

UNITED

METHODIST

DOCTRINE



THE EXTREME

CENTER

SCOTT J. JONES

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United Methodist Doctrine

The Extreme Center

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CHAPTER 1

The Shape of United Methodist Doctrine

Teaching In The United Methodist Church

Discerning the structure of United Methodist teaching requires taking statements from a variety of official sources and inquiring about the internal relationships between them. While the structure genuinely shapes the Church's teaching, it is not explicit. It must be elucidated from a careful reading of the relevant sources.

As noted in the introduction, "doctrine" can be used in a variety of different ways. In its broadest meaning, it encompasses all of the teaching that the church does in all of its forms. Within that broad category, one can distinguish official teachings that are the activities leaders of the church undertake to instruct others. They exercise their offices as teachers, pastors, catechists, deacons, bishops, synods, councils, and conferences to convey the content of the Christian faith. It is possible to use this kind of meaning to refer to either the activity of teaching or the content that is conveyed.

A yet more narrow distinction can be made. Within the category of official teaching, there are some teachings that are authoritative official teaching. This is the sense of Lindbeck's use of the word "doctrine," where certain teachings are agreed upon by the community as essential to their identity or welfare. When any teaching, whether official or unofficial, is called into question, it is authoritative teaching that resolves the dispute. Authoritative doctrine is that body of teaching to which all other doctrines refer for their validity.

Since the beginnings of Methodism in the United States, the Conference has been the primary source of authoritative teaching in the Church. This is true for the Methodist Episcopal traditions as well as for the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association. At the same time, however, each of these traditions had bishops who played significant roles both formally and informally in the doctrinal activity of their denominations.

Today there are five levels of conferences that guide the life of the denomination: local church, district, annual, jurisdictional or central

conference, and General Conference. While each of these bodies carries on a teaching function as it guides the mission and ministry of its part of the denomination, it is only the General Conference that speaks for the whole denomination.

We will consider the discernment and teaching functions as two ways in which the General Conference functions as doctrinal authority, and then consider the role bishops are understood to play. One of the purposes of the General Conference is to discern the will of God for the Church. In 1744 John Wesley and the preachers who were in connection with him held the first conference. According to the minutes, they asked three questions: "What to teach? How to teach? What to do?"

While the Conference has evolved in many ways since its beginning, there is still a sense in which these questions are the business of the General Conference. Part of the Conference's discernment process takes place in the formation of study committees or through requests for study made to one or more of the general agencies of the denomination. Frequently these groups spend four years looking at a particular set of issues. Their intense study facilitates the discernment process during the General Conference session. In the area of doctrine, the work of the doctrinal study committees chaired by Albert C. Outler (1968–72) and by Bishop Earl Hunt (1984–88) was crucial to the process of reformulating the doctrinal statements of the United Methodist Church at the General Conferences of 1972 and 1988 respectively. Sometimes the Conference makes doctrinal changes in response to petitions sent by general agencies, individual church members, congregations, or groups in the Church.

In considering the future of the Church, many months of preparation are spent by the approximately one thousand delegates to the Conference. Delegates are encouraged to pray and converse with their colleagues in seeking God's will for the future. Occasionally, official groups such as study commissions, general boards, and other agencies send in reports that have a direct bearing on doctrine. Often unofficial groups do similar work and offer their understandings to the whole Conference. When the Conference convenes, a great deal of time is first spent in worship and prayer. The Conference then spends a week of its time in legislative committees where the task of discernment is carried out often with great

care. Clearly the discernment process works better on those petitions where significant time for their consideration and refinement is built into the agenda. Other petitions are barely considered at all.

Sometimes these proceedings are described as primarily political, reflecting the human side of the process. There is an inevitably political side of conferencing because of the human composition of the group. Human groups making decisions together are by definition engaging in a political process. However, there is a theological conviction that God also uses conferencing as a means of grace. If the church is understood to be a sacramental entity, then one trusts that the Holy Spirit is present in this process. It follows then, that despite human sinfulness, God uses these Conferences.

With regard to doctrine, the work of legislative committees has been significant in recent years. In 1988 the Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission was formed to examine the recommendations of two study committees that had worked during the previous quadrennium. One had examined the Church's doctrine and the other its mission. Each brought petitions that were referred to a newly formed legislative committee. Concerning this Conference, Langford says:

The Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission of the 1988 General Conference was constituted to engage in theology.... These people understood themselves to be engaged in theological activity as a church and for the church. They were challenged to model how The United Methodist Church actually does its theological work. They were reminded that this was a new legislative committee and, therefore, they were part of a new venture. They were commissioned to seek truth and serve the church; the spirit and quality of their work would leave its mark.

In 2000 there was a Legislative Committee on Faith and Order to deal with doctrinal issues before the Conference.

Another purpose of the General Conference is to teach what it has discerned. Some may argue that this is the same as the discernment

process, but there have been many occasions where the Conference has debated significant issues and then declined to produce a statement. When the General Conference chooses to make a doctrinal statement, it usually does so by amending one of the existing texts that embody the Church's teaching. These statements serve as the Church's teaching until another General Conference chooses to amend what has been said. The resolutions of the General Conference lose their status after eight years unless explicitly reaffirmed.

Judicial Council

The Church's Judicial Council has the responsibility, in part, "to determine the constitutionality of any act of the General Conference upon an appeal of a majority of the Council of Bishops or one-fifth of the members of the General Conference." It also reviews the decisions of law made by bishops in annual conference sessions.

Conceivably, the Judicial Council could then determine whether a doctrinal statement of the General Conference violated the Restrictive Rules and was thus unconstitutional. In one case, it invalidated the action of a Central Conference that violated the Church's commitment to infant baptism on the basis of the First Restrictive Rule. In four other decisions, however, the Judicial Council has kept its approach to doctrine very narrow in focus. It has not allowed the Church to alter the wording of the doctrinal standards, but has also refused to interpret them. In 1948 it said, "It is the opinion of the Judicial Council that the Judicial Council was not set up as an interpreter of doctrine but as an interpreter of law from the strictly legal standpoint." This language was reaffirmed in decision 86 in 1952, and again in decision 358 in 1972. In the 1972 decision, the Judicial Council offers a narrowly construed version of the question before it, and says that the report of the Theological Study Commission does not change the doctrinal standards and thus does not violate the Restrictive Rules. It says "We find no recommended substantive changes or additions to the documents themselves." In a crucial paragraph it then says,

The broader question of whether or not changes in paragraphs of

historical and theological interpretation in **Part II** of the Discipline make changes in these protected documents we do not decide. The Judicial Council, historically, and we think properly, has refused jurisdiction over questions which demand of it theological interpretations. (Decisions No. 59 and 86) We believe the General Conference is competent to make this decision.

More recently, the Judicial Council refused to answer a broad request on the status of the Social Principles, instead narrowly deciding the meaning of a particular sentence based on its legislative history. Thus, the Judicial Council's role in the determination of United Methodist doctrine has been limited.

Nonauthoritative Official Teaching for the Whole Church

The *Book of Discipline* gives to bishops the task of doctrinal teaching in the whole denomination. Section IV of **chapter 3** of the Discipline is titled "Specific Responsibilities of Bishops." Paragraph 414 is labeled "Leadership—Spiritual and Temporal," referring to the Constitution's provision that the bishops be responsible for "the general oversight and promotion of the temporal and spiritual interests of the entire Church." Subparagraph 3 gives them the responsibility "to guard, transmit, teach, and proclaim, corporately and individually, the apostolic faith as it is expressed in Scripture and tradition, and, as they are led and endowed by the Spirit, to interpret that faith evangelically and prophetically." In a similar way, paragraph 427.2 says, "The Church expects the Council of Bishops to speak to the Church and from the Church to the world and to give leadership in the quest for Christian unity and interreligious relationships."

Bishops, as United Methodist elders, are expected to "preach and maintain" United Methodist doctrines. But paragraphs 414.3 and 427.2

give them added responsibilities of guarding and transmitting that doctrine and speaking to the Church and from the Church to the world. In addition, as a corporate body of leaders in the church, they have opportunities for fulfilling these functions in ways not open to anyone else.

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

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

(Continues...)

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"This is a most welcome book! For far too long it has been touted--by adherents and opponents alike—that United Methodism is not a 'doctrinal' church. Some have celebrated the supposed freedom this provides, while a growing number have lamented how this supposedly accounts for our lack of self-identity. Jones decisively lays to rest this long-standing caricature of Methodism. More importantly, he clarifies the nature and the specific claims of 'official' United Methodist doctrine in a way that should help us move beyond the current tendency to assume that our only alternatives are a rigid dogmatism or an unfettered theological pluralism. Best of all, in classic Wesleyan form, his driving concern is less with defining doctrine than with recovering the vital role of forming believers in the 'mind of Christ,' so that they might live more faithfully in their many settings in our world." Randy L. Maddox, Paul T. Walls Professor of Wesleyan Theology, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington

"This is a textbook for those who wish to know the essentials of Christian faith interpreted through the tradition of the United Methodist church and a handbook for pastors and laity who wish to understand the connection between the beliefs of a United Methodist and the practice of the Christian faith." Robert F. Kohler, Assistant General Secretary, Section of Elders and Local Pastors, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church

"In this lucid and meticulous study, Scott Jones investigates the ways in which one contemporary American denomination seeks to teach with authority. He not only considers the idea of doctrinal authority in Methodism, but offers a detailed account of what United Methodist doctrinal standards commit that Church to teach—on matters ranging from the Trinity to global diversity. Consistently alert to the complexities of doctrinal controversy, this book will interest not only United Methodists, but Christians of all denominations, who alike must decide what it is to be Christ's faithful church amid the challenges posed by contemporary American life." Bruce Marshall, Professor of Historical Theology, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas

"The role of doctrine has come to be one of the most controversial topics in Methodist church life in the last two decades. To date, however, we have not had a sustained, scholarly inquiry into the status of doctrine in the United Methodist church or a sustained account of the content of our doctrinal standards. Scott J. Jones has addressed both of these needs with *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*. This book warrants serious reflection on the part of Methodist leaders, including bishops, superintendents, pastors, lay Christian teachers, in short, anyone who presumes to speak on behalf of the denomination." Ted A. Campbell,

President, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois

"Throughout this practical book, Scott Jones insists that for United Methodists the ultimate goal of doctrine is holiness. Right belief aims at righteous living. This book not only informed me about United Methodist doctrine, it also convinced me that doctrine helps form Christians for holiness and encouraged me to live and think more faithfully. This book should be of interest to all United Methodists who care about doctrine and holiness. If Jones is right, that number would include ALL United Methodists." Rebekah Miles, Associate Professor of Ethics, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas