

DEMOCRACY OF THE DEAD

Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death....

--G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), Orthodoxy (1908)

DEPARTED THEOLOGIAN ADDRESS THE LEADERSHIP GATHERING

This is truly tragic. After its most significant theologians “cross the Jordan,” The United Methodist Church pays them scant attention. The church, in today’s terms, cancels them. Their cancellation is not complete or absolute. After all, their names and works occasionally appear in the footnotes of usually more academic works. Theirs is a near cancellation. Their witness, their work, their study, and their writing and teaching and debating are buried under mountains of what’s-happening-now. The wisdom they carried, and the truths they proposed and defended, mostly just go away. The most significant theologians are largely ignored by the church they faithfully served. To the detriment of The United Methodist Church. To the detriment of those of us who have followed them.

Lifewatch resists this unfortunate, disturbing habit of canceling our departed, best-and-brightest thinkers. So this issue of Lifewatch singles out, and lifts up, five of Methodism’s most significant and recently departed theologians—Dr. Paul Ramsey (1913-1988), Dr. Albert C. Outler (1908-1989), Dr. Thomas C. Oden (1931-2016), Dr. Geoffrey Wainwright (1939-2020), and Dr. William J. Abraham (1947-2021). Below, five of us among the living, who knew the now-deceased theologians and continue to know their theological work, write so that our departed friends can find their voices, so to speak, and address the upcoming Leadership Gathering.

“The Leadership Gathering?” you ask. “What is that?”

“The Council of Bishops is hosting a [L]eadership [G]athering in Calgary, Canada October 20-24, 2026,” reads The United Methodist Church’s announcement. Bishop Tracy S. Malone, then-president of the Council of Bishops, goes on to describe the bishops’ intention in calling this meeting: “This gathering is about faithful leadership for such a time as this. We are being called to reimagine the Church—not to preserve what is familiar but to fulfill God’s calling and vision for our future. We will lean into the Spirit’s leading with boldness and humility, center Christ in all we do, so that the witness of The United Methodist Church might be renewed, relevant, and rooted in justice, love, and hope.” (www.resourceumc.org/en/churchwide/council-of-bishops-leadership-gathering) In organizational terms, the Leadership Gathering will have around 300 participants—including bishops, clergy, lay leaders, and young adults—from worldwide United Methodism.

Again, in what follows, five of the living will write so that five departed theologians of the church can be given voices (but not votes ...) to address the Leadership Gathering in Canada. May God grant you, as you read what follows, the patience to honor the departed by thoughtfully considering their theological claims. In the service of Jesus Christ and His Church, and for the good of The United Methodist Church, read carefully and enter into this “democracy of the dead.” (PTS)

DR. PAUL RAMSEY SPEAKS: BE THE CHURCH!

by Rev. Paul T. Stallsworth

Dr. Paul Ramsey taught Christian ethics at Princeton University for decades. I remember reading (*somewhere!*) that, while deciding to take an academic position at Princeton, Dr. Ramsey reasoned that he would rather fight theological liberals in the North than Biblical fundamentalists in the South.

In the early 1980s at a theology-and-society conference in Washington, DC, I first saw Ramsey in action. Then a young pastor, I went on to read some of his works—most memorably Basic Christian Ethics (University of Chicago Press, 1950 [renewed in 1977]). Dr. Ramsey and I corresponded occasionally. (He also wrote to James Lung and Steve Wissler, early Lifewatch leaders.) Later, working at The Center on Religion and Society in New York City, I was instructed by Ramsey's book Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism: A Critique of the United Methodist Bishops' Pastoral Letter "In Defense of Creation" (Penn State Press, 1988; hereafter Speak Up). Living in Edison, NJ, I briefly visited, and prayed for, Dr. Ramsey as he neared his end in a hospital room in Princeton, NJ. Soon after the visit, his soul joined the Communion of the Saints.

Dr. Stanley Hauerwas of Duke Divinity School describes Paul Ramsey as similar to Reinhold Niebuhr—"a theologian in the great tradition of Protestant liberalism." Furthermore, writes Hauerwas, "Ramsey in many ways was the last great representative of the Protestant social gospel." (Hauerwas, Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy [Westview, 1997], p. 128; hereafter Wilderness Wanderings)

Therefore, Dr. Ramsey was willing to critique church leaders' public stands and statements. His book Who Speaks for the Church?: A Critique of the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society (Abingdon, 1967; hereafter Who Speaks) demonstrates how sharply critical his denominational and ecumenical engagements could be. At times his criticisms are less public—for example, when he critiques the newly merged United Methodist Church's proposed teaching on abortion. Dr. Ramsey's feistiness was always good for the church; he pushed her to think more, and to think more clearly and deeply.

Ramsey against Pontificating on Politics

Recall Dr. Paul Ramsey's "best joke." He borrows it from Dr. Sydney Ahlstrom (1919-1984), a church historian at Yale. As Ramsey tells it, there was "a nineteenth-century British Methodist who said, 'Methodism and all her institutions will stand strong and firm long after Christianity has disappeared from the face of the Earth!'" (Speak Up, p. 142)

Of course Ramsey intends humor. At the same time, he is taking aim at the unthinking, predictable institutionalism of The United Methodist Church. Ramsey is concerned about the church's rote institutionalism that is regularly on display in its political witness in the public square. Unfortunately, it continues. Even as the present article is being written, and as it is being read by you dear reader, the denomination's next public statements on the next political crises are being planned, researched, and

drafted. About exactly that public witness—which usually issues from the General Board of Church and Society or the Council of Bishops—the Leadership Gathering should think theologically and critically.

With a wink, Paul Ramsey describes the "social action *curia*" and the "Church and Society syndrome." By those terms, he means "the passion for numerous particular pronouncements on policy questions to the consequent neglect of basic decision- and action-oriented principles of ethical and political analysis." (Who Speaks, p. 13) Leading this *curia* are "persons who have served too many years on boards of church and society and in church councils (including, I suppose, Methodist Bishops) [who] are tempted to regard the unwashed laity as especially in need of their instruction." (Speak Up, p. 132) Unfortunately, this *curia* is self-perpetuating. It evidences an institutional elitism that lacks self-awareness and self-criticism.

Dr. Ramsey is baffled by the social-action establishment's double-mindedness: "My quandary is in attempting to understand how those who triumphantly proclaim the end of the Christian age can then still have the audacity to address pronouncements and counsel to governments...." (Ramsey's "Tradition and Reflection in Christian Life" [1982], quoted by Stanley Hauerwas in Wilderness Wanderings, p. 129) Ramsey believes that, no matter what else is going on in the general society or in the church, habit compels this Protestant *curia* to pontificate on politics to the general public.

Sadly, the *curia*'s pronouncements and pastoral letters break very little new ground. Remember that Ramsey writes this nearly 60 years ago: "[T]he present polarization of so-called liberal religious opinion and so-called conservative religious opinion, which in substance look remarkably like the secular variety of the same opinions—plus, in each case, the little steam engine of religion that 'thought he could.'" (Who Speaks, p. 21) Back in the 1960s, Ramsey takes seriously the political polarization in American churches and society that has since metastasized.

Furthermore, Ramsey discerns why the church's public pronouncements always seem to have a ring of familiarity: "Christian address to the world becomes identified with a number of specific partisan positions that may or may not be correct.... This is a form of culture-Christianity.... It would identify Christianity with the cultural vitalities, with the movement of history, with where the action is, with the next and even now real establishment.... By contrast, true prophesy to the most high God would be impelled in this or any other age to speak words of judgment to precisely the existing cultural vitalities—against both Baalism and the Baalization of Yahwehism!" (Who Speaks, p. 55) Back then, Ramsey is not persuaded by earlier versions of "we are on the right side of history."

Paul Ramsey believes that United Methodists are particularly prone to talk loosely about politics: "It is God's redeemed people, individually and collectively, who are going on to perfection and to a World of Love. That is the 'progressive' element stressed in the Wesleyan heritage; that is the meaning of our legacy joining knowledge with vital piety, and of yearning for holiness. Whenever this is directed (without differentiation

between church and world) toward secular problems (however urgent), we swap our birthright for a ‘pot of message,’ while also sometimes speaking impossible dreams to states and instilling unearthly (i.e., misplaced) hope in laypeople. Like any church formed in the wake of the Reformation, we should have eyes to see darkness as well as light at the end of every man-made tunnel....” (*Speak Up*, pp. 36-37)

According to Ramsey, when a church identifies her agenda with a political agenda, this “comes close to the original and the New Testament meaning of *heresy*. It introduces divisions into the life...of the church. This, at least, was Paul’s meaning when he condemned the factions (*haireisis*) among the Corinthians....” (*Who Speaks*, p. 56)

Ramsey steps back and surveys the whole of the church’s public witness: “[A] serious student of these matters cannot but regard the resolutions of churchmen on any number of urgent specific questions with increasing dismay—or as a laughing matter. That is, if the love of Christ and his church permits the exercise of a sense of humor when what is at stake is witness to this light in the present world....” (*Who Speaks*, p. 147)

With that, Dr. Paul Ramsey puts finishing touches on his devastating critique of The United Methodist Church’s public witness. That critique was valid in Ramsey’s day. The same critique remains valid in our day. After all, the culture of the “social action *curia*” has endured through the decades. Things have not changed. But they should change. Indeed, they must change.

Speaking to the Church for the Church about *Being* the Church

Dr. Paul Ramsey puts to the Leadership Gathering large problems it must address: “The world is too much with us, too much within the churches.” And there is “...the politicization of the social-concerns decisions of [e.g., The United Methodist Church] today....” (*Speak Up*, 135)

Beginning to respond to these problems, Ramsey sketches a generally reforming vision for the Church: “[E]verything has its season. Perhaps in this time of God’s patience we should speak *to* the church *for* the church about *being* the church...let that witness be overheard or not by ‘the world of today.’ Perhaps fidelity to Christ would have us, in this time and place, turn in that direction—and therefore away from speaking for the church to the church and to the nation and to one another...as citizens of an armed power in the international system.” (*Speak Up*, p. 142)

Ramsey notes that “being the church”—for United Methodists guided by the Leadership Gathering—would involve at least the following eight reforms.

“Dr. Ramsey’s feistiness was always good for the church; he pushed her to think more, and to think more clearly and deeply. Recall Dr. Paul Ramsey’s ‘best joke.’ He borrows it from Dr. Sydney Ahlstrom (1919-1984), a church historian at Yale. As Ramsey tells it, there was ‘a nineteenth-century British Methodist who said,

“Methodism and all her institutions will stand strong and firm long after Christianity has disappeared from the face of the Earth!” ’’

1. Those who create social-action content, pronouncements, press releases, and pastoral letters would **become much more self-aware and self-critical**. They would, in Ramsey’s words, have “much greater reticence in reaching particular conclusions.” Their new approach “would make for a proper hesitation in faulting the consciences of our fellow Christians, or in instructing them too narrowly, by pronouncements issued by official and semiofficial conferences of churchmen

on policy questions concerning which there may be legitimate differences in practical, prudential judgment.” (*Who Speaks*, p. 15)

2. A chastened approach to public witness would **routinely observe Ramsey’s “self-denying ordinance.”** That is, “no more [would] be said in addressing the urgent political problems of the present day than can clearly be said on the basis of Christian truth and insights.” (*Who Speaks*, p. 30) Speaking on the basis of church doctrine (e.g., Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation), the church would wisely prune (or cancel some of) its political pronouncements.

3. When a renewed church speaks, she would **be less politically partisan and more politically realistic**. Writes Ramsey: “Christians should be speaking more about order as a terminal political value along with justice.... More about the need for the rule of law as well as revolutionary change. Of serving human liberty as well as the war on poverty.... About...destroying the illusion that government will provide a solution for every irritant or distress, as well as what government can and should do. Of the responsible use of political power as well as the limits upon it. Of how involvement in the world’s problems means tragic involvement.” (*Who Speaks*, pp. 156-7)

4. Were The United Methodist Church to strive to become more faithfully the Church of Jesus Christ, her leaders would **preach and teach more often, as did St. Augustine, about the City of God and the City of Man**. (Now, they often speak only about the “beloved community.”) Furthermore, they would never simply identify the City of God with The United Methodist Church. For the City of God is *God’s City*—appearing in glimpses as history unfolds, and coming in fullness only when history ends. Knowing that the City of Man is a rebellious-and-rough-and-tough municipality, Ramsey uncompromisingly insists that “there now are *two* cities, not one....” (*Who Speaks*, p. 21, emphasis added) So should the church.

5. Ramsey would **urge the church not to fear becoming more like a sect**. After all, he declares: “I do believe that while Christianity ought always to be willing to be a sect whenever necessary, there is always at work

a culture-forming impulse as well....” (letter to Hauerwas [1990], *Wilderness Wanderings*, pp. 130-131)

6. Being faithful would **require that local churches call out and critique the “atomistic individualism”** that is culturally dominant in the West today. Hauerwas notes: “Ramsey, of course, thought this commitment [love for the neighbor] was under attack by atomistic individualism. Such an individualism erodes every bond of life with life, in particular the bonds into which we enter (spousal) and those into which we are born (filial)....” (*Wilderness Wanderings*, p. 135) Such toxic individualism also eats away the bonds of baptism.

7. Truly being the Church would **have United Methodists practice church discipline**. Ramsey writes that “the church [in Hauerwas’] sense would require mutual discipline. We would need to search for agreement concerning the fruits of our life in Christ as specific as were the ‘rules’ John Wesley drew up... These ‘General Rules of The United Methodist Church’ [see *The Book of Discipline* (2020/2024, pp. 78-80)] were, within memory, required by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to be read by every preacher at least once a year to his congregations.” (*Speak Up*, p. 143)

8. Finally, being the People of God today would **necessitate being in ministry and mission in ways that grow out of the Church’s great tradition**. Ramsey throws out several truly traditioned possibilities: “establish Methodist parochial schools;” repurpose The United Methodist Building in Washington, DC; align United Methodist hospitals with their church’s moral teaching; and invite pregnant co-eds, while carrying and after birthing their children, to move in with senior Methodist couples. (*Speak Up*, 145-146)

According to Dr. Paul Ramsey, for The United Methodist Church to become more fully and faithfully the Church of Jesus Christ, she must break some public-witness habits that she has unthinkingly practiced for decades. Those habits have led to inconsequential outcomes at best and negative results at worst. They have often distracted and divided the church herself.

Dr. Paul Ramsey, and those of us influenced by him, would challenge the Leadership Gathering to have The United Methodist Church embark on a truly new course. Bishop Malone has stated the bishops want the Leadership Gathering to “reimagine” the church, “not to preserve what is familiar,” “to center Christ in all” that is done, to “lean into the Spirit’s leading.” Well, then, Leadership Gathering, do it! Preach, propose, discuss, debate, develop, and vote for a truly new direction. Do not protect and promote the old social-action schtick dressed up with contemporary theological jargon. Set aside the seductive allure of constantly striving to “speak truth to power.” Focus on becoming, and being, the Church of Jesus Christ more fully, more faithfully.

Leadership Gathering, lead The United Methodist Church to *be the Church!* The Church! The one holy catholic and apostolic Church!

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DR. ALBERT C. OUTLER SPEAKS BY EXAMPLE:

FOLLOW CHURCH LAW

by Dr. William B. Lawrence

It is impossible to predict what will happen when the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church conducts the “Leadership Gathering” that the bishops chose to assemble in western Canada. Yet it is reasonable to assume that one of the church’s most important leaders will neither be mentioned by name nor have his writings referenced. Albert C. Outler was a churchman of the first order, a scholar of the loftiest rank, an ecumenical figure held in the highest esteem, and a Methodist to the core of his soul. He discovered long-ignored theological depths in the works of our founder John Wesley. He was a Methodist “Observer” at the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. He discerned the distinctive Wesleyan method for defining doctrine by using the four sources and guidelines labeled scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. And he delivered the magnificent sermon at the Uniting Conference in 1968 that celebrated the merger of two denominations to form The United Methodist Church.

He Was Formed, Then Served

The archivist of Wofford College perhaps committed at least half of a hyperbole when he wrote that Outler “is regarded as the most original Methodist theologian in the history of the church and was one of the foremost experts in the life and works of John Wesley.” [1] However, Wofford is justifiably proud of this alumnus, who finished an undergraduate degree in three years before going to Emory for a divinity degree and Yale for a Ph.D. He taught at Duke and held a named faculty position at Yale before moving to Southern Methodist University and Perkins School of Theology, with which he is most clearly identified. Besides being an official “Observer” at Vatican II, he also represented the denomination at the World Methodist Council and the World Council of Churches. In the same year that he preached at the creation of The United Methodist Church, he delivered the Commencement Address at Wofford. A son of the south, he was the soul of Methodism.

If it can be fairly guessed that neither his name nor his notes will be deemed worthy of any attention at a so-called “Leadership Gathering” in Calgary, one wonders if it can be fairly guessed what he would have thought of such an assembly. It is by no means appropriate to put words in his mouth nearly four decades after his death. And there was no meeting in his lifetime like the Alberta gathering for which we are likely to find a comment that could be applied to what will be happening in October 2026.

Nevertheless, we know that he had enormous respect for ecclesial institutions, and for the principles as well as the politics by which they functioned. Unlike some Christians whose primary professional home is in academia, Outler was thoroughly immersed in—and engaged in—the ways and the methods of church life. He treasured the systems by which ecclesiastical decisions are made. He explored the resources of secular fields, including psychology, that are important not only to theological reflection but also to ministerial practice. He

devoted himself intensely to preparing persons for Christian ministry. He was troubled by inattention to intellectual resources for the task of faithfully fulfilling the pastoral vocation, an indifference that often infects ecclesiastical leaders.

For Outler, these were not esoteric or abstract matters. He was deeply invested in the formal procedures and organizational demands of putting theological insights into practice. In his first year as a faculty member at Perkins School of Theology, he chaired a newly established committee on admissions, which assumed responsibility for admitting new students—a task that previously had been the purview of the Dean. [2] In 1962, he chaired the faculty committee whose work led to the creation of a new Master Plan for Southern Methodist University. [3] He conceived the idea that became the central feature of that SMU Master Plan, the University College. [4]

Outler's commitment to institutional life had no limits. He chaired the Faculty Senate of the university. He conducted the research and provided the administrative leadership that laid the groundwork for the Graduate Program in Religious Studies, which awarded the Ph.D. under academic leadership of the university using the faculty resources at Perkins School of Theology. [5]

Accountability during Scandal

That determination manifested itself not only in constructive improvements for the institution but also in critiques when the university lost its way. Arguably the most famous, if not the most ferocious, crisis at Southern Methodist University involved the football scandal that led to imposition of “the death penalty” by the NCAA—a punishment which the association had not used before and has not used since to discipline a university for infractions in an athletic program.

Among the elements in the whole sordid episode was the firing of President Paul Hardin in 1974, just two years after he was inaugurated. Hardin had refused to submit to the pressures of the select group called “the Board of Governors” that claimed authority to run the university on behalf of the larger, and ecclesiastically more inclusive, Board of Trustees. Hardin's resignation was actually a dismissal forced by the major leaders of the Board of Governors, who engineered the hiring of the former president to replace Hardin.

Outler said that beneath all of this scandalous conduct was a “deeper” issue that involved the polity of the university and the authority to control it. Outler said that according to the charter and the by-laws of the university, the office of president was under the jurisdiction of the Board of Trustees, not the Board of Governors. [6] Indeed, Outler believed that the forced resignation of Paul Hardin “was a usurpation of that jurisdiction.” [7]

It is impossible to say what Outler would have thought of the “Leadership Gathering.”

Nevertheless, just as Outler believed in creating academic and ecclesiastical structures, he believed they

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had to be accountable to their own rules. The so-called “Leadership Gathering” in October 2026 will be an assembly of persons chosen by the Council of Bishops without any authority in the Constitution or the laws of The United Methodist Church to take any action. It seems consistent with the views of Albert Outler to warn about

the dangers of letting some entity (namely, the Council of Bishops) usurp the authority of a legitimately constituted body (namely, the General Conference).

[1] Phillip Stone, “Albert Outler: From Wofford to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” April 3, 2013 (<https://blogs.wofford.edu/from-the-archives/2013/04/03/albert-outler-from-wofford-to-the-wesleyan-quadrilateral/>)

[2] Joseph L. Allen, Perkins School of Theology: A Centennial History (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2011), p. 112

[3] Ibid., p. 167

[4] Ibid., pp. 167-168

[5] Ibid., pp. 165, 169

[6] Darwin Payne, One Hundred Years on the Hilltop: The Centennial History of Southern Methodist University (Dallas: DeGolyer Library, SMU, 2016), p. 338

[7] Loc. Cit.

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DR. THOMAS C. ODEN SPEAKS: RESTART YOUR LIFE ON FIRMER GROUND

Adapted with approval from a longer essay by Rev. Mike Graef. Original available upon request, email Mike at jmgraef@outlook.com.

I met Dr. Thomas C. Oden in the fall of 1983 at Drew University's Theological School. He was often my professor as I worked toward an M.Div. I wrote papers for him in classes like “Methodist Doctrine,” “Readings in Wesley,” and “Seminar on Soteriology [study of salvation].” Later, it was my privilege to renew friendship with Tom at board meetings of The Confessing Movement within The United Methodist Church.

Tom Oden was one of only a handful of American Protestant theologians whose callings included full, immersive, sincere, and supportive participation both in a denomination (for Oden, The United Methodist Church) and in extraordinary ecumenical opportunities. He was a silent observer at the Second Vatican Council in Rome in the 1960s. He served on the staff of the World Council of Churches at its World Conference on Church and Society in Geneva, Switzerland in April 1966. He joined the Evangelical Theological Society as a board member. He

kept in touch with renewal ministries within mainline Protestant denominations, such as Good News, and later with groups like the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and the Institute on Religion and Public Life. He helped form the Charles Wesley Society and attended General

Conferences. His published books number 61; he wrote countless articles. He sought to build bridges between the classical Christian consensus and the floundering realities of the modern and post-modern world. Find access to, or somehow acquire, the 30-volume Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCS), Thomas C. Oden, General Editor. Considering the entire body of his own work, Tom would say the ACCS is the best.

Changed Heart and Mind

In 1970, a challenge came to Tom Oden from his new colleague Professor Will Herberg (1901-1977), a prominent Russian-born American Jewish theologian, who taught at Drew Theological School from 1955 until his retirement in 1976. The story is told in A Change of Heart (IVP, 2014), Tom Oden's personal and theological memoir. Tom had asked Will Herberg to read his most recent book. At a restaurant lunch soon thereafter, Herberg let out his frustration with Tom's sincere but shallow efforts: "If you are ever going to become a credible theologian instead of a know-it-all pundit, you had best restart your life on firmer ground. You are not a theologian, except in name only, even if you are paid to be one." (Herberg himself had accepted a similar challenge many years before; in response, he dove deep and read carefully the Talmud and Midrashim.) "You will remain theologically uneducated until you study carefully Athanasius, Augustine, and Aquinas," Will warned Tom.

What followed, for Oden, was a change of heart. It occurred not in a revival tent or during a powerful spiritual retreat, but in solitude over many years, reading in a library carrel, absorbing the faith of the early Church's theologians. What did he learn from Athanasius, Augustine, and Aquinas—and many others? The following is how I understand what Oden learned and why he so valued the writing of the earliest Christians.

I get at this by reviewing the well known passage in Matthew 16:13-20 about the foundation of the Church. Jesus "said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'" (Matthew 16:15-19, NRSVA)

Next, to understand Oden's theology, we need to

Tom Oden "learned that ... worshipping the Father in heaven who spoke and revealed to Peter what he could then confess, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' That revelation is a thing and not available to reification, or imagining or reimagining. According to the early Church fathers and mothers, this is absolutely what Matthew 16 is declaring."

grasp the philosophical term reify. Webster's New International Unabridged defines reify this way: "To regard (as an abstraction, a mental construction, etc.) as a thing; to materialize; to convert into something concrete or objective; as to reify space and time." The word thing in Webster's is a term used in philosophy and physics. In physics, things being studied never require a

scientist to regard them as things because they already are things. So an ocean wave does not need to be converted into something concrete or objective, because it already is concrete and objective. Just ask a surfer if that last wave was real. No need to reify. Later on, the surfer might brag about that wave being the biggest ever on the planet to be surfed. That would be reification. But the wave itself spoke for itself at one time in history. The wave was not a story, not a narrative. If one could regard it at all, one might simply regard it by being speechless, stunned, and amazed—by receiving it, by seeing it, by hearing it, by taking it in.

Tom Oden, in a library carrel at Drew, learned that in the first seven centuries (and more) of the Church, the followers of Jesus did not reify passages like Matthew 16 the way some modern folks assume and argue they did. They did not reify these passages, because they were already surfing the wave—worshipping the Father in heaven who spoke and revealed to Peter what he could then confess, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." That revelation is a thing and not available to reification, or imagining or reimagining. According to the early Church fathers and mothers, this is absolutely what Matthew 16 is declaring.

Later on, Martin Luther would say the confession, from Peter, is God's revelation. Roman Catholics would emphasize Peter, with his confession, as the revelation—to indicate an indwelling of this revelation in the Church. In the midst of this revelation, Matthew 16 makes the first mention of ecclesia (or church) in the Bible. The Church's first seven centuries of worship and community life—which were received by Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism—were a thing called "that faith" (and no other). "That faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all." (Vincent of Lerins, died c. 445)

Oden saw this, and it was all new to him. Worship and community life authored a living heritage for, as Jesus named it in Matthew 16, "my church." Guided by the Holy Spirit, laity and clergy over many centuries found consensus as they trusted, and lived community life on, this "rock." Six canons (or authoritative standards and works) emerged: Scripture, sacraments, creeds, holy orders, liturgies, and missional witness. (William J. Abraham) These canons, filled with inexhaustible inspiration and instruction, became Tom Oden's new theological home.

Job was addressed from the whirlwind. Peter was addressed by Jesus' Father in heaven. Tom Oden was also addressed—by his friend Will Herberg. At a restaurant

near the Drew campus where Tom was a professor, being paid to teach and be original and publish, Herberg offered Oden two roads. Either “study carefully” or remain a know-it-all pundit, and a

progressive pundit at that (after all, the latest, most urgent trend always set Tom’s theological agenda). Remarkably, startlingly, instead of being amused or briefly distracted, Oden allowed Will Herberg’s challenge to change his life. Tom Oden saw and received, trusted and obeyed, “that faith—believed everywhere, always, by all.” “There it was, still pulsating as a living, caring community that had survived unnoticed underneath the illusions of modernity.” (*A Change of Heart*, p. 140)

Tom Oden to the Leadership Gathering

How would Tom Oden address the 2026 Leadership Gathering of The United Methodist Church?

Oden would want to converse deeply, one to one, with each participant, and open up for such who are willing “a deep and hidden democracy at work in consensual teaching” (*A Change of Heart*, p. 255) He would offer to all Will Herberg’s invitation to become a credible theologian. Perhaps a leader might protest, “But I am a credible theologian now.” Good! Because the alternative is dire. In Herberg’s challenge, one might actually “not [be] a theologian, except in name only, even if you are paid to be one.”

So how would Tom Oden’s convictions, if expressed today, regard the front-burner speech crafted by the bishops as the unifying vision of United Methodist theology for this moment of ministry? Front-burner speech such as “Love Boldly, Serve Joyfully, Lead Courageously” (from the bishops’ new vision statement). This speech provided guidance for the three official webinars conducted to prepare participants for the 2026 Leadership Gathering in Calgary. My sense is Oden would appreciate this speech and hearken to John Wesley when Wesley called such words “these *marks*, by these fruits of a living faith.” (“Character of a Methodist,” par. 18)

What would give Oden pause, however, is the United Methodist webinar’s (“‘Love Boldly’ Webinar on Theology,” <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/love-boldly-webinar-on-theology>) rush to spend nearly all of its attention on “these marks,” leaving Wesley’s “living faith” almost entirely unnoticed. I believe Oden would focus on this arresting absence. Arresting because even though there are six elements of the Church’s canonical heritage, a person would have great difficulty finding traces of even one canon in this training webinar—in the official Calgary webinar headlined “‘Love Boldly’ Webinar on Theology” (and titled “Wesleyan Theology: Love Boldly”).

“But surely,” one might protest, “it is *good* to exhort one another to love and serve and lead in these ways.” Yes! And encouragements that start with imperative or commanding verbs are found throughout Scripture. But as the apostles knew far better than us, commands and exhortations die on the vine without the nourishment of sun, soil, and water. That is, without the living faith. Even the very best of commands repeated over and over—like

“... if a sermon reduces the Gospel to inclusion, then that sermon is just another secular sermon.”

“love thy neighbor”—have to be retrieved from our memories and replayed. But they will not stay there. “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” Glad tidings and good news, which proclaim

the Church’s faith, keep the commands alive in hearts and minds.

“Love Boldly, Serve Joyfully, Lead Courageously” is good parenetic material. That is, it is designed to advise, exhort, and encourage moral behavior. In the broadest sense, it is also theology. But why is there not a single parenetic phrase in, for instance, The Nicene Creed? Because the creed points the Church, the churches, and the disciple to a *living faith*. Until one beholds, adores, and experiences God’s perfect love, one cannot love boldly as did Jesus. No faith? Then no *marks*, no *fruits*.

One might object, “But isn’t it enough to say: Love as Jesus did? Jesus included everyone. This is what we need to do as well. Inclusion is the Gospel.” Oden would counter that, if a sermon reduces the Gospel to inclusion, then that sermon is just another secular sermon. There are many daily instances of moral exhortation which urge us toward all kinds of noble things. They issue from all faiths and from no faith. There is but one Gospel, and that includes specific moral exhortations.

“Thousands of them in every age have known” this Good News, says John Wesley. (Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” Introduction #3) What we call “Wesleyan,” Wesley calls the people of “every age.” Tom Oden met these “every age” people, and Wesley too, in his carrel. Who of the “every age” people should we be reading and studying and learning from? In addition to Athanasius, Augustine, and Aquinas, the desert mothers and fathers, and others.

We now have Tom Oden’s library: the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (ACCS). We need not call it orthodox or conservative, or see it as the opposition, or even the hero returning (or any other terms that come from reification). One simply has to note, with Tom Oden, that this faith, represented by ACCS, has thrived for nearly 2,000 years, and it shows no signs of fatigue.

Bishops, and Leadership Gathering clergy and laity, make sure your service of The United Methodist Church is based on this faith—and no other. Of all the gifts you have to give, this is the one that has not been revealed by flesh and blood, but by the Father in heaven. (Matthew 16)

Every now and then, we catch a glimpse of this faith—and how it is not a human construction open to our deconstruction. Often it happens when singing a hymn or receiving Holy Communion. Something pulls back the curtain. The pure love in Jesus Christ visits again. How to serve this love?

What Will Herberg said to Tom Oden could be said to The United Methodist Church: “Become a credible theologian instead of a know-it-all pundit.” If Oden could take the challenge, so can the Leadership Gathering: “You had best restart your life on firmer ground.”

Rev. Graef is an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church and a member of the Pacific Northwest Conference. Retired from pastoral ministry (which included service as a district superintendent), he lives in Spokane, WA.

DR. GEOFFREY WAINWRIGHT SPEAKS: COMMIT TO THE APOSTOLIC FAITH

by Dr. Michael Pasquarello III

I was introduced to Dr. Geoffrey Wainwright's work in my first year at Duke Divinity School. I enrolled in Dr. Robert Cushman's seminar on theology. The required text of the seminar was Geoffrey's freshly published Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life (Oxford, 1980). This book became a significant resource for my work as a pastor and a professor. Years later, I was enrolled as a doctoral student in Geoffrey's seminar on the doctrine of the Trinity. The semester confirmed why he was a highly respected teacher and scholar of the catholicity of the Trinitarian faith that Christians confess, and why he was for many years the leading Methodist voice on ecumenical dialogues.

What I learned from Dr. Wainwright's teaching, example, and witness is stated well in his Doxology: "Christians confess their faith both before God and before their fellow human beings. The motive and purpose of their confession is both doxology and witness. The act of confession is part of a more ample movement, a broader sweep which takes its origin in God and comes to completion in God, having drawn humanity to salvation during its course. Faith is confessed in response to the preaching of a preacher who preaches God's word at God's call (Romans 10:8-17). In its witnessing capacity, the confession of faith becomes part of the extension of grace to more and more, so that the thanksgiving, *eucharista*, may be increased to the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:13-15)." [1]

What follows is in great part inspired by the work of Geoffrey Wainwright, particularly his calling of the whole Church to the praise of God in worship, doctrine, and life. Furthermore, in the words of St. Irenaeus, "The glory of God is humanity fully alive, and the life of humanity is knowing God." (Against Heresies, Book 4, 20)

This is my appeal to the bishops of The United Methodist Church: As you prepare to host the Leadership Gathering, remember that you have been consecrated to servant leadership and "...authorized to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline of the Church..." (The Book of Discipline [2020/2024], Par. 404.1)

Irenaeus Provides the Rule

Irenaeus (d. 200), bishop of Lyon, France, is an excellent exemplar of classical interpretation of Scripture as a single, unified narrative. According to Irenaeus, this scriptural narrative discloses the triune God within the baptismal, eucharistic, and kerygmatic patterns of the Church's life. His powerful witness as a bishop, saint, and martyr is remembered with gratitude by both Western and Eastern Christianity. Arguably the first great post-Biblical theologian of the Church, Irenaeus summarizes the Apostolic witness to the triune God in a rule of faith. His rule of faith identifies the one Creator who is sovereign over heaven and earth, is worshiped by the Church, guides its interpretation of Scripture, informs the content of its preaching and teaching, and shapes its imagination, life, and mission. Therefore, for Irenaeus, the fundamental

source of the knowledge of God revealed in Christ is received through doxology, through worship, through the praise of God.

The Church's worship, doctrine, and life were intimately related by the new reality entrusted to the Apostles: The crucified and risen Lord was continually present in His congregations' baptizing, communing, and proclaiming. The Lord's command to do those holy things makes this a *lex orandi* (law of prayer). On the foundation of what God accomplishes in this worship, including the communities' apprehension of them, a tradition of theology developed. Over time, certain ways of understanding divine things became normative: *lex credendi* (law of believing). Eventually, the liturgy became an interpretive framework, and interpretive vision, for the Bible. In this way, the Apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, as received from Scripture, became the *regula fidei* (rule of faith).

For Irenaeus, prayer, sacraments, Scripture, preaching, virtue, and devotion are all necessary to and consistent with this Trinitarian rule of faith. This rule proposes an ecclesial-Christian way of life. This rule helps make ecclesiastical Christians. Irenaeus' rule of faith is most positively set forth in his handbook The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching. It provides a "summary memorandum" of Christian teaching, "the preaching of truth so as to strengthen your faith...to understand all the members of the body of truth...and receive the exposition of the things of God, so that...it will bear your own salvation like fruit." [2] Because the true meaning of Scripture is God and God's will, Irenaeus begins his handbook by confessing the Trinity as the true source of Christian faith, hope, and love: "We must keep the rule...unswervingly, and perform the commandments of God, believing in God and fearing Him, for he is the Lord, and loving Him...Faith exhorts us to remember that we have received baptism for the remission of sins, in the name of God the Father and in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was incarnate, and died, and was raised, and in the Holy Spirit of God, and that this baptism is the seal of eternal life and rebirth to God." (Dem. 3)

Irenaeus' confession of the triune name leads to a reading of Ephesians 4:6 that declares a doxological vision: "One God and Father, who is above all and with all and in us all." This enabled Irenaeus to affirm that everything is created by the Father through His Word, while the Holy Spirit, who is received in baptism, enables us to cry "Abba, Father," and forms us to the likeness of God (Dem. 5). Irenaeus' great theological and pastoral accomplishment was the assertion of concrete, material convictions regarding the truth of God, creation, and humanity. Notice this can extend from God's creation of all things, to the Spirit's recreating work in baptism and sanctifying work in the Eucharist, to the consummation at Christ's return in glory when God's peace will be totally established in this world.

For Irenaeus, these three articles—God the Father, God the Son Christ Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit—are the order of the Christian faith and life. These articles are also connected intimately to what happens in the liturgical assembly (Dem. 7). This is summed up in the themes of Adam and Christ, creation and redemption—which are all-encompassing, communicated in Scripture, summarized in

the rule of faith, demonstrated in renewed humanity through the power of the Word and Spirit. Most important for Irenaeus is that the one God, who is the Creator and Redeemer of all things, is known in the Church's doxology. In the saving activity of the Trinity, those blessed by the Spirit are led to the Son, and the Son

presents them to the Father: Salvation is communion with the triune God (Dem. 7). The liturgical knowledge of the Trinity, which is received in baptism, provides the rule for understanding Scripture—when the Church reads, proclaims, trusts, or obeys it.

Gnostics Then and Now

The formulation of the rule of faith was an urgent matter for the bishop of Lyon. The ancient Church was, according to Dr. George Lindbeck (1923-2018, Yale theologian), a "tournament of narratives." In this tournament, Irenaeus worked to differentiate the ecclesial reading and preaching of the Bible from that of the Gnostics.

The Gnostics had idiosyncratic interpretations that pointed away from the Church formed by the Apostolic witness to the God of Jesus Christ. During the second century, Gnostic teachers wreaked havoc in Christian congregations. They tempted the faithful with their highly popular, creative, novel, and reimagined ways of understanding the Bible. All the while, they claimed to have superior channels for getting to the most relevant "meaning," as opposed to truth, of Scripture. For them, Scripture functioned as a sort of gold mine from which they could dig scriptural nuggets of wisdom and rearrange them to suit their own purposes. This did not involve minor differences of opinion. Rather, this led to the embrace of false gods which required neither being devoted to the crucified Jesus as Lord, nor sharing the weakness and foolishness of the cross that identifies the Church and His body. [3]

Gnostic interpretation of the Bible regarded Scripture as an opportunity to acquire or display highly individualistic renderings of religious and ethical teaching. It consisted of abstract truth claims over the more earthy and embodied narrative of the Church. In certain ways, this is similar to the practice of contemporary preachers who visit the Bible to extract illustrations, principles, and topics that can be exploited for scoring a relevant point, promoting a particular program, advocating a preferred ideology, or just creating a "vibe."

Irenaeus' great work *Against Heresies* exposed and challenged this way of reading, preaching, and teaching Scripture. It demonstrated the Gnostics' failure to discern the larger Biblical framework, themes, and actors according to the Apostolic (and Prophetic) proclamation of the Gospel. *Christ Himself is the key to discovering and interpreting the Word of God; but it is Christ who also identifies and interprets the people who seek Him as the Truth.* According to Irenaeus, the heretics neither

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grasped nor participated in the providential plan of Scripture revealed in Christ. Instead, they discovered truth in their own interpretations and ended up preaching themselves.

As a bishop in the Church, Irenaeus viewed the Gnostics' misinterpretation of Scripture as pastoral malpractice. He wrote: "Such then is their system, which the prophets did not announce, the Lord did

not teach, and the Apostles did not hand down; but which they boastfully declare that they understand better than others...they attempt to make ropes of sand in applying the parables of the Lord, or prophetic utterances, or Apostolic statements to their plausible scheme, in order that they may have foundation for it. But they alter the scriptural context and connection and dismember the truth as much as they can.... It is just as if there were a beautiful representation of a king made by a skilled artist, and one altered the arrangement of the pieces of stone into the shape of a dog or a fox and then should assert that this was the original representation of a king. In much the same manner, they stitch together old wives' tales, and wrestling sayings and parables, however they may, from the context, attempt to fit oracles of God into their myths." [4]

As a bishop of the Church, Irenaeus guided Christian communities through doxological remembrance and to shared participation in a coherent, over-arching narrative of salvation in Jesus Christ, according to the Scriptures. As he writes, *"This, beloved, is the preaching of the truth, and this the character of our salvation, and this is the way of life, which the prophets announced, and Christ confirmed, and the apostles handed over, and the Church, in the whole world, hands down to her children."* (DEM. 98)

Scripture intends to disclose the truth of God, the world, and human destiny by speaking of the one Jesus Christ. He is the manifestation of God's cosmic purpose as proclaimed by the Apostles. Moreover, the rule of faith is necessary for discerning the proper arrangement of Scripture—which announces through the Law and the Prophets the coming Lord and which narrates the Apostles' witness to the incarnate Lord. Christ Himself is the purpose of the story, just as He is also its interpretation, content, and end. For this reason, the Apostolic preaching, the Gospel proclaimed in the "wisdom of the Cross," is given voice within the whole Bible. The God of Jesus Christ is always the subject and object of Scripture. Scripture speaks of Him as the Word, as the incarnate One, as the expression of salvation.

Bp. Irenaeus offered this wisdom concerning the Apostolic faith of the Church: "The church, dispersed throughout the world to the ends of the earth, received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in one God the Father Almighty, 'who made heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them' (Ex. 20:11) and in one Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the incarnate for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit, who through the prophets predicted the dispensations of God: the coming, the birth from the Virgin, the passion, the resurrection from the dead, and the

ascension of the beloved Jesus Christ our Lord in the flesh into the heavens, and is coming from the heavens in the glory of the Father to ‘recapitulate all things’ (Eph. 1:10) and raise up all flesh of the human race, so that to Christ Jesus our Lord and God and Savior and King, according to the good pleasure of the invisible Father, ‘every knee should bow, of beings in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess....’” (AH, 1.10.1)

The relationship between worship, Scripture, doctrine, and the Church’s mission is established by the proclamation of the whole narrative, which reaches its climax in cross and resurrection. Irenaeus described this as the “recapitulation of all things,” a summary or restatement which provides a way of discerning the person of Christ, the incarnate Word, the One who defeated the power of sin and overcame death to accomplish the cosmic purpose of God. Moreover, the grand recapitulation of all things in Christ was essential for Irenaeus in combating the Gnostics. After all, the Gnostics separated Christian content from its form: Christ from creation, the Old Testament from the people of Israel, the divinity of Christ from His humanity, Christian people from Christ’s obedience and suffering.

By thinking *from*, *with*, and *toward* the Trinitarian faith of the Church, Irenaeus affirmed that salvation is neither from this world nor from ourselves. Salvation is the work of God, the restoration of all things, visible and invisible. This overcomes the Gnostic division of reality into material and spiritual realms.

Seen through the lens of the cross, the center of Scripture and Christian preaching is Christ—the concise word of salvation proclaimed by the Apostles! This summary unites the identity of the Word in creation, Scripture, and the flesh of Christ with the Word proclaimed and embodied by the Church in history. In its interpretation of Scripture as the revelation of the triune God’s dealings with the world, the Church is summoned to submit its life to the transforming power of that providential story. Then the Church becomes a unified sign of, and witness to, the divine purpose of perfecting all things through the Son, in the Spirit, to the glory of the Father.

Irenaeus states clearly the responsibility of the Church, particularly its episcopal leaders, to guard this Apostolic faith and preaching. To this day Methodist people confess this faith in the liturgy of baptism, the liturgy of communion, weekly assemblies, and occasional rites of confirmation, ordination, and the consecration of bishops. Irenaeus declares: “The church, having received this preaching and this faith, as we have just said, though dispersed in the whole world, diligently guards them as living in one house, believes them as having one soul and one heart, consistently preaches, teaches, and hands them down as having one mouth.... As the sun, God’s creature, is one and the same in the whole world, so the light, the preaching of truth, shines everywhere and illuminates all men who wish to come to the knowledge of truth. And none of the rulers of the church, however gifted he may be in eloquence, will say anything different—for no one is above the Master—nor will one weak in speech damage the tradition. Since the faith is one and the same, he who

can say much about it does not add to it nor does he who says little diminish it.” (AH, 1.10.2)

Bishops, lead The United Methodist Church to trust anew the Apostolic faith and proclaim anew the Apostolic preaching.

[1] *Doxology*, 52.

[2] Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1997) 39. Hereafter references will appear in the text as Dem.

[3] Robert Jenson, “Hermeneutics and the Life of the Church,” edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 95-6.

[4] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, rev. A.C. Coxe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 1.VIII.I. References will be included in the text as AH.

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DR. WILLIAM J. ABRAHAM SPEAKS: DO NOT SETTLE. DO NOT GIVE UP. REPENT. REFORM. AND SHEPHERD.

by Dr. David F. Watson

I met William J. “Billy” Abraham in my early twenties. He was my evangelism professor at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. I was immediately taken with his powerful intellect, his love for the Church, and his passion for the faith once delivered to the saints. An Oxford-trained philosopher with extensive knowledge of theology, Wesley studies, and evangelism, Billy devoured material on topics from epistemology to Biblical studies to politics. His mind worked overtime. He was not only a great scholar, but also a wise counselor, a missionary, and a spiritual father. I think often, with gratitude, about all I learned from him.

Billy taught seminary students for over 35 years, and there he made his biggest impact. He thought of seminary as university-level catechesis. Seminary education, he believed, should immerse students in the historic faith of the Church. He spent much of his career working for reform in The United Methodist Church, urging his denominational peers toward an orthodox vision of the faith. His was a steady drumbeat across the decades, calling the church he loved forward to the historic, orthodox faith, and holding her to the highest standard of intellectual virtue. Toward the end of his life, he turned his attention to the formation of the Global Methodist Church, though initially with some reluctance. He had come to believe, against his own wishes, that a new expression of Methodism was the only way out of our denominational trench warfare.

His Canonical Project

Billy was not, however, only interested in The United Methodist Church, or even in the broader Wesleyan movement. His Canonical Theism project was a way of engaging Christians of different traditions through the Church's canonical faith. The basic idea of Canonical Theism is that the claims we make about God and His saving work in Jesus Christ are more important than how we arrive at those claims. In technical terms, "ontology precedes epistemology." Put more simply, Protestants and Roman Catholics can both affirm The Nicene Creed without agreeing on *why* we affirm it. God has given us a treasury of resources as means of grace, pathways into the life of God, and we need not get our epistemology entirely straight before we begin to avail ourselves of them.

We Protestants commonly and appropriately affirm the centrality of our canon of Scripture, but there is more to the canonical heritage than the Bible. There are canons of doctrine, liturgy, and great teachers. There are canons of saints and practices of piety. The resources of the historic Church are vast, and yet we Protestants tend to regard the broader canonical heritage with suspicion. This is a form of unnecessary spiritual impoverishment.

What Would Billy Say?

What would Billy say to The United Methodist Church's Leadership Gathering? That is a very good question. While he had certain reliable core commitments, he was an insatiably curious person, and many of his ideas were perpetually works in progress. His opinions could be surprising, though I suspect that at times this was to generate deeper engagement on the part of his conversation partners. There were, however, a few commitments that formed the basis of much of his work. Among these were the Church's Nicene faith, her evangelistic mission, and the centrality of intellectual virtue. Whatever Billy would say to the Leadership Gathering, I believe these would be in the mix. He was also a relentlessly hopeful person, a perspective shaped by a strong doctrine of providence. His advice to the Leadership Gathering, then, might look something like the following.

At present, the future of The United Methodist Church looks bleak. It has been in a state of decline since 1968, the year of its founding. While at times it has shown remarkable growth outside the Global West, and particularly in parts of Africa, here in the United States we have seen a steady dwindling of both membership and attendance. Now, following the 2024 General Conference in Charlotte, large segments of the African church are opting out, as are churches in the Philippines, Eastern Europe, and other parts of the globe.

No church-growth program or public-relations campaign will fix this problem. The problem is theological. Put plainly, the leaders of The United

"We Protestants commonly and appropriately affirm the centrality of our canon of Scripture, but there is more to the canonical heritage than the Bible. There are canons of doctrine, liturgy, and great teachers. There are canons of saints and practices of piety. The resources of the historic Church are vast, and yet we Protestants tend to regard the broader canonical heritage with suspicion. This is a form of unnecessary spiritual impoverishment."

Methodist Church—bishops, the heads of boards and agencies, and other power players—have too often ignored the great treasures of the Church's canonical heritage. They have allowed themselves to be blown about by every wind of doctrine. The core commitments of these denominational leaders are commonly misaligned with the witness of the Church across the centuries. If the issue is misalignment, the solution is clear: realignment. It is not too late.

Our risen Lord stands waiting for us to invite Him into the church through the means of grace he has provided.

To immerse ourselves in sacred Scripture, to teach and profess and defend the faith of Nicaea and Constantinople, to recover the Church's traditions of liturgy and hymnody, to avail ourselves of the writings of her great teachers, and to embrace the mystery of her sacramental life will begin to reanimate The United Methodist Church. From within our own tradition, we have Wesley's 44 Standard Sermons, which together serve as a handbook for the spiritual formation of the disciple. These canonical resources, the common heritage of all who worship God in Spirit and in truth, are conduits of the grace of God. They are the sensitive instruments by which we apply the healing balm of the Holy Spirit to our sin-sick souls and communities. The canonical tradition, moreover, is a buffer from rapid cultural change, a sturdy theological anchor in the storm.

The future of The United Methodist Church is yet to be written. It is no foregone conclusion that the decline it has experienced for so long must inexorably continue. The challenges before us today are vast, but the good news is that God has not left us to our own devices. The same Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets, who inspired the Church's Scriptures to be written and read and well interpreted, and who has guided the Church across the centuries abides with us today. And we possess a great treasury of resources through which the Spirit leads in every new generation.

So, do not settle for decline. Do not give up on the souls whose eternity hangs in the balance. Repent where you have fallen short of the faith once and for all entrusted to the saints. Then go and fulfill your historic and sacred calling as the shepherds of God's people.

Dr. Watson, an ordained elder in the Global Methodist Church, is the president of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, KY. Before that, he served at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, OH—as Professor of New Testament, Academic Dean, and Vice President for Academic Affairs. Dr. Watson is an editor of "Firebrand," an online theological publication, and a writer of many articles. His most recent book is [Faith and Fire: Methodism as a Move of God](#), with Kevin M. Watson (Seedbed, 2026).



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O gracious God, we pray for your holy Church universal,
that you would be pleased to fill it with all truth, in all
peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error,
direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it; where it is
right, establish it; where it is in want, provide for it; where
it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of him who died and
rose again, and ever lives to make intercession for us, Jesus
Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

--The United Methodist Book of Worship
(The United Methodist Publishing House [1992, #501];
from The Book of Common Prayer [1979, Alt.]

Vulnerari praesidio.

“Protect the most vulnerable.”

Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.

“Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail.”

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