

United Methodist Doctrine After Disaffiliation: Learning to Teach Our Teachings

Sarah Heaner Lancaster

Abstract

In *Methodist Review* 12 (2020), William B. Lawrence presented “A Question of Doctrine: Whither The United Methodist Church?” This article returns to the question posed by Lawrence to consider what The United Methodist Church intended by its statements in *The Book of Discipline* about doctrine. Earlier reflection intended for theological and doctrinal renewal may continue to serve as a guide for how to think about doctrine as the church goes forward after disaffiliation. The article looks at why doctrine matters, but also why ongoing interpretation and self-criticism are important, giving special attention to the Social Principles.

Introduction

In the time leading up to disaffiliation by congregations and individuals in The United Methodist Church, it was common to hear dissatisfaction expressed in terms of doctrine.¹ Would the Church follow its teaching or not?

¹ Several scholars who contributed to conversation that resulted in papers published as *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness*.

The question arose with regard to a statement contained in the Social Principles that asserts “homosexuality” is “incompatible with Christian teaching.”² The complaint is rooted in a longstanding Methodist value: connecting Christian doctrine and Christian living. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* refers to the “Wesleyan way of serving Christ through doctrine and disciplined Christian life.”³ *The Book of Discipline* further explains “No motif in the Wesleyan tradition has been more constant than the link between Christian doctrine and Christian living.”⁴ This constancy is rooted in the connection between faith and works that is present in John Wesley’s theology and has been valued throughout Methodism. To be criticized for not living out doctrine is then a serious concern that requires reflection. This reflection needs to consider what doctrine is, what it is for, and how it should be used. As some of the current conversation about the way The United Methodist Church understands doctrine is shifting from moral lifestyle to more central theological topics (such as fear that Christology may be threatened), the question about how The United Methodist Church will understand and use its doctrine becomes especially important.

William B. Lawrence began such reflection in his article “A Question of Doctrine: Whither The United Methodist Church?” published in volume 12 of *Methodist Review*. In his article, Lawrence describes with extensive legal, political, and historical analysis how we arrived at the situation we were in before disaffiliation. He aimed to shift the narrative of what had brought us to this point away from the usual stories about declining membership, diminishing financial resources, and changing demographics to a story about doctrine, specifically “disappearing Doctrinal Standards, declining attention to the

published by Higher Education and Ministry (2018) speak about questions of doctrine and doctrinal differences. See for instance Ted A. Campbell, “Grounds for Unity in The United Methodist Church and a Proposed Way Forward,” 113–131; Jack Jackson, “A Division of the Heart: John Wesley’s Case for Separation,” 211–224; and Kenneth J. Collins, “Human Sexuality and the Unity of the Church; Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness,” 151–179.

² The statement “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” appears in ¶161.G in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*. This “teaching” becomes the basis for a chargeable offense listed in ¶2702 as “practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teaching, including but not limited to being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies.”

³ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, Part III, ¶101, 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ¶102, 54.

importance of doctrine, and deteriorating connections between doctrine and discipleship." When Lawrence asks "whither," he is asking The United Methodist Church to think about the direction in which it should go. Now that disaffiliation has become reality, I want to consider the question of "whither" by looking at work The United Methodist Church has already done on doctrine in order to uncover what the Church intended as it has considered the importance of doctrine. What does our history of doctrinal reflection tell us about the way The United Methodist Church can take doctrine seriously while it develops a new understanding of what it means to be The United Methodist Church? This reflection is also called for because General Conference 2024 will consider a revised Social Principles, which I will discuss briefly at the end of this article.

Although reflection on doctrine seems timely and wise as disaffiliation has become reality, this task does not come easily for United Methodists. The 2016 *Book of Discipline* acknowledges, "Devising formal definitions of doctrine has been less pressing for United Methodists than summoning people to faith and nurturing them in the knowledge and love of God."⁵ Although concern about doctrine has in recent years most often been identified with "traditionalists," and many "traditionalists" are leaving through disaffiliation, The United Methodist Church should not cede concern about doctrine to those who have left. We have long held that there exists a link between doctrine and Christian living, but doctrine is not simply a norm by which lives are judged. It should work in service of summoning people to faith and nurturing that faith. This essay aims to uncover a way of thinking about doctrine that can serve this purpose. In the decades since it was formed, The United Methodist Church has done valuable work on doctrine that has been sometimes ignored or misunderstood. The essay will proceed by tracing the outlines of the establishment of doctrine and reflection on doctrine in The United Methodist Church. It seeks to set a framework in which The United Methodist Church may meet the questions of our time by embracing its doctrine more effectively.

Defining Doctrine

One of the important features of the current statement on doctrine and theology in Part III of *The Book of Discipline* is that it attempts to draw a distinction between doctrine and theology. The title of Part III "Doctrinal

⁵ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, Part III, Section 1, ¶102, 56.

Standards and Our Theological Task” implies a distinction that is described in the opening paragraphs of Section 4 in ¶105. Doctrinal affirmations are a “central feature” of the identity of The United Methodist Church (what we believe tells people who we are), while theology reflects “upon God’s gracious action in our lives” in order to “give expression to the mysterious reality of God’s presence, peace, and power in the world” and therefore make us “more fully prepared to participate in God’s work in the world.”⁶ Doctrine is theological in that the beliefs the church holds are beliefs about God’s action and reality in the world, but theology continues reflection beyond the formulations that are officially codified in our doctrinal affirmations. This distinction has been described by Thomas Langford as a house (doctrine) and blueprints for remodeling (theology) or as the “grasp” of the church (doctrine) and its “exploration” (theology).⁷ The two work together as doctrine secures the faith of the church so that the church adequately represents what it means to be Christian, while theology assists the church in proclaiming its faith effectively in new situations.

Although the intended distinction is clear, Part III does not contain a denotative definition of the word doctrine. This absence has left scholars to offer their own definitions. In his book on doctrine, Scott Jones used a definition provided by George Lindbeck: “Church doctrines are communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question.”⁸ Ted Campbell offered a definition in his book on doctrine, “that which Methodists have agreed to teach.”⁹ Both definitions used by Jones and Campbell highlight the idea of teaching that is embedded in the word doctrine (from the Latin *doctrina*, derived from *docere*). They both also underscore the idea of agreement. Jones explains in a footnote that the word “authoritative” covers the idea of agreement, and because it indicates official action by the church (in the UMC case by General Conference), it conveys a “stronger” agreement than consensus among members.¹⁰ Both recognize that the usual formal way of agreeing for Methodists is

⁶ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* ¶104, 80.

⁷ These images are found respectively in Thomas A. Langford, “Conciliar Theology: A Report,” p. 181 and “Doctrinal Affirmation and Theological Exploration,” p. 204 in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991).

⁸ Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 20.

⁹ Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials, Revised Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 16.

¹⁰ Jones, 29, note 13.

by an act of General Conference.¹¹ William B. Lawrence offers a quite serviceable definition in his article for *Methodist Review*, doctrine "refers to a theological assertion that a church body has designated as its official teaching."¹²

As the material in Part III has been worked out, doctrinal standards (covered in the next section) have been much discussed, but official teaching may not be limited to the standards. Lawrence points out "From its inception The United Methodist Church has used the words 'doctrine' and 'doctrinal' in reference to two types of official teaching." One type consists of the doctrinal standards, and the other type "refers to doctrinal statements or declarations that are issued by the church, some of which are published in Part III of *The Book of Discipline* and some of which are in *The Book of Resolutions*."¹³ Examples of the latter category are the sacramental documents called for and confirmed by General Conference (*By Water and the Spirit* and *This Holy Mystery*).

One of the questions that disaffiliation presses home is the status of the Social Principles as doctrine. Disagreement has already existed over that status. Scott Jones recognizes the ambiguity around the Social Principles, but he thinks it odd that the Social Principles would be less authoritative than the Book of Resolutions, which he regards as doctrine. In his constructive interpretation of doctrine for *The Extreme Center*, he includes the Social Principles in the second level of doctrine as Contemporary Statements.¹⁴ Lawrence, however, interprets the status of the Social Principles differently, noting that although in giving a theological point of view for a position it draws from doctrine, it is not itself a doctrinal declaration.¹⁵ The Social Principles describes its stated purpose as a "call to faithfulness . . . intended to be instructive and persuasive." The revised Social Principles to be presented at General Conference 2024 also describes itself in this way. Furthermore, the revised version states clearly that it is not church law, despite Judicial Council Decision 833, which decided with reference to *The Book of Discipline* 1996 that the sentence "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches" had the effect of church law. In this complicated situation, it is important for General Conference to make clear the status of this document.

¹¹ Campbell, 17.

¹² Lawrence, 4.

¹³ Lawrence, 5. The Social Principles are published in Part V..

¹⁴ See Jones, *The Extreme Center*, 37, 45, 55.

¹⁵ Lawrence, "A Question of Doctrine," 15.

Lawrence further points out that not only is doctrinal material broader than the standards, but also much doctrinal responsibility falls outside General Conference. Lawrence acknowledges the vital role the Committee on Faith and Order plays along with General Conference in establishing our official teaching through the documents it produces. He also recognizes the role of the episcopacy, which carries a teaching office and has responsibility to guard the faith. In this role, bishops sometimes issue statements on important issues. Annual conferences pass resolutions, and they also make decisions about the doctrinal and theological adequacy of candidates for ministry. They play a role, then, that General Conference does not in ensuring official teaching of the church. All these bodies make theological assertions on behalf of the church that have some official status. The United Methodist Church has done too little to think through what counts as official teaching or doctrine in the broader sense. It has, though, given a great deal of thought to its doctrinal standards and how those standards are intended to be used. The next section covers what we might learn from that history.

Doctrinal Standards as Standards

The merger in 1968 between The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren precipitated important reflection on doctrine that has significantly shaped the UMC since that time. The practical matter that the two church bodies merging into The United Methodist Church each already had a formal statement of doctrine (for The Methodist Church, the Articles of Religion; and for The Evangelical United Brethren, the Confession of Faith) posed the question of how the newly forming United Methodist Church would approach the matter of doctrine.

The 1968–72 Theological Study Commission was formed, and it was clearly tasked with reporting on “Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards.” The mandate for the Commission included the option to create a new faith statement for the new church (many thought of the Commission as the Creedal Commission).¹⁶ Instead of writing a new statement of faith, the Commission determined that theological renewal would be better helped by another

¹⁶ Albert Outler, “Introduction to the Report of the 1968–72 Theological Study Commission” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1991), 20. The comments were included in the *Daily Christian Advocate* (April 19, 1972), 218–22.

approach.¹⁷ The result was a part (at the time Part II titled Doctrine and Doctrinal Statements and The General Rules) in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1972* that consisted of three sections: Historical Background (§68), Landmark Documents (§69), and Our Theological Task (§70). The Historical Background covered doctrine in both The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren. The material under the heading "Wesleyan Doctrinal Standards" covers Wesley's *Sermons on Several Occasions* and *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*.¹⁸ These Wesleyan materials were named in the Model Deed for preaching houses in England, and they served to secure sound doctrine in Methodist preaching. Importantly, §68 states an interpretation of the First Restrictive Rule. Although acknowledging that the phrase "present, existing, and established standards" has never been defined, §68 understands the phrase to refer to Wesley's *Sermons* and *Notes* "by plain historical inference." It takes the double reference to the Articles of Religion and to "present, existing, and established standards" to mean that the Rule forbids "alterations" to the Articles and "additions" to the Wesleyan standards.¹⁹ The Confession of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren was recognized and accepted as a counterpart to the Articles of Religion. There were no comparable materials in the EUB tradition that were identified to serve along with the Wesleyan materials (perhaps because they understood there were to be no additions to the Wesleyan standards).

The next paragraph of the 1972 *Discipline* (§69) uses the heading Landmark Documents, and it includes full text of The Articles of Religion, The Confession of Faith, and The General Rules, along with providing information about how to find the *Sermons* and *Notes*. This description of doctrine as "landmark documents" sets up the way that the commission understood how The United Methodist Church would regard its doctrine. In his introduction to the report, Outler explained that state churches in Europe had tended to treat creeds and confessions as "juridical enactments, enforceable by punitive

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1972*, §68, 48 and 40. Under another heading ("American Methodism and the Wesleyan 'Standards'") the *Discipline* also noted on p. 43 the use in The Methodist Episcopal Church of "the London Minutes" conference deliberation for a "threefold agency—the *Conference*, the *Sermons*, and the *Notes*—as their guides in matters of doctrine," but the Minutes did not gain the same status in The United Methodist Church.

¹⁹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1972*, §68, 43–44 The Wesleyan "present, existing, and established standards" are listed in this paragraph as the Minutes, *Sermons* and *Notes*.

sanctions against all violators, or else let [them] slide into the oblivion of the dead letter.”²⁰ The Commission wanted to treat its Articles and Confession differently. Paragraph 68 states, “the *Articles* and *Confession* are not to be regarded as juridical norms for doctrine, demanding unqualified assent on pain of excommunication.”²¹ Neither are they to be discarded. Outler explained that because of “historical consciousness” which leads us to ask about the context in which a document is produced, we can “appreciate the ancient creeds and confessions afresh” and “repossess their living truth in the light of radically new experience.”²² Rather than discard the heritage of each church in the merger and produce a new statement that would itself become dated, the Commission wanted to find a way to interpret them for our time. Landmark documents, although dated, held wisdom that could be repossessed through interpretation.²³ The documents serve as landmarks do to help us find our way as Christians.

The final section in Part II explains how this repossession was intended to happen. After having interpreted the phrase “present, existing, and established standards” to refer to the *Sermons* and *Notes*, in ¶70 the *Discipline* uses the same phrase to refer to the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith (saying the standards are “cited in the first two Restrictive Rules”). These standards are “not to be construed literally and juridically.”²⁴ This characterization prevents them from being used for punitive sanctions, but they may be reflected upon profitably so they should not be ignored. The method for this reflection is stated succinctly as “free inquiry within the boundaries defined by four main sources and guidelines for Christian theology: scripture, tradition, experience, reason,” and then each boundary is explained in the following paragraphs. Our theological task, then, is to interpret our confessional material so that it can speak to a new age and time. The method has been widely characterized as the Methodist (or Wesleyan) quadrilateral. The structure of the 1972 Part II reflects the idea that the Gospel must be appropriated anew in every age, so having doctrine as a touchstone of “living truth” enables the church to address the

²⁰ Outler “Introduction to the Report,” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 23.

²¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1972, ¶68, 48.

²² Outler “Introduction to the Report,” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 23.

²³ Outler, “Introduction to the Report,” 23–24.

²⁴ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1972, ¶70, 75.

problems of its time with the wisdom of the Christian faith as it has been handed down to United Methodists.

Although the work of the Theological Study Commission was widely regarded with gratitude and even excitement, criticism also emerged early. Schubert M. Ogden judged the work to identify the doctrinal standards to be successful, even though he also judged reflection about their role to be less successful. For instance, he noticed that calling them "landmark documents," creates ambiguity. He worried that the standards would not serve truly as standards, and at the same time he worried that theology would be confined to reflection within our doctrinal heritage.²⁵ For different reasons, Robert Cushman also wondered about the roles of doctrine and theology. To him, the statement made the work of theological reflection too corporate (the task of the whole church) so that there seemed to be no one responsible for guarding the faith. Doctrine would also seem always to be in process as it is constantly theologized rather than providing any standard by which beliefs could be measured.²⁶ These early objections identified tensions—between doctrine and theology, between understandings of what is normative—that were to grow over the years as the statement on Our Theological Task was questioned and tested.

Eventually, the General Conference of 1984 was inundated with hundreds of petitions that raised questions in connection with Our Theological Task. Speaking on behalf of the Committee on Discipleship, Mark Trotter characterized the petitions as raising primarily three categories of issues: "1) the significance and proper use of the so-called Methodist quadrilateral, 2) proper understanding of the catholic spirit, which is often spoken of today as pluralism; and 3) the contribution that United Methodism can make to ecumenical-theological conversation."²⁷ The report of the Committee on Discipleship recommended that the Council of Bishops constitute a committee to prepare a new statement for the church and bring a report to the 1988 General

²⁵ Schubert M. Ogden, "Doctrinal Standards in The United Methodist Church," in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 42–45. The article was first published in the *Perkins Journal* 28 (Fall 1974), 19–27.

²⁶ Robert E. Cushman, "Church Doctrinal Standards Today" in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 6. This article was first published in *Religion in Life* 44 (Winter, 1975), 401–11.

²⁷ Journal of the 1984 General Conference of The United Methodist Church, vol. 1, 319, Records of the General Conference, United Methodist Church Archives—GCAH, Madison, New Jersey. <http://www.archive.org/details/journalbaltimore01unit>.

Conference. The result was the formation of the new Committee on Our Theological Task, or COTT.

Initially the work of the 1968–72 Theological Study Commission to identify the doctrinal standards had seemed successful; but as reflection began anew on the question of doctrine and doctrinal standards, Richard P. Heitzenrater (a member of COTT) challenged the inference made by the previous committee regarding what constituted the doctrinal standards. His own research on the General Conference of 1808 (which established the First Restrictive Rule) led to a different conclusion. In his judgment, the intent of the General Conference was to identify only the Articles of Religion, not the Wesleyan material, as standards for orthodoxy. Wesley’s writings were useful, but in a different way than the Articles of Religion. The Articles of Religion contain the beliefs held by (Protestant) Christians for doctrinal orthodoxy while Wesley’s *Sermons* and *Notes* illustrate and exemplify the doctrinal heritage of Methodists.²⁸ The judgment about how to identify the standards had implications for their roles. As standards of orthodoxy, the Articles of Religion could in fact function juridically. Because the Articles of Religion were accepted and protected legally, they could be used in matters of trial. In fact, the chargeable offense as currently stated in ¶2702 “dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church” once read “disseminating doctrines contrary to our Articles of Religion.”²⁹ Wesley’s *Sermons* and *Notes*, on the other hand, were “traditionally accepted” and served as “exemplary illustrations” of doctrine as interpreted by this particular tradition.³⁰ A further important insight that follows from this distinction is that the 1808 General Conference had under consideration more than Wesley’s writings as exemplary Methodist doctrine. John Fletcher’s *Checks Against Antinomianism* was specifically mentioned in an (unsuccessful) motion in 1808 to clarify what was covered by the First Restrictive Rule. Fletcher’s *Checks* was considered a “good explanation” of the Articles of Religion.³¹ From this historical situation, Heitzenrater introduces a distinction between “doctrinal

²⁸ Richard P. Heitzenrater, “At Full Liberty: Doctrinal Standards in Early American Methodism,” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 109–124. See especially p. 121. This essay was first published in *Quarterly Review* 5 (Fall 1985) and was reprinted in *Mirror and Memory* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

²⁹ See p.12 in “The New Doctrinal Statements: A First Draft Proposal” in *Circuit Rider* 11 (February 1987): 9–15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

³¹ Heitzenrater, “At Full Liberty,” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 117.

statements (accepted patterns of doctrinal *exposition*) and the established doctrinal *standards* (minimal measures of doctrinal *orthodoxy*).³²

In other words, to preach the Gospel, the Methodist Episcopal preachers were accountable to basic Christian beliefs as stated in the Articles of Religion, but to preach in an adequately Methodist way, they needed formation in Methodist understandings as presented in other Methodist materials. The Articles of Religion were doctrinal standards. The Methodist materials were doctrinal statements. The former were normative. The latter were formative. The language of formative and normative does not appear in the *Discipline*, but it is used by Heitzenrater as he describes the issues the COTT thought about as they worked on the official statement.³³ The words "normative" and "formative" were not defined, but they signaled a need for having standards for judgment as well as standards for shaping identity. Heitzenrater identifies one problem, in particular, that required attention, namely *The Book of Discipline* called doctrinal standards "non-judicial" in one place but referred to "doctrinal discipline for church trials" in another.³⁴ Distinguishing standards and statements allowed standards to function juridically while statements functioned non-judicially.

Heitzenrater's historical work was questioned vigorously by Thomas C. Oden, who argued for an "uninterrupted consensual history" of receiving Wesley's *Sermons and Notes* as "established standards of doctrine."³⁵ Oden argues not only historically, but also by considering the grammatical meaning of the First Restrictive Rule. He points out that the plural "standards" would have to refer to each article individually if it does not refer to other material.³⁶ Robert Cushman also points to the "plurality" of the First Restrictive Rule, and he understands the plural to include more than the *Sermons and Notes*, for instance,

³² Ibid., 122. The words standards and statements were both used in the 1972 Discipline, but Heitzenrater is using them differently in his proposal.

³³ Heitzenrater "In Search of Continuity and Consensus: The Road to the 1988 Doctrinal Statement," in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 97.

³⁴ Ibid., 93–94. The wording for chargeable offense is found in *The Book of Discipline* 2016 ¶2702.1 and 2701.3.

³⁵ Thomas C. Oden, "What Are 'Established Standards of Doctrine'? A Response to Richard Heitzenrater" (in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 125–142. See p. 125. This article first appeared in *Quarterly Review* 7 (Spring 1987), 42–62.

³⁶ Ibid., 134.

he also names the *General Rules*, the *Minutes of Several Conversations* (1780), and the *Collection of Hymns* (1780).³⁷

Despite the contention between Heitzenrater and Oden over what counted as “doctrinal standards,” Oden in practice considered the roles of the Articles and Wesleyan materials in ways similar to Heitzenrater’s view. Oden stated the Articles of Religion serve as “Criterion for trial” while the Sermons and Notes serve as “Criteria for preaching.” In other words, the Articles of Religion may function juridically, while the Wesleyan material functions to show how good Methodist preaching should proclaim the Christian faith that is secured in the Articles of Religion. To put it another way, normative standards measure Christian orthodoxy (faithfulness to the Christian faith itself) while formative standards measure proper formation, commitment, and understanding of this particular church as distinct from other Christian churches.

Thomas W. Ogletree (member of COTT) described the way that the committee worked through the question at issue between Heitzenrater and Oden. The new statement dropped the claim about inferring reference to the *Sermons* and *Notes* in the First Restrictive Rule. Although the Plan of Union worked under the assumption of that inference, this inferred historical judgment remains open to review and reconstruction. Although it dropped the inference, the new statement retained the language of standards for the Wesleyan materials, but it specifically distinguished the way that the Articles of Religion and Wesley’s *Sermons* and *Notes* were considered to be doctrinal standards and functioned as such. The Articles of Religion are *formal* doctrinal standards, officially adopted as such by an ecclesiastical body and can be used judicially. The Wesleyan materials are *traditional* doctrinal standards, held to be such by their use as valuable resources and are used especially for teaching.³⁸ In this way, both kinds of materials serve as measures (standards) that are important for representing The United Methodist Church well.

Adopting Heitzenrater’s conceptual distinction between standards and statements shows that doctrine (teaching) comes in different forms for

³⁷ Cushman, *John Wesley’s Experimental Divinity: Studies in Methodist Doctrinal Standards* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 180.

³⁸ Thomas W. Ogletree, “In Quest of a Common Faith: The Theological Task of United Methodists” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 168–175. See especially 173–175. The distinction between formal and traditional doctrinal standards is described in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* ¶102, 48.

different purposes.³⁹ Although the language used by *The Book of Discipline* for the Wesleyan material is "traditionally accepted standards" (rather than doctrinal statements), it remains clear that the *Sermons* and *Notes* do not function in the same way as the Articles of Religion. We may also recognize the existence of doctrine beyond the doctrinal standards (whether formal or traditional) that has its own valuable role to play. Additional doctrinal statements that have been written in more recent years function differently than our doctrinal standards do. They explain and expand on our central beliefs as Christians (named in both the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith), and they also explain and expand according to the distinctive voice that United Methodism uses to proclaim those beliefs to the world. For instance, the sacramental documents (*By Water and the Spirit* and *This Holy Mystery*) cite both our formal standards and our traditional standards. These documents depend, then, on doctrinal standards (both the formally adopted and traditionally accepted standards) but they are the product of ongoing theological reflection, often including insights from ecumenical dialogue. Their exposition of our doctrinal standards is needed as new situations and questions arise. Other teaching statements are in development. For instance, the Committee on Faith and Order has overseen work on a document on ecclesiology, now titled *Sent in Love* which will be presented for vote at General Conference 2024. If General Conference approves this document, it will be adding to our doctrine in the broad sense. Still, however "official" materials in this broader category may be, they are open to revision and correction, if the need arises, in a way normative doctrinal standards (protected by the Constitution) are not. There have been attempts to paraphrase Wesley's sermons in more accessible language, but the original sermons themselves are not "revised" and they stand as measure for how well they have been paraphrased.

Even though discussion about the revised Part III indicated how doctrine might be used juridically, it is important to remember that the 1968–72 Theological Study Commission did not intend doctrines to be used to enforce punitive sanctions. We do not need to have trials in order for the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith to function as standards or measures. These formal standards demonstrate what should and should not be "disseminated." Annual conferences may use them to determine whether people seeking to be ordained have adequate understanding of the Christian faith. Those who

³⁹ Heitzenrater notes that this language did not survive in the final revision but the basic distinction informed the work. See Heitzenrater, "In Search of Continuity and Consensus," 97, note 15.

proclaim the Gospel are reminded that they have an obligation to preach the faith of the church, not simply their own private ideas.

The provision for trials that exists in the *Book of Discipline* indicates that accountability and correction are important even if the harsh punishment Outler was concerned about should be avoided. Trials may become necessary if persons do not respond to correction and participate in actual “dissemination.” The caution Outler presented in light of what had happened in European state churches, though, should be taken seriously. Trials are a last resort, not a first defense. Correction may be needed also for the Methodist ideas presented in the Wesleyan statements. Wesleyan teaching can be distorted just as basic Christian belief can be. John Wesley recognized correction was needed for the preachers in his own time (for instance Wesley’s doctrine of perfection was being misrepresented in the early 1760s).⁴⁰ And if traditionally accepted Wesleyan material may be employed for correction, it has also been observed that The Confession of Faith (formally accepted in 1968 along with the Articles of Religion and given the same protection) was intended to be catechetical rather than juridical.⁴¹ It may be that it is not so easy to draw a sharp distinction in function between formal (normative) and traditional (formative) doctrine. Perhaps attempting to draw clear lines is less important than recognizing that doctrine both measures and forms the way Christian faith is expressed.

Doctrine and Our Theological Task

The 1968–72 Theological Study Commission had another concern, namely that doctrine should not be construed “literally.” What might it mean for doctrine not to be taken literally? The 1972 Part II does not address this concern very directly, but Outler pointed out in the introduction to the Commission’s report that the tendency to treat creeds and confessions as “legislative statutes” not only meant enforcing them with punitive sanctions but also replacing one creed with another to correct insufficiency or error. This way of

⁴⁰ See Gareth Lloyd, “A Cloud of Perfect Witnesses’ John Wesley and the London Disturbances 1760–1763” in *The Asbury Theological Journal*: 57: 1, 117–136.

⁴¹ Jason E. Vickers, “The Confession of Faith: A Theological Commentary,” in *Methodist and Pietist: Retrieving the Evangelical United Brethren Tradition*, eds. J. Steven O’Malley and Jason E. Vickers (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2011), 109–135.

thinking, he believed, was altered by "our emerging historical consciousness" by which we ask about context.⁴² An example illumines what he had in mind.

The Articles of Religion, produced in the throes of anti-Catholic sentiment as the Church of England was being established, contain several anti-Catholic articles. The ideology of the time is enshrined in our doctrine and because of Constitutional protection by the First Restrictive Rule, the articles cannot be changed easily to be less anti-Catholic. Outler, a major ecumenist, recognized this problem. He also recognized that asking questions about context allow us to "repossess" the "living truth" of doctrine "in the light of radically new experience."⁴³ The special General Conference of 1970 adopted a "resolution of intent" acknowledging that these articles must be "reconsidered and reassessed."⁴⁴ These articles indicate that we stand clearly in the Protestant way of being Christian, and they belong to and connect us with our Anglican heritage, but the historical judgment about Catholicism from that time (for instance calling certain beliefs and practices "repugnant") must be revised by the ecumenical insights of our time. The "literal" or accepted meaning in the time these articles were written can no longer be treated as normative. It should be acknowledged that even the continued presence of these articles in the Articles of Religion is problematic. Nothing guarantees that they will be interpreted according to an intent expressed in *The Book of Resolutions*. Since they are given the same protection to prevent revocation or change as all the central beliefs of the faith, it certainly appears they should be regarded as equally normative. One wishes there could be options other than a resolution for minimizing their harm. In any case, the current situation witnesses to the problem of a doctrinal document becoming dated and the need for ongoing interpretation, as well as to the need for self-criticism covered below.

Interpreting doctrine in light of new insights helps us avoid literalism. The method presented in the 1972 Part II and known as the quadrilateral was the method by which we could undertake this interpretation. When introduced, the method for reflecting on doctrine was intended to follow the model of Christian theology itself. In other words, it was asking United Methodists to

⁴² Outler, "Introduction to the Report," in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 23.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ The original resolution of intent was not published in the *Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*. The mistake was corrected in 1992 when a slightly revised version was adopted and printed in the 1992 *Book of Resolutions*.

do what theologians do: engage in ongoing reflection on the meaning of our beliefs.

One of the reasons that reflection must be ongoing is not only that new times bring new questions, but also that interpreters have varied perspectives. Varied perspectives can open up valuable new meanings, but they can also be the source of conflict. As these varied perspectives presented themselves when United Methodists made use of the quadrilateral, the method itself came under criticism. In the previous section, one of the three concerns expressed in the petitions that led to the rewriting of Our Theological Task was about “the significance and proper use of the so-called Methodist quadrilateral.” Many were disturbed that outlining an interplay of interpretive factors made scripture less normative or authoritative than it should be. Of course, biblical scholarship recognizes hermeneutical problems about reading the Bible itself, and debates about the primacy of scripture regarding our theological task rarely, if ever, acknowledge the complexity of interpretation. Complex and difficult hermeneutical questions are already endlessly studied and debated. The method we call the quadrilateral does not eliminate multiple, varying interpretations of scripture itself. It may be, though, that uncovering these different ways of understanding scripture is essential to our proper use of doctrine. Scripture itself uses various witnesses to convey the truth of God’s work in Jesus Christ. Preoccupation with using scripture and doctrine as determinative norms may deflect us from needed insights.

When thinking of doctrine as “standards” or “measures,” it is natural to imagine the work as one-directional. The doctrine measures the way the church believes and acts in the present age. This measuring is surely important, but the example of the anti-Catholic articles shows that sometimes we need to measure the standards themselves in light of new insights and relationships. One friendly non-United Methodist critic of the 1972 Part II saw this need as even broader than anti-Catholic sentiment. Frederick Herzog saw in the 1970s that United Methodism was in “agony,” a word used in the 1972 Part II to express the urgency of the world’s need for the witness to Christ.⁴⁵ The “agony” of The United Methodist Church shows itself in how we have been unsuccessful in holding together competing concerns. For instance, Part II wants to renew doctrine, but it also, in its section on Our Theological Task (§70), recognizes the presence and importance of “special-interest theologies.”⁴⁶ This

⁴⁵ Herzog, “United Methodism in Agony,” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 26. ed. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1972* §70, 69, 72.

⁴⁶ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1972*, §70, 72.

aspect of the quadrilateral has also received considerable criticism, because it seems to accept a pluralism that is too hard to bear in a single church, but Herzog offers another way of understanding what is going on.

Herzog pointed out that reckoning with various "special-interest" theologies will necessarily involve that we take into account the lives they describe living. The link between doctrine and life is not simply doctrine showing us how to live, but life showing us how to understand doctrine. The special interest that shows the pain of actual lives makes us look at the assumptions of the doctrine, or at least our assumed understandings about what the doctrine means. Herzog said, "every doctrinal utterance is also a statement about a particular action, not in terms of the detail of decision-making, but in regard to the framework in which it takes place."⁴⁷ Speaking as an outsider to The United Methodist Church, he finds in documents from the 1972 General Conference "the seemingly self-confident posture that nothing could be wrong at least in principle with Methodist faith-stance itself."⁴⁸ For example, theologies of liberation call United Methodists whose teaching is set in the framework of personal salvation to consider a different kind of conversion, that is, conversion into the corporate selfhood of Christ. The way that Jesus identified with the lost shows us a new way of being a person. Conversion is not simply an internal, personal reorientation to God, but also a reorientation to other persons—recognizing our connections with each other and how we affect one another. So instead of "special interest" what we are really being shown by these theologies is our common interest. We have a common interest in the hurt of another because this other is the treasure of God.⁴⁹ For Herzog, theology rooted in common interest "would mean that Methodist tradition itself would be radically questioned."⁵⁰ The presence of varied interpretations and perspectives in The United Methodist Church opens the possibility of needed self-criticism.

Herzog further pointed out that in 1972, The United Methodist Church acted in a way that bifurcated its tasks of doctrinal renewal and social action. The General Conference approved this statement on doctrine but in a separate action it endorsed *The Bishops' Call for Peace and the Self-Development of*

⁴⁷ Herzog, "United Methodism in Agony," 36.

⁴⁸ Herzog, "United Methodism in Agony," 32.

⁴⁹ Herzog, "United Methodism in Agony," 28–29.

⁵⁰ Herzog, "United Methodism in Agony," 34. Since the time Herzog wrote, some have taken quite seriously how Methodist ideas can be stretched by the need for liberation. See *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981).

Peoples. Herzog criticized the *Bishops' Call* for not showing its doctrinal underpinning about corporate selfhood in Christ, but he also criticized the easy acceptance of our own social attitudes as the meaning of the doctrines we profess. The agony of the church is that “the ideological dilemmas have become less tolerable. There is not a single doctrine we could think through apart from them. We realize much more how with every doctrine we also tend to legitimate our way of life, glorifying it with a religious halo.” Having in mind at that time especially economic attitudes, he said “there is a long tradition of social attitudes to be reckoned with in Methodism. A study of Methodist doctrine has to take them into account, if it wants to do justice to the full doctrinal dynamics operative today.”⁵¹ Herzog was pointing out how the only way the doctrinal standards can function as adequate standards is if we can allow the burning questions being shown to us by those our society hurts to lead us to self-criticism, rather than let internalized social attitudes determine how we understand our doctrine.⁵² It is necessary to engage our theological task in reflection on the meaning of doctrine in order to bring our faith in God’s action and reality to bear on the world as God would have us do. Not taking our doctrinal standards “literally” at least means allowing our assumptions about what doctrine means to be open to criticism so that we may more faithfully express and live the faith to which we summon the world. Our theological task as described in the *Book of Discipline* exists as a tool for this purpose.

Social Principles

Because disaffiliation has been driven largely by disagreement over the incompatibility language in the Social Principles, how does this reflection about doctrine come to bear on the Social Principles? Clearly, Social Principles have always been intended to present an understanding about how to live out our faith. Writing the Social Principles was driven by a need similar to the statement on Doctrine and Doctrinal Statements in Part II; both church bodies involved in the merger had social statements and this duality needed to be resolved. A preliminary report given to the 1970 Special Session of the General Conference shows that the link between faith and life was present in the

⁵¹ Herzog in Langford, 35.

⁵² Although he did so differently than Herzog, Schubert Ogden also argued that theology has the task of critically understanding, and perhaps even correcting, doctrine. See Ogden, “Doctrinal Standards,” 44.

heritage of both church bodies. It also says that the Social Principles Study commission occasionally met with the Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards. The Social Principles Study Commission recognized that minor changes or additions to what might be received from each church in the merger would not be satisfactory. The new church needed a new statement. As it did its work, the Commission invited papers written by experts and held hearings in regional jurisdictions.⁵³

The incompatibility statement, though, was not a product of this careful joint work. The section on human sexuality ended in the original report with an affirmation about ensuring civil and human rights for "homosexuals." This issue was important because the Commission had learned that many persons were fired from their jobs when their same-sex orientation became known. Some delegates worried that the section on human sexuality was implying that "homosexuality is a normal and acceptable expression of sexuality in our society." Discussion on the point continued for some time and was finally ended when a delegate suggested by amendment to add the wording about incompatibility.⁵⁴

At the time this wording was being discussed, social attitudes regarding same-sex orientation and relationships were just beginning to be discussed publicly. The expressed concern about regarding same-sex orientation and relationships as normal (with the implied position that they should not) certainly reflected the prevailing social attitude of the time even if those who held this view also understood it to be a matter of Christian teaching.⁵⁵ The association between prevailing social attitude and presumed Christian teaching made the matter seem so obvious that it prevented exploration about what our teaching should actually be. Because the concern was handled by an amendment, no thorough reflection on complex matters, including listening to the

⁵³ Report of the Social Principles Study Commission, 869–879 in *Journal of the 1970 General Conference*. Records of the General Conference, United Methodist Church Archives—GCAH, Madison, New Jersey <https://archives.gcah.org/bitstream/handle/10516/408/Social-Principles-1970.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

⁵⁴ For details about this action, see *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church*, 457–461, accessed via Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/journalatlantal01unit/page/460/mode/2up> and also an article that gives context leading up to the amendment by Don L. Hand by Robert W. Sledge, "The Saddest Day: Gene Leggett and the Origins of the Incompatible Clause" in *Methodist History* 55: 3 (April 2017), 145–179.

⁵⁵ To the extent that people think Christian teaching opposes same-sex orientation and relationships because of scripture's opposition, it should be kept in mind that current biblical research makes this assumption much less clear.

hurt of human beings, could take place.⁵⁶ Calling this amendment a “teaching” (especially one that has specific consequences for trial) simply because it was voted on by General Conference does not do justice to the importance of the genuine link between doctrine and life.

For many years, United Methodists outside the United States have pointed out that the link between doctrine and life has been described in our Social Principles from a decidedly US-centric perspective. It has been common for United Methodists to adapt the Social Principles to reflect their own setting.⁵⁷ Finally, in 2012, a petition to revise the Social Principles was passed and a revised version will be presented to General Conference 2024. The revision was driven by global concerns, but the revised Social Principles also makes a more direct connection to doctrine. Each major section that names a community (All Creation, Economic, Social, and Political) opens with a quotation from John Wesley, and the Preamble sets the whole document in the framework of the General Rules. Theology and the link between faith and life are brought to the forefront. The word “incompatible” does not appear either with regard to sexuality or the military. Instead, the document affirms the sacredness of life while also opposing and grieving threats and abuses that sometimes occur. The document does not contain any instance of using the word “shall” that could be considered church law, although the word “must” is used in several places.⁵⁸ This hesitance to prescribe behavior is fitting to the “instructive and persuasive” purpose of the document. Persons are enabled to do informed theological reflection in light of Christian values. This approach is unlikely to lead to uniform behavior, but it does call people to do what they understand to be faithful as they seek to be led by God.

⁵⁶ From his own experience working on COTT, Heitzenrater has cautioned that important documents approved by General Conference “should not be liable for quick revision and vote” but rather should be considered as a whole, with further study as needed, and finally voted on as a whole. Heitzenrater “In Search of Continuity and Consensus,” in *Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church*, 253, note 39.

⁵⁷ For context and details about this adaptation, see Darryl Stephens, “A Cross-Cultural Dialogue of Social Principles” in *Methodist History* 54:2 (January 2016), 102–116.

⁵⁸ Judicial Council Decision 833 (August 7, 1998) focused on a sentence that used the word “shall.” It determined that even though the sentence appeared in a document of exhortation, the sentence itself had the effect of church law. <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/church-wide/judicial-council/judicial-council-decision-home/judicial-decisions/833-request-from-the-college-of-bishops-of-the-south-central-jurisdiction-for-a-declaratory-decision>.

If considered "doctrine" (and I have already said the church should be clearer about its status), the Social Principles fall in the category of revisable teaching statements, as a wholly revised version makes clear. This version of the Social Principles explicitly shows its dependence on our Wesleyan formative materials, so it explains and expands our faith in God's action and reality in the world by calling us to reflect on our own actions in the world. The Preface states (as the unrevised version does) that the Social Principles are not "church law" but are rather an effort by General Conference to speak to our time so that United Methodists may be called to faithfulness.⁵⁹ Understood in this way, the Social Principles may be deeply formative without being juridically normative.

Conclusion

The Book of Discipline tells us something important about doctrine in the conclusion to ¶105: "Doctrine arises out of the life of the Church—its faith, its worship, its discipline, its conflict, its challenges from the world it would serve." (p. 91) The present tense of "arise" does not mean that doctrine is constantly in question or in flux. It does mean that further teaching statements may be called for (as for instance the church felt the need to explain its beliefs about baptism and Holy Communion) and teaching statements that are not protected by the constitution may even be revised. Furthermore doctrinal standards that "arose" in a previous time and place and are protected by the Constitution (namely, the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith) should be interpreted to be able to speak to a new time and place (as the 1970 General Conference recognized about the anti-Catholic articles), so that they may continue to serve their function in supporting the summons to faith and nurturance of faith. Our theological task was never intended to threaten or jettison Christian belief, but rather to bring faith into dialogue with a changing world and give it fitting expression as new questions and concerns arise. Even if doctrine and theology must be distinguished from one another, they also interact in an essential way. Doctrine secures our faith in God's action and reality in the world through Jesus Christ, but theology calls us to keep looking for how God is acting as new situations and needs become apparent. It also calls us out of

⁵⁹ The revised version may be found in English at <https://www.umcjustice.org/documents/124>.

complacency over assumed meanings of doctrine that do not further God's work and may even be harmful.

Theological reflection allows the church to continue thinking about how to engage the world according to its deeply held belief that God is working in the world through Jesus Christ. Arguments about pluralism and about the primacy of scripture that attempt to close off exploration have deflected attention from this point. The church learns how to teach its teachings as its ideas and actions are tested in lived experience. The link between Christian doctrine and Christian living requires ongoing reflection. Doctrine needs to be stable but not understood in a static way. It provides identity but must also allow for growth.

About the Author

Sarah Heaner Lancaster is the Hazen G. Werner Professor of Theology at Methodist Theological School in Ohio and an elder in the North Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church. She served as the co-chair for the Wesleyan Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion, and she currently serves as North American co-chair of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies. She edited "Treatises Emerging from the Debate with the Moravians," in *Doctrinal Controversies and Treatises III*, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, Vol. 14.