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Faith Decisions: Order or Novelty

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Faith Decisions: Order or Novelty

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Abstract

This project is an exploration of the tension between the extremes of order and novelty to determine how one should decide to act in church polity or personal ethics. In a world caught in an either/or mindset, maybe the answer is not simply both/and, but holding the two together intact and in tension. Using order and novelty as a lens, this project will review the church polity in the Book of Discipline in the United Methodist Church and compare two other denominations heavily weighted in order or novelty: The Presbyterian Church and the United Church of Christ.

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Chapter I: The Theological Chatter of Order and Novelty

“He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” Matthew 13:52

We have old and new treasures stored in our being and in our churches. The old treasures I am calling “order” the new I am calling “novelty.” In the cyber security world, our Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation talk of terrorist chatter. I want to begin with the theological chatter about order and novelty. Much has been said about these polar elements.

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Matthew 10:16 NRSV

Martin Luther King, Jr. in a turbulent time in history, held together the need for compassion and savvy actions. King in his eloquent way has captured a complex theory and brought it to the people in a challenge to change both thought and feelings when it comes to behavior. In the late 1950’s and early 1960’s civil rights were being fought in the streets and in the churches. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew a soft mind and a tough heart would not suffice to change the course- of history. But a tough mind and a tender heart held together could move us.

King’s sermon “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart” begins with a Hegel quote, “No man is strong unless he bears within his character antithesis strongly marked. ... Hegel said that truth

is found neither in the thesis nor the antithesis, but in an emergent synthesis which reconciles the two.”¹

King clearly makes his case for the importance of a tough mind at the same time as having a tender heart. King used the scripture text to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. How is one to do this? How can we hold together the wisdom of a predator like a snake and the innocence and gentleness of a harmless dove? King’s answer is a tough mind and a tender heart. King: “[Jesus] knew that the disciples would face a difficult and hostile world, where they would confront the ... intransigence of the protectors of the old order. He knew they would meet cold and arrogant men whose hearts had been hardened by the long winter of traditionalism.”² The tough mind is the ‘old order’ and the tender heart is the challenge to the status quo. This sermon reveals the relevance for both order and novelty when clergy speak to congregations or when laity set out to put their beliefs into practice.

A tough mind is discerning, clear about purpose, committed and decisive. A soft mind according to King, fears change, feels security in the status quo and “has an almost morbid fear of the new.”³ King compares toughminded to the transcendence of God and the tenderhearted to the immanence of God. “[God] is toughminded enough to transcend the world; he is tenderhearted enough to live in it.”⁴ King is equating transcendence with eternity and changelessness. He is using tenderness as an example of change and the dynamics of time. Immanence and transcendence seem to be like the painting by Michelangelo in the Sistine

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York : Harper & Row, 1963), 13.

² King, 13.

³ King, 15.

⁴ King, 20.

chapel, God touching man. God may be “the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow,”⁵ but that does not mean God does not enter into our story, our changing times and changing lives. This is counter to a deistic God who set the earth to spinning then backed off.

Holy is often defined as “other” or “set apart.” God may be different, but God is not distant. To live only by order assumes God is not living or dynamic, but static. To live only by novelty assumes God is not constant or stable.

As so many faith communities decline, there may be a trend to remove all structure. Some may see the new as more attractive. Tradition may become equated with boredom or static routine. When those in a church becomes discouraged about the present circumstances, there is a tendency to throw out all tradition in hope of a brand-new makeover. Maybe novelty is like a reset button.

Someone may define religion as “organized spirituality.” Sometimes the pendulum swings toward freedom, creativity and mercy. This may lead to new life, but without any structure this tendency can lead to chaos and anarchy. Paul Tillich, a Lutheran protestant theologian and a German-American Christian existential philosopher held together polar opposites in his *Systematic Theology*. Tillich wrote this three-volume influential piece between 1951 and 1963. Tillich developed a method of correlation between Christian symbols and human existence his contemporaries in existential philosophy raised. Tillich was born in 1886 and died in 1965. Tillich was most interested in the nature of being. I do not think I am overstating to say

⁵ Hebrew 13:8 NRSV

any theologian who wants to define concepts that connect us to one another will look to Tillich for support.

Tillich can help define the importance of seeing both order and novelty as essential in decision making in the church and in life in general. His timeless studies can help us clearly visualize the extremes. Paul Tillich said, “Man’s dynamics, his creative vitality, is not undirected, chaotic, self-contained activity. It is directed, formed; it transcends itself toward meaningful contents.”⁶

Sometimes the pendulum gets stuck in the opposite direction and there is no willingness to move into a new world. While preserving the order and justice of the status quo, this may lead to death, death of the denomination or of individuals. Why will this happen? I can only say for sure it has already. There is an end to the philosophy of the Field of Dreams, “Build it and they will come.”⁷ Perhaps people have become bored. Perhaps prosperity has left many without a thought for needs. The connection between tradition and life experience in many churches has become inconceivable. Those who were brought up attending church may now see it as irrelevant. Some see no connection between the Christian church and their everyday lives.

With order the word law comes to mind. Law becomes a collective restraint when the common good is abandoned for the sake of freedom. Order in the church has many faces: tradition, justice, ethics, order of worship, liturgy, music. Much of the time in our theological thought and even personal decisions or a church doctrine we want control. Order in the church may also be about liturgy and music. Churches that lean heavily on the side of liturgy look upon novelty with suspicion. If a Book of Worship or a Book of Common Prayer tells church leaders

⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 180.

⁷ Phil Alden Robinson, director, *Field of Dreams*, DVD (Universal Pictures, 1989).

how to form their worship experience, many feel comfortable. A high church mass or worship service may mean something sacred and therefore to change the service would be blasphemy or at least irreverent. Music is another faction of the church where order and novelty collide. Those who read classical music and appreciate high church anthems and hymns may not be interested in new songs with a free form beat.

Novelty may not be a word we use often. It is a reminder of the new, creative, artistic side of our theology. Words in the church around novelty may be: mercy, experience, and pleasure. The novelty is about spontaneity. What new treasures will we find in our pack?

A Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) pastor, Reverend Jack Haberer was a part of a Presbyterian coalition in 1993. The Presbyterian church at that time was struggling with homosexuality and whether or not to include same sex marriages in congregations and ordinations. The Presbyterian Coalition was formed by leaders of two other pre-existing organizations: Presbyterians for Renewal: his was an advocacy organization for evangelicals within the denomination, somewhat similar to the Wesley Covenant Association in the United Methodist Church. The other organization was called the Genevans, an organization of denominational bureaucrats, mostly presbytery executives and stated clerks, who were truly denominational ecclesiasts. They loved the denomination and wanted it to stay together; they tended to avoid the ideologies of both the left and the right (order or novelty). They came together when it appeared that the denomination would likely split over the LGBT ordination. These two organizations joined forces to resist the split. Haberer attended their first major convocation meeting and was asked to become their “moderator” or chair of the board. He was assigned to moderate at a very turbulent time in the Presbyterian life. He also served as editor of

the Presbyterian Outlook for nine years. Haberer has been a Presbyterian pastor of large PCUSA churches.

Haberer had an epiphany while observing the sites in the Holy land. He thought of the deep contrast between Carmel and Caesarea; the contrast of the story of Elijah at Mt. Carmel and Peter's vision at Caesarea. He wrote about this experience in his book *GodViews*. Haberer said, "This is where the church is- living in the tension between Carmel, the citadel of truth, and Caesarea, the port city of inclusiveness."⁸

At Mount Carmel Elijah had a showdown with Yahweh and the gods of Baal. Elijah is told by God to gather all 450 of the prophets of Baal and all 400 prophets of Asherah. "How long will you be limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. IF Baal, then follow him."⁹ So, Elijah has the prophets of Baal and Asherah take a bull and prepare it for sacrifice and the Israelites prepare another bull. They are to pray to their god and see which one can produce a fire on the altars. The god of Baal produces no fire. Then Elijah doused his altar 3 times with water and prayed to Yahweh and the bull was consumed and the wood and the stones and the water. This was a powerful proof of the truth of God. This site and the story behind it, remind us of great bearers of truth. The responsibility might seem daunting to prove the validity and supremacy of the God Yahweh. This shows the power of truth. When something is true, it will surface and the church needs to be aware and give voice to this truth or as I am naming it "order". Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."¹⁰ I know the old

⁸ Jack Haberer, *Godviews: The Convictions That Drive Us and Divide Us* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2001), 2.

⁹ Genesis 18:20 (NRSV)

¹⁰ John 8:32 (NRSV)

saying: if your only tool is a hammer, then everything is a nail.¹¹ So perhaps I see order and novelty everywhere, yet Jesus seems to claim both the structure of order (truth) and the freedom of novelty in that one statement. The truth is not stagnant. Clarity seems more important than certainty.

Then there is the story in the book of Acts at Caesarea. Peter has been taught to remain pure by being kosher. Then in a dream he sees animals he considered unclean coming down on a sheet. What God calls clean he is not to name unclean.¹² Many are familiar with these biblical stories and they are not simply about geography. So here we are, caught between the longing for purity and truth-bearing and the demand to expand our borders to include strange foods, and strange people.

Those stuck in the order side of the polarity believe they would be unfaithful to include those the Bible claims we are to exclude. Or as the text states, they reject “limping between two opinions.” And Peter could claim, “But the Bible says...”. Yet he is taught to include and not call something unclean any longer. Inclusivity in this story in the book of Acts is a push beyond old order values that were taken to be true and therefore became a static order. Peter was told to exclude foods, and later through a repeated vision, was commanded to include those same foods.

Paul Tillich in his *Systematic Theology* mapped out polarities in three categories of ontological elements shown in the table below: dynamics and form, destiny and freedom, participation and individuation. The polarity that fits this thought of order and novelty most directly is dynamics and form.

¹¹ This has been attributed to both Abraham Maslow and Abraham Kaplan, but it may not have originated from either one.

¹² Acts 10:9-16 (NRSV)

Tillich helps us hold order and novelty together when he said, “Criticism is an attempt to overcome the conflict between absolutism and relativism.”¹³ Holding the tension of these two polarities can be done through biblical and theological criticism. It is not so much conflict, or resistance, but connection.

Tillich holds together formalism and emotionalism with *amor intellectualis* (“intellectual love”). A great deal has been written about emotional intelligence. Intellectual love is a thoughtful deep emotion beyond the fickle or fleeting feelings. It is also as King reminds us more than a small-minded relationship. “Emotional reactions against intellectualism forget the obligation of strict serious, and technically correct thinking in all matters of knowledge. But they are right in demanding a knowledge which not only controls but also unites.”¹⁴ Emotional intelligence or intellectual love seems to combine both order and novelty. Perhaps it is another way of saying we are called to love with our heart and mind.¹⁵ The mind or the intelligence orders things and the heart of the emotions give new insight. Love can be seen in both structure and spontaneity.

Control and freedom fluctuate in our attempt to maintain and at the same time grow. Tillich holds together “Dynamics and Form”. Form reminds us something is being created. The expression of the thought, element or way of being and doing is what is essential. “The question is whether a cultural creation is the expression of a spiritual substance or whether it is a mere form without such substance... If he fails to use such forms and instead uses forms which have ceased to be expressive, the artist is a formalist irrespective of whether the forms are traditional

¹³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 88.

¹⁴ Tillich, 90.

¹⁵ Matthew 22:37 (NRSV)

or revolutionary. A revolutionary style can become as formalistic as a conservative style. The criterion is the expressive power of a form not a special style.”¹⁶ . If the concept of order and novelty was only about style, we could describe it as an ontological mullet. Remember the hairstyle that was all business in the front and party in the back? Yet this is not about style or fads but substance.

The traditional (order) and the revolutionary (novelty) work in tandem to express something of substance within us and within the church. Something is being formed. The dynamic is the potential. Dynamic is called different things in different schools of thought: will (Schopenhauer), unconscious (Freud), strife (Jung). Greek thought of non-being or matter may be about resistance against form. According to Tillich in the Christian realm the dynamic has to do with divine life. Tillich claims the dynamic element of the polarity as vitality (novelty) and the form element as intentionality (order). He said, “The dynamic element in man is open in all directions; it is bound by no a priori limiting structure. ... spirituality is the unity of dynamics and form in man’s moral and cultural acts... intention means living in tension with (and toward) something objectively valid... The dynamic character of being implies the tendency of everything to transcend itself to create new forms. ... Dynamics unites: identity/difference, rest/movement, conservation/change.”¹⁷ Tillich is not implying that we can remain absolutely void of any a priori. To become void of an ideal or starting point in reference to our structures seems inconceivable. In his pages Tillich does not completely separate his polar ontological elements.

¹⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 179.

¹⁷ Tillich, 180.

Tillich claims that individuals grow through self-transcendence and self-conservation. “It shows very clearly the interdependence of the two poles.”¹⁸ Self-transcendence gives us freedom to grow and self-conservation keeps our feet firmly on the ground.

Father Richard Rohr is a Roman Catholic priest and monk who holds together contemplation and action in his monastery in Albuquerque, NM and through books such as *Falling Upward: A Spirituality through Two halves of Life*. Rohr tries to do justice to Tillich’s polar tensions. Because we are hungry today for both quiet reflection and active results, Rohr is immensely popular not simply with monks and those living within the confines of a religious order. Rohr has appealed to the masses through his daily devotional posts, his enneagram lectures, his male spirituality teachings and his retreats.

Rohr brings together order and novelty by saying we can “transcend and include.”¹⁹ What do we transcend and what do we include? As we grow in our faith, we may abandon or at least let go of some of what our parents or church adamantly taught. Yet we include their intent, their love, their faithfulness. Rohr held together order and novelty, “it is a creative tension, because both law and freedom are necessary for spiritual growth,”²⁰ Rohr understands the importance of both having a prophetic voice and a pastoral presence. Much like Clinical Pastoral Education formed an experiential education for pastors and theologians through the action/ reflection method, Rohr lives through the rhythm of contemplation and social justice in tandem.

Sister Joan Chittister also is known for both social justice and a contemplative life. Chittister claims to have a “passion for God, a passion for justice and a passion of life.”²¹

¹⁸ Tillich, 181.

¹⁹ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 35.

²⁰ Rohr, 35.

²¹ Benetvision, “Joan Chittister,” Joan Chittister, 2015, <http://www.joanchittister.org/>.

Chittister in Sojourner Magazine wrote an article titled: *reconciling tradition and change*:

“Tradition lives and thrives on the energy and clarity of its vision and its dreams, its purpose and its goals. Traditionalism stands to smother the tradition under an avalanche of time-bound practices that served one generation well but have little spiritual nourishment or meaning to offer the next.”²² Chittister is known for bringing Benedictine order to the masses and the non-cloistered. She is also passionate about the justice needs of the world.

Participation in both novelty and order may be a way forward in our polarized society and church polity today. Habermas knew claiming the truth and being open to inclusion is vital and even inevitable today if the church is going to survive. In *Stages of Faith*, James Fowler speaks about “*the absoluteness of the particular*”²³ Fowler was a developmental psychology theologian. Fowler founded the Center for Research on Faith and Moral Development and the Center for Ethics at Emory University. Fowler was a United Methodist clergy and professor at Emory University. Psychologists such as Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg studied human development, but Fowler observed the development of faith. He believed if we develop into spiritual maturity, we can see the manifestation of God in a particular expression without negating other expressions. Fowler said, “the absoluteness of the divine character can come to expression in different forms and contexts with each of these instances bearing the full weight of ultimacy.”²⁴ Is it possible to hold to a truth and embrace a different expression of the divine truth? Fowler and Tillich claim it is possible. This correlates with order as accepted truth and novelty as a different expression of truth.

²² Joan Chittister, “Reconciling Tradition and Change,” *Sojourners*, May 2017.

²³ James W Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, 2010, 208.

²⁴ Fowler, 209.

As Tillich holds together individuation and participation, is it possible to be who we are and include all? When I worked as a Clinical Pastoral Education resident chaplain at Albert Einstein Hospital in Philadelphia, the Rabbi supervisor, told the Christian pastors to wear a cross and she wore a yamaka. This is an inviting contrast to generic chapels you find at an airport with an absence of symbols. Being both distinct and inclusive is a way of holding the tension of order and novelty.

ORDER	NOVELTY
Form	Dynamics
Intentionality	Vitality
Self-conservation	Self-transcendence
Being	Becoming
Identity	Difference
Rest	Movement
Conservation	Change
Structure	Potential
Destiny	Freedom
Law	Spontaneity
Participation	Individuation
<i>From Paul Tillich, "Polarity Elements in Ontological Thought"</i>	

Justice and Mercy

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8 New Revised Standard Version

Order and novelty might also be associated with the concepts of justice and mercy. By justice we are speaking about righting wrongs, which is commonly called retributive justice, or with the allocation of societal benefits, which is commonly called distributive justice, or with the maintenance of or law and order. By mercy I am referring to forgiveness given to not the innocent, but to the guilty. If all the energy is put into justice, the compassion of Christ is lost. If every abuse or damaging behavior is met with mercy, the structure of society may collapse. A

recent television show called: *The Purge*²⁵ is a dystopia America where all crime is made legal once a year. This is what the Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to as cheap grace. Bonhoeffer lived in Germany during the rise of Nazism. He was executed days before WWII was over for plotting to kill Hitler. He was renowned in his field at a very young age. He came to the United States and taught briefly at Union Seminary in New York City. He could have stayed. But he felt he could not return after the war if he was not willing to be a part of the change before the war ended. He is most famous for his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. “Cheap grace means justification of sin without the justification of the sinner.”²⁶ By this Bonhoeffer is referring to naming evil good under the guise of forgiveness and grace (mercy). Whitewashing behavior does not help anyone or further the will of God in society. Yes, we believe in a grace and the forgiveness and mercy of a loving God. We also know there are consequences and responsibility in the life of those religious or not who long for a better world which mercy does not negate.

We find ecclesiastical examples of abandoning justice and moving into mercy too soon in the recent cases of pedophilia in the Roman Catholic church. Under the guise of “forgiveness”, many years went by before cases of priest sexual abuse were reported.

The novel, Broadway musical and movie of *Les Misérables*²⁷ compares and contrasts justice and mercy masterfully. The author, Victor Hugo, was one of the most famous French novelist and poets of the 19th century. His works of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and *Les Misérables* were among his most famous works. The character Inspector Javert in the novel *Les*

²⁵ *The Purge*, accessed December 29, 2018, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2184339/>.

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1st Touchstone ed (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 5.

²⁷ Victor Hugo et al., *Les Misérables* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Signet Classic, 1987).

Misérables committed suicide because “order was his dogma...he placed all his religion in the police.”²⁸ and he was unable to let go of a particular understanding of justice even for a moment to move into mercy. Jean Valjean is a well-developed character who began living in poverty and was starving. He was arrested for stealing a loaf of bread to simply survive. Prison hardened him. Yet due to a merciful priest he changed his whole life. He lived a life of service and compassion. He became wealthy. Javert could not imagine a change. He only knew order and law. When Javert came face to face, and was even on the receiving end of mercy, he could not let go of his idea that order was all there was.

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian pastor and author, has provided a poetic image of justice and mercy: “Justice does not preclude mercy. It makes mercy possible. Justice is the pitch of the roof and the structure of the walls. Mercy is the patter of rain on the roof and the life sheltered by the walls. Justice is the grammar of things. Mercy is the poetry of things.”²⁹ The structure of justice gives a space for the spontaneity of mercy. Language needs grammar, a linguistic structure analogous to the structures of justice, to be understood. Grammar is a means to communicate the depths of a message. Grammar is not an end in itself. It is the means to order the words, not control the message. A quote from the movie *Dead Poets Society* helps bring together the purpose of order and novelty. The main character proclaims: “ medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.”³⁰

²⁸ Hugo et al., 1352.

²⁹ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 356. Kindle

³⁰ Peter Wier, director, “Dead Poets Society (1989) - IMDb,” 1989.

Paul Tillich deliberated about the interaction of love, power and justice. Tillich defined love not simply as an emotion but as ethics.³¹ Love within the exercise of power keeps the compulsory element in check. According to Tillich, “love transcends justice.”³² Justice may be about giving rewards or punishments to the parties involved. Love steps in and gives a purpose beyond a set structure. If justice is only about universal laws and principles, the particular, unique, concrete situations will be diminished. Justice through the lens of litigation alone does not take into account the uniqueness of individuals or the possibility of religious grace.

Tillich also noticed the danger of love as an emotion driving decisions through a misguided attempt at being Christian. Tillich gives an example of the extreme of mercy when justice is needed: “I know your criminal deed, and according to the demand of justice, I should bring you to trial, but because of my Christian love I let you go.’ ... This means he received neither justice nor love, but injustice, covered by sentimentality.”³³

Tillich saw the interaction of love, power and justice as being crucial in multiple disciplines: psychology, sociology, ethics, political theory and educational methods.³⁴ The line in the sand between order or novelty in these various areas have different terms. Psychology speaks of boundaries. Similarly, to psychology family systems theory is about self-differentiation while remaining connected but not cut-off. The current United States immigration policy and border wall is about national boundaries with a conflict between static safety and a more open-ended inclusion. The scope of this project is theological and not political or psychological. Yet, we have multiple connections among these disciplines simply by the complexity of living.

³¹ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analysis and Ethical Applications* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.

³² Tillich, 13.

³³ Tillich, 13–14.

³⁴ Tillich, 1.

I participated in a retreat for clergy that was ecumenical. It was held at the Norbertine Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico.³⁵ It was titled: Called back to the Well. The renewal retreat was funded by the Lily Endowment for spiritual development of clergy. I commented to one of the Roman Catholic monks how impressed I was that they served me, a Protestant, communion even though I knew it was against their polity. He told a story about a man who traveled often to Ireland. He loved looking down at the country-side from the view of the airplane. He mainly loved the ancient stone fences separating the green pastures. One year he saw no fences. He was puzzled. Had they been removed. He knew they had been there for centuries. How could this be? So, he asked about this strange phenomenon. And he was told, “Oh, you must have never been here this time of year before. We let the vegetation cover the fences once a year.” The monk then said to me, “That is a metaphor for God’s vantage point. There are no boundaries when we relate at this deep level.” The order and the novelty do not have to lose their respective properties in order to be connected. I am still Protestant and he is still Roman Catholic. Yet as he said at this deep level the lines between us are inconsequential.

An attorney by the name of Bryan Stephenson has spent years working with clients on death row. Many he defended later through a jury or judge found them to be falsely accused. In 2014 he wrote about his experiences in a book titled: *Just Mercy*.³⁶ The cases he brings to our minds and hearts awaken a sense of both mercy and justice. We want to right wrongs (justice) and we want to offer forgiveness (mercy). Since we have a limited vantage point when

³⁵ The Norbertine Community of Santa Maria De La Vid Abbey, “Homepage,” Norbertine, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://norbertinecommunity.org/>.

³⁶ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, First edition (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014).

determining when to do which, we need to walk humbly with God whether we are clergy or attorneys.

Reinhold Niebuhr in the mid-twentieth Century was most known for his grasp of the theology of social order. In his book *Love and Justice*, Niebuhr warned us against thinking that humans will simply grow out of injustice and hate through education and the cultivation of good will. Niebuhr writes, “Those of us who dissociate ourselves from the easy optimism of modern liberalism and who believe that a just society is not going to be built by a little more education and a few more sermons on love that have particular reason to reorient our thinking in this matter so that we will not come forward with pressure of every kind and claim the authority of Jesus for it.”³⁷ Love as the ideal is important as long as we are honest when we fall short due to our sinful self-interests. Niebuhr took an honest look at our vantage points when it comes to how we make ethical decisions. He remarked, “In the social struggle we are either on the side of privilege or need. No ethical perfectionism can save us from that choice.”³⁸ Such observations point to his on-going concern that a one-sided focus on love (including mercy) without an appreciation for the need for justice would lead to societal chaos.

Tradition and Experience

In the application of polarity of order and novelty to contemporary issues, theological language in the United Methodist church refers to experience and tradition. In applying the concept of order to church polity, tradition has been a major category to organize the free-floating spirit and the novelty dimension has been articulated through appeals to experience.

³⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 33.

³⁸ Niebuhr, 40.

The fluctuation between order and novelty is seen in many churches. David Heim noted the existence of the two poles when he observed, “Many church members don’t align themselves with either of [two opposing] camps. They are ready to listen and learn ... to rest what they hear against the witness of scripture, tradition, and Christian experience. This approach will not appeal to those who would banish imagination from theological thought, or who think tradition is fixed and settled... Nor will it attract those who regard the tradition as so corrupt that it must be entirely re-imagined...”³⁹ Heim wrote this article following a controversial event called Re-imagining held at the Minneapolis Convention Center November 4-7, 1993.

A Quaker, Richenda Scott, also described the dialectic of tradition and experience. She wrote, “The peculiar danger is that some particular expression of tradition may lose all life and relevance, but may still be retained out of a mistaken piety, out of fear of the consequences if its death is acknowledged, or out of sheer mental and spiritual inertia. Then it becomes a crushing weight upon initiative or newly thrusting thought. As experience drives us to experiment, pricking us on to penetrate further into the half perceived or the unknown, a clash inevitably develops. Therefore, experience must ever criticize and challenge tradition, but tradition that is living and valid must ever act as the check and touchstone of experience.”⁴⁰

For example, a piece of music may be experienced in a crowd. Yet the impact of the same experience or the interpretation of the experience is diverse. So, it is with worship experience, for a group of congregants in the same space may find completely different emotions, thoughts and feelings.

³⁹ David Heim, “Sophia’s Choice: Wisdom and Conversation,” *The Christian Century* 111, no. 11 (April 6, 1994): 339–40.

⁴⁰ Richenda C. Scott, *Tradition and Experience*, n.d., 5.

The rhythm of order and novelty is not exclusive to Christianity. Abraham Heschel, a leading Jewish theologian of the 20th century wrote: “Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; ... its message becomes meaningless.”⁴¹ Heschel reminds us the danger of living only in the dimension of order can keep novelty from forming new life in the next generation. Order alone can lead faith to a dull, irrelevant, discipline.

Father Richard Rohr speaks about the first half and the second half of life in this book *Falling Upward*. According to Rohr the first half forms the structure of an individual’s life and the second half he sees as the more spontaneous and unpredictable movement of love. He believes that we develop a structured container in the first half of life and then we fill it in the second half of life. He writes, “Law and tradition seem to be necessary in any spiritual system both to reveal and to limit our basic egocentricity and to make at least some community, family and marriage possible.”⁴² He compares those issues to aspects of the scriptural story of the prodigal son.⁴³ To describe the movement from a life lived only for order, ethics and duty, Rohr talks about discharging your loyal soldier. This is a term stemming from a ritual in post-World War II Japan. He writes, “The voice of that loyal soldier gets us through the first half of life safely, teaching us to look both ways before we cross the street, to have enough impulse control to avoid addictions and compulsive emotions, to learn the sacred no to ourselves that gives us dignity, identity, direction, and boundaries.”⁴⁴ But he goes on to say that although the loyal soldier kept us safe, it cannot lead us into the place of risk, compassion, inclusiveness or

⁴¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, First paperback edition, 1976 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 23.

⁴² Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 28.

⁴³ Luke 15:11-32 (NRSV)

⁴⁴ Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 45–46.

mystery. Rohr continues, “The loyal soldier cannot get you to the second half of life. He does not even understand it. He has not been there.”⁴⁵ We have to let go of that sense of duty in order to grow. Yet how is that done? Is there a new sense of order that transcends the old? Living in the tension of order and novelty can help us discharge the loyal soldier or the use of order as an end in itself and allow for the conscience and the Holy Spirit to provide the restraint when novelty is leading to destruction or selfishness. This is moving from being a slave to being a son; or from acting out of sense of obligation and compulsion instead of acting out of a desire. It is a movement from “This is what I have to do” to “This is what I want to do.” Or as John Wesley said, it is a movement from a spirit of bondage to a spirit of adoption.⁴⁶

It is no small feat to be able to allow novelty into our entrenched views. A United Methodist Bishop wrote a book intended for local churches about leadership with an eye on evolving into new life called: *Remember the Future*. He notices the fear may be as much about loss as it may be about change. The bishop writes, “Abandoning long-held patterns feels like we are being disloyal to those who created and taught the older, familiar ways to us. People hold on to ideas as a way of holding on to the persons who taught them the ideas.”⁴⁷ Discharging our loyal soldier may be about letting go of outdated ideologies while still honoring the care that those mentors gave us. Misplaced loyalty may become a form of idolatry.

Scripture gives us a metaphor concerning the old and the new using the metaphor of wine. Jesus says, “Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both

⁴⁵ Rohr, 47.

⁴⁶ John Wesley, Albert Cook Outler, and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley’s Sermons : An Anthology*. (Nashville : Abingdon Press, 1991), 134.

⁴⁷ Robert Schnase, *Remember the Future: Praying for the Church and Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 7.

are preserved.”⁴⁸ So the wineskin, or as Rohr calls it the container, may need to change in order to hold the new ideas, the new way of seeing and being. It does not take a wine connoisseur to know that the wine must age in order to improve; otherwise, without the old we are simply drinking grape juice. Wisdom may take years to steep, to become marinated. So, not only the form may change, but also the content itself will take time to develop. Therefore, order and novelty work together. The form is the order and the novelty is the new wine. In Tillich’s ontological polarity of form and dynamics, if the wineskin is the form then the wine is the dynamics. The wine aging therefore is a dynamic process. The form or the order may adapt with the needs of the content.

Defining what is order and what is novelty is not as simple as I once thought it was. Ken Myers offers a chart concerning what he sees as popular culture vs. traditional or high culture. Many of the items in his list of traditional or high culture I would classify in the novelty category.

It depends partially on how a person defines order and novelty. Here are a few of the items from list:⁴⁹

Popular Culture	Traditional and High Culture
Focuses on the new	Focuses on the timeless
Discourages reflection	Encourages reflection
Pursued casually to kill time	Pursued with deliberation
Aesthetic power in reminding of something else	Aesthetic power in intrinsic attributes

⁴⁸ Matthew 9:17 (NRSV)

⁴⁹ Ken Myers, *All God’s Children & Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1989), 238.

Myer's view of tradition and high culture seems to relate to Søren Kierkegaard's description of middle-class cultural values that are taken to be timeless. In *Either / Or*⁵⁰ Kierkegaard contrasted a way of life based on allegedly timeless ethics (duty) with a way of life based on spontaneity and novelty of aesthetics (pleasure).

Kierkegaard claims that an aesthetic life view responds in the immediate moment, having no continuity, and leads to despair because it is not attached to the eternal purposes.

In much the same way that Tillich sees the polarity of being and becoming, Kierkegaard divides who we are from who we may become. Kierkegaard writes, "What is it to live aesthetically and what is it to live ethically? The aesthetic factor in a person is that by which he is immediately what he is; the ethical factor is that which he becomes who he becomes."⁵¹ A life of duty can become stagnant and lack the flexibility of forgiveness or appropriately loving responses to new situations. How order or novelty is defined effects the actual impact of our faith decisions upon the world. The tension between a life of pleasure and a life of duty may drive us to less permanent polity, but may impel us toward a greater current impact.

Kierkegaard further contrasts the poles of the aesthetic and the ethical. He writes, "The only absolute either/or there is- is the choice between good and evil, but it is also absolutely ethical. The aesthetic choice is either wholly immediate, thus no choice or it loses itself in multiplicity."⁵² Kierkegaard's aesthetic life view is completely absorbed in the now. To attempt to live in the tension between the infinite and the temporal is moving beyond the either/or and will lead to multiple grey areas.

⁵⁰ Søren Kierkegaard and Alastair Hannay, *Either/or: A Fragment of Life*, Penguin Classics (London, England ; New York, N.Y., USA: Penguin Books, 1992).

⁵¹ Kierkegaard and Hannay, 492.

⁵² Kierkegaard and Hannay, 485.

Haberer applied Kierkegaard's appreciation of the value of dialectical tension to the life of the church. He also saw the church as being more than a two-party system, in which one party must dominate. He found that the church has five "Godviews" or forms of spirituality. He named them as: confessionalist, devotionalist, ecclesiasts, altruist, activist.⁵³

The confessionalist god-view sees their role as protecting the truth. Haberer compares this view as white blood cells fighting off infection. In a similar way Edwin Friedman, the famous Rabbi and family systems therapist, compared going rogue as a malignant cancer cell. Friedman compares organs with organizations on a pathological or completely selfish path. "The only way malignant cells self-destruct is by taking their host with them."⁵⁴ Friedman does not even see it as intent, but a lack of self. A lack of a clearly defined confessional faith is the key to this world view. Knowing what one believes, leads to knowing who we are according to the confessional world view. The confessionalist god-view is the group with the self-acclaimed title of truth bearer and feel surgery, or the polity to ward off intrusions of pathology is up to them.

The devotionalist god-view falls into two categories, evangelical piety or contemplative mysticism. Evangelical piety attempts to move as Haberer said, "beyond eternal security to internal purity."⁵⁵ The pursuit of holiness is the goal of the evangelical pietist.

Contemplative mysticism is another form of a devotionalist god-view. This has a history within the desert fathers and mothers of the monastic early church. The search and longing is for the mystery of God. Words that find meaning in this world view are: detachment, solitude, dark

⁵³ Haberer, *Godviews*, 40.

⁵⁴ Edwin H Friedman, Margaret M Treadwell, and Edward W Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 2017, 317.

⁵⁵ Haberer, *Godviews*, 58.

night of the soul and centering prayer. In 2003 I attended a spiritual formation conference with an all-star cast of contemplatives and spiritual leaders in Navasota, Texas. This included Desmond Tutu, Father Thomas Keating, Phyllis Tickle, Walter Wink, to name a few. During the question and answer time someone asked Father Keating, “How will I know I have been in the presence of God? Will I hear his audible voice? Will I see colors?” Keating answered, “When I see the results, I will say you have been there. When you show the fruit of the spirit, you love your enemies and you do not have to be right then I will know you have been in the presence of God.” Thomas Keating died in 2018 and left behind a legacy to bring centering prayer, or contemplative mysticism to the masses.

The third form of Haberer’s God-view is the ecclesiast. The purpose is to gather a group who come to worship and become nurtured together. Buildings are designed and created. Even within the ecclesiast God-view there are forms of church polity: local ecclesiast, connectional ecclesiast, and ecumenical ecclesiast. The local ecclesiast cares for the flock, reaches out to those in need, nurtures members with an emphasis on devotions and equips those members to serve the world. Haberer believes most American churches fall into this category. The connectional ecclesiast wants a central governing body to draw together all the churches in a common goal. Local ecclesiasts may miss the connection of other clergy provided in a connectional church view. The ecumenical ecclesiast is not content with the study of peace, they have a passion for living peace in the world beyond their church building walls.

The altruist God-view is about trying to live as Jesus would have us live. The WWJD (what would Jesus do?) is the attempt of church here. Haberer uses the old adage “Christ of the creeds

becomes Jesus of the needs.”⁵⁶ Altruism as a God-view seeks to know the needs of the culture and community and to meet those needs as church, not as ideas about church.

The activist God-view according to Haberer is the pursuit of justice in the world. Haberer says of this way of seeing, “Jesus disrupted the social order because he was the social transformer, a revolutionary... He proclaimed a reversal of hierarchies, power management, wealth and prestige.”⁵⁷ In the activist God-view the marginalized and the poor are heard and helped. This is not a God-view concerned with buildings or doctrines but action and commitment to systemic change.

For the focus of this study, I will look mostly at these in terms of order and novelty and will continue to find this polarity in various traditions and experiences in the life of the church.

⁵⁶ Haberer, 76.

⁵⁷ Haberer, 85.

Chapter II: Movies Demonstrate the Dichotomy

I walked on the campus of Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, PA and had to look up the translation of the Latin motto I kept seeing, Lux et Lex. The college is a merger of Franklin College and Marshall College named after Benjamin Franklin and Supreme Court Justice John Marshall. This was a serendipitous moment as I googled the translation of the text on my phone Lux et Lex = light and law. I began to ponder the combination of light and law. Benjamin Franklin might well have been on the side of novelty with the discoveries he made. Justice Marshall would certainly be on the side of order because adjudicating the law was his trade.

Light may not necessarily suggest a new idea. It may be about light shining on an old message. The possibility is expressed in the hymn lyric: “When in scenes of glory I sing, the new, new song, t’will be the old, old story that I have loved so long.”⁵⁸ An epiphany may be a very old idea given to a new generation. There is a difference between novel inventions and rediscoveries.

The law may not simply be about preserving what is old. It may become a means to protect the implementation of the new. The concept of the rights of LGBTQ may have been unheard of 100 years ago. Today the law can be a way of allowing the new information gained through science and experience to become part of our churches and our personal lives.

Are we still malleable? The prophet Jeremiah gave us a metaphor of God’s relation to God’s people with the image of a potter and clay in the 18th chapter of Jeremiah.⁵⁹ In fact, just as we today use object lessons in children sermons, Jeremiah describes God as saying, “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” The clay is marred and the

⁵⁸ “I Love to Tell the Story,” in *Wikipedia*, May 10, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=I_Love_to_Tell_the_Story&oldid=840595569.

⁵⁹ Jeremiah 18:1-12 (NRSV)

potter reshapes it. In the Jeremiah passage God asks, “Can I not do just as the potter has done?” The question is: are we still malleable? Under the guise of purity, we may err on the side of pottery already thrown into the kiln and being fully formed. The text ends tragically with: “We will stick to our stubborn will.” And, as a result, the vessel is destroyed. I once had a potter come to our worship service to throw his clay on a wheel as we asked him questions. I remember that he said he had to learn how to get the right consistency of water and clay. For the church to survive we have to get the right consistency of order and novelty.

As with the right consistency of water and clay or old and new; perhaps there must be an appropriate consistency of sacrifice and celebration. A vivid contrast of sacrifice and celebration can be seen in the gospel of Matthew speaking about John the Baptist and Jesus:

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”⁶⁰

We do not consider John the Baptist wrong, simply ordered and disciplined. Jesus was not wrong in his abundant life of celebration with food and drink. There are times to play the flute and dance and there are times to wail and mourn. Further reflection of John the Baptist’ new challenges to the old order and Jesus breath of fresh air into old rituals would be worth pondering here. Order may not necessarily be obsolete and novelty may not necessarily be a new trend. John the Baptist

⁶⁰ Matthew 11:16-19 (NRSV)

confronted a sense of entitlement when he is recorded as saying, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”⁶¹ Jesus took the ritual of Passover and transformed it into his presence.⁶²

It is interesting that Jesus in Matthew’s gospel says, “With what shall I compare this generation.” Because years ago, a group of World War II generation people were asked what their scriptural mantra was. What scripture text do you see as a guide for your life? They replied, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”⁶³ Then a group of baby boomers were asked for their mantra, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”⁶⁴ Jesus said both of these things. We have to get the right consistency of sacrifice and celebration, or order and novelty.

In 1997 Jean-Dominique Bauby wrote a book called *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*.⁶⁵ It was later adapted into a vivid film. The story is about a man who was in his prime. Bauby was the editor of the French magazine: *Elle*⁶⁶ when he suffered a massive stroke leaving him speechless and paralyzed. He was unable to move except for his left eye lid and was able to write a book blinking out letters to a scribe. In the film it states that two things were not paralyzed besides his left eye lid and that was his memory and his imagination.⁶⁷ The memory relates to order for this is

⁶¹ Matthew 3:9 (NRSV)

⁶² Matthew 26:26 (NRSV)

⁶³ Mathew 16:24 (NRSV)

⁶⁴ John 10:10 (NRSV)

⁶⁵ *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly: A Memoir of Life in Death* (Princeton, N.J.: Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic, 2008).

⁶⁶ “Fashion Magazine - Beauty Tips, Fashion Trends, & Celebrity News,” ELLE, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.elle.com/>.

⁶⁷ Julian Schnabel, director, *Le scaphandre et le papillon=The diving bell and the butterfly* (Burbank, CA: Miramax Films, 2015).

what is established. Tradition and history show what has been. Imagination relates to novelty for it is, as Tillich reminds us, our potential.

For preachers, memory and imagination sum up what we do. To proclaim the living word Walter Brueggemann in his book *Deep Memory and Exuberant Hope* said, “The church and its interpreters must hear every nuance and go deep into memory. Such attentive remembering, however, is more than a recall of the past. It spills into the present as a neighborly ethic ... and into the future as hope that contradicts despair.”⁶⁸

A movie that captures the concept of order and novelty most vividly is *Wit*.⁶⁹ This was based on a play written by Margaret Edson, formerly a Hospice nurse. It is about the death and dying of a female professor of sixteenth century poetry, namely that of John Donne. A most vivid scene is a flashback she has with her professor while in graduate school. The main character Vivian has a dialogue in her flashback with her professor:

“I see it is wit. I’ll go back to the library.”

“It is not wit, Ms. Bearing, it is truth. Don’t go back to the library. Go out, be with friends.”

*“I went outside, simple human truth and uncompromising scholarly standards. There connected, I just couldn’t... I went back to the library.”*⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Walter Brueggemann and Patrick D. Miller, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).

⁶⁹ Mike Nichols, director, *Wit* (Sydney, N.S.W.: Showtime Drama, 2010).

⁷⁰ Mike Nichols, director.

This is a direct example of order and novelty. Simple human truth or experience (novelty) is set in contrast with uncompromising scholarship (order). They are connected. One way to understand this connection is through emotional intelligence, or intellectual love.

Vivian Bearing, the character in *Wit*, tries to reduce answers to having enough data and finding the right interpretive technique. Edwin Friedman, a Rabbi and family systems therapist, wrote extensively about the danger of trying to reduce leadership to data and technique. Friedman claims that we fall into societal regression when safety is more important than risk and imagination. He writes, “Exposing oneself to change is often the only way to provide the kind of mind-jarring experience of novelty that can make us realize that what we thought was reality was only a mirror of our minds.”⁷¹

Edwin Friedman in his book *Failure of Nerve* finds risk and adventure to be a cure for the gridlock of fear. A failure to live in the tension of order and novelty may have to do with what one sees as the problem. Friedman gave examples from history when innovation and creativity thrived and when society regressed. If the problem is perceived to be unwelcome change, then protection will be the goal and safety will become more important than adventure.

Just as Friedman sees the paralysis of analysis in collecting more data instead of trusting ourselves, today there is an arrogance in those who equate gathering information on Google with wisdom. Novelty alone with no order may dismiss or disparage the wisdom of the ages because data can be collected at our fingertips. We may be able to gather information faster, but we cannot speed up the process of emotional and spiritual development. An example of this may be the

⁷¹ Friedman, Treadwell, and Beal, *A Failure of Nerve*, 124.

contrast between in-coming freshman congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the current majority leader of the House of Representative Nancy Pelosi. Ms. Ocasio-Cortez is young and ready to try new things. She has said that she is not so concerned about what the senior, older representatives think of her new ideas. It helps to have novelty. A breath of fresh air is welcomed by the progressive Democrats. Yet, if giving no thought or yielding to the experienced wisdom of those who have been trying to implement policies for many years triumphs at the expense of novelty, then all will be the less for it.

W. Paul Jones served as a professor of philosophical theology and director of doctoral studies at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. Jones put theological words into categories with differing *obsessios* (dilemmas) and contrasting *epiphanias* (resolutions).⁷² He saw five types of faith categories: separation and reunion, conflict and vindication, emptiness and fulfilment, condemnation and forgiveness, suffering and endurance.⁷³ The five-fold scheme is not based on the tension between order and novelty. It is not as if some of the categories are oriented toward order and others toward novelty. Novelty is not the problem and order is not the solution in this study. However, within each of the categories there is tension between the two. Depending on what is perceived as the problem, there may be an overreaction to resist what the new or the old may teach us.

Archibald MacLeish put words into the mouth of Job's comforters in his modern version of that biblical story called: J.B.⁷⁴ The three comforters represented the church, psychology and

⁷² W. Paul Jones, *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 18.

⁷³ Jones, 19.

⁷⁴ Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1956), 119.

politics. Each had an answer to J.B.'s suffering. The preacher claimed that the problem was sin. The psychologist saw the issue as a self-imposed illusion. The politician saw it as history in the making until the masses are set free. If the goal is to alleviate suffering, different disciplines will find different solutions. The state or the government will have one way of keeping order while the church has another. If the mind is the part that is tortured, then the therapist will use yet other forms of control or restraint and find freedom from guilt as a way out. The church, which is my field of discipline, has through the years used different methods to perpetuate the faith as well as maintain stability. Job is a poetic reflection of the search for meaning in suffering. MacLeish created a contemporary character to ponder again the why of suffering. If suffering is seen to be caused by the country and the collective policies of the state, the solution may be seen as finding law and order and less spontaneity and freeform behavior. If suffering is seen as the problem of the psyche, perception of new narrative therapy (novelty) may be the remedy. If suffering is seen as a root cause of sin, then a doctrinal order and disciplinary action may be seen as the way to healing. Jones elaborated with his theological categories for cause and effect in churches or in faith perspectives.

Edwin Friedman may be right in his connection of risk and adventure being an antidote to a locked-in gridlock of fear under the guise of safety. The old adage may fit, "A ship is safe in the harbor but that is not what it was built for." Yet on the other side of the pendulum, C.S. Lewis warns about what he coined as "chronological snobbery: "the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited."⁷⁵ As though anything recent is more advanced and therefore

⁷⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, Reissue edition (HarperOne, 2017), 207.

progress. Boredom of the same may create a restlessness that lacks stability. To simply find something new because of a lack of interest in an ancient order is “little more than a substitution of the trivial for the ossified.”⁷⁶

Another metaphor for order and novelty is roots and wings. The story of Jesus’ friends, Mary and Martha, gives us a glimpse of this. Martha is earth bound and steeped in tradition. She is pragmatic. She wants Jesus to scold her sister for not helping prepare a meal. But Mary is listening to something new.⁷⁷ Years ago, I was in a small group with two spiritual leaders. One was from a small rural community and lived simply. The other was a physicist and theologian. He was intense and driven. A member of the group described them, “He kept us on our toes and she kept our feet on the ground.” There is the old adage, “Some people or so heavenly minded they are no earthly good.” Yet Mary is a reminder that at times we long for more. Roots and wings and the tension between the two can keep us on our toes and keep us grounded. Elephants have been described as earth-bound clouds. I once had a parishioner who was paralyzed, unable to move any part of her body except her face. She was described as an earth-bound angel. She could soar in her thinking and her spirit even though her body never moved without assistance.

The verses before the Mary and Martha story in the gospel of Luke may give us insight. The good Samaritan story is just before Mary sitting at Jesus feet.⁷⁸ The good Samaritan story refers to the behavior and action of our faith, not the pondering of beliefs. Action and contemplation is a balance Richard Rohr has created with quite a following.⁷⁹ Order is a way to

⁷⁶ Leander E. Keck, *The Church Confident* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 25.

⁷⁷ Luke 10:38-41 (NRSV)

⁷⁸ Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)

⁷⁹ “Center for Action and Contemplation,” Center for Action and Contemplation, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://cac.org/>.

keep us grounded, novelty is a way to keep us soaring. To live with roots and wings is a path to embrace church as both a monument and a movement.

Freedom and Control

Order might be associated with control and novelty may be more related to the freedom of our faith. Tillich holds together the polarity of freedom and destiny. It does not seem to be possible to completely live free of limits. Becoming bored with the form or trappings of religion does not exempt us from the influence of history. “When I make a decision, it is the concrete totality of everything that constitutes my being which decides, not an epistemological subject. This refers to body structure, psychic strivings, spiritual character. It includes communities to which I belong, the past unremembered and remembered....”⁸⁰ By destiny Tillich is not referring to “a strange power which determines what shall happen”⁸¹ but it is who we are shaped by outside and internal influences. Again, living free of limits is not possible whether we are conscious of the restraint and motive or not.

In the United Methodist church in order to prepare for the then upcoming contentious general conference debate about homosexuality a group of United Methodist bishops wrote a book including all perspectives on the issue titled: *Finding Our Way: Love and Law in the United Methodist Church*.⁸² J. Michael Lowry wrote a chapter simply titled “Order”. He wrote, “Order contains within its essence a doctrinal character (what we teach) and a disciplinary character (how we shall act together.) In the life of any organization...the boundaries must be

⁸⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 185.

⁸¹ Tillich, 185.

⁸² Rueben P. Job, ed., *Finding Our Way: Love and Law in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014).

permeable enough to breathe and simultaneously firm enough to contain the essence.”⁸³ Lowry sees the UMC book of discipline as the foundation of order and those who disagree with the wording as playing outside the foul lines according to his baseball metaphor. He continued, “Our current rage against order and struggle about order is by image a contentious argument about the foul lines and indeed about the very nature of whether foul lines properly exist.”⁸⁴ Lowry goes so far as to accuse progressives who disagree with his way of *putting things in order*⁸⁵ as exhibiting colonialism. It is interesting that by his own definition he describes colonialism as “the control of one country over another area and its people”⁸⁶ and yet he is the very one claiming that all must obey the order as he interprets scripture and the *Book of Discipline*. Who is demanding control in this instance?

Bishop Gregory Palmer also claims that order in the United Methodist church is based on rules to obey. He asserts, “One of the characteristics of order or orderliness is that we have applicable rules and regulations that can and should be applied fairly and without distinction for the sake of the mission.”⁸⁷ Again, the implication is that flexibility in the interpretation or applications of the rules in North America is unfair to the United Methodist churches in the rest of the world who are trying to live by these rules.

In the same study of love and law, Bishop Talbert said, “I invite others to join me in what I am calling an act of biblical obedience based on the twofold commandment of Jesus.”⁸⁸ Here Talbert claims that the one to obey is the one who calls us to love. His sense of novelty is to love

⁸³ Job, 74.

⁸⁴ Job, 75.

⁸⁵ II Corinthians 13:11 (NRSV)

⁸⁶ Job, *Finding Our Way*, 77.

⁸⁷ Job, 11.

⁸⁸ Job, 40.

God and to love others in new ways and in new situations. Where others see him as disobeying order, he claims that he is obeying a higher order. Here the desire to obey a higher order leads to novelty in regard to the lower order of regulations.

Let us reflect on the tension between order and novelty and how we make our choices as we are driven and influenced by these two polarities. Bishop Reuben Job edited the various perspectives in the *Finding our Way* message with this introduction: “We may choose to celebrate or abhor a holy union; to enforce a prohibition or choose to rely on what we view as the spirit of the gospel. The word choice helps to make apparent the profound tension between freedom and obligation.”⁸⁹ The tension between order and novelty, freedom and obligation and how we decided is the focus of this project.

I had a friend who was a non-canonical Catholic sister. The Roman Catholic church did not recognize her order. She said her group of sisters needed support but not control. Their order was designed to provide resources and compassion for one another but not to exercise accountability in the sense of compulsion or control. This allowed for novelty in the midst of a steeped tradition within her own denomination.

This particular woman of faith told me about reading a book by one of her greatest mentors. She was disturbed, in fact she was shaken to the core of her faith. She could not dismiss him and his words and yet she felt that she must do so. She was in a faith crisis so she wrote him a letter and told him he was taking her faith away. She told him she felt like she was in 4th grade again. One day as a 4th grader she had become very angry at some classmates who told her that

⁸⁹ Job, 6.

there was no Santa Claus. She ran home and told her parents and then asked them, “How could they stop believing?” She said that her parents then had to sit her down and explain that it was make-believe and confess that maybe they let her believe far too long. So, when her favorite author received the letter he immediately replied saying, “Whatever I said, throw it away and never read it again. That was never my intent. I always want you to know how much you are loved by God.” I was impressed with the way he was able to let go of his work. He did not try to defend it. He was not possessive of his own words and ideas. He was attentive to her needs. She was able to transcend his views and include her own insights. She transcended this author’s words that did not fit into her faith. She included his faithfulness and his influence in her prayer life. Perhaps she will grow in her faith beyond the Santa Claus mentality, yet at that moment it was the experience of compassion that changed her. Here order, in the sense of clinging to past beliefs, was modified in the interest of bringing new life and a renewed faith.

Chapter III: A Case Study in the United Methodist Church Between Experience and Tradition

Introduction of a Case Study

In the application of the themes of order and novelty, theological language in the United Methodist church often uses the vocabulary of experience and tradition. In applying the concept of order to church polity, tradition has been seen as the structure that organizes the free-floating spirit and the dimension of novelty has been described as the ever-changing experience of individuals and the community. In the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, it states that, “Support without accountability promotes moral weakness; accountability without support is a form of cruelty.”⁹⁰

I have served in a congregation with scientists and artists. Biblical studies were rich as a result. Individuals have personalities that respond to certain ways of seeing. For example, on a mission trip we spent the day renovating a home. That evening we gathered together to share our experience. I used the metaphor of geese flying in a V. The lead goose takes the brunt of the wind so the other geese begin honking to cheer him on. That lead goose changes and moves back in the line and another goose takes the lead. I thought that they would want to discuss the way that we relied on one another and the way that we may have to lead with encouragement from our crew and the way that the leadership changes with a specific task. Yet the scientist wanted to discuss how the lead goose knew when to change. This was before google, and immediate access to such information was not available, and so the conversation continued. The artists on the other

⁹⁰ United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2016, 2016.

hand wanted to paint the scene with words. One person was focused on getting the facts right, while others were interested in exploring novel creative possibilities.

Another example of differences in perspective became evident when a nurse and a chaplain watched the movie *Captain Phillips*.⁹¹ This is a movie based on a capture of a cargo ship. I do not know how accurate the movie portrays the event. At the end of the movie, the captain was rescued and the members of the medical team were assisting him. The chaplain said, “Tell him his family is well and he is safe now.” The nurse said, “No, she is triaging and she must find out if there is internal bleeding. He could die if she loses perspective and does not remain objective.” A particular way of seeing is important, not wrong, but more than one way of seeing can be valued if both are held in dynamic tension; both mercy and justice, both order and novelty, and both tradition and experience must be affirmed.

Denominations are formed through structure. As the movement progresses, spontaneous change is inevitable and sometimes beneficial. Our faith is lived not in a vacuum, but in a community and in a nation. When leaders have no respect for law, we see the results. When fear of change is the driving force, the pendulum will probably spring again to a tight form of control.

The United Methodist church has used the quadrilateral (scripture, reason, tradition and experience) to interpret the will of God through the years. This phrase was popularized by the Methodist scholar, Albert Outler.⁹² In the quadrilateral, “tradition” usually functions to strengthen order, while “experience” functions to open up new possibilities.

As I pondered this topic of order and novelty, I attended the Eastern Pennsylvania conference of the United Methodist Church and was amazed to see right before my eyes, exhibit

⁹¹ Paul Greengrass, *Captain Phillips* (Columbia Pictures, 2013).

⁹² Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley*, 13. print (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).

A: an example of the stark contrast of order and novelty or tradition and experience in the life of the denomination.

An Explanation by Bishop Peggy Johnson

Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church 2018

During the 2016 general conference of the United Methodist Church a decision was made to establish a commission to study the issues of human sexuality. The commission chosen was comprised of 32 people including both laity and clergy from various ethnicities and theological perspectives. The commission studied the issues facing the church, namely the ordination of gay and lesbian pastors and the act of officiating at same sex weddings. Because the “united” Methodist church is at an impasse regarding these issues, the commission was called “The Way Forward.” The members of The Way Forward Commission were asked to consider contextualization, mission and unity. The commission through intense conversations and study created three plans to move forward to be voted upon at the next called General Conference.

The Three choices are as follows:

Traditional plan - Keep the Book of Discipline the same and include more accountabilities.

This plan would broaden the definition of “self-avowed practicing homosexual” to include persons living in a same-sex marriage or civil union or persons who publicly state that they are practicing homosexuals. This plan would mandate any just resolution not to repeat an offense outlined by their by laws.

One Church Plan – Remove all the language from the discipline concerning the issue of homosexuality and same gender weddings and allow for conferences and churches to follow their conscience in their particular contexts. This plan was recommended by the council of Bishops.

Connectional conference plan – Have shared services but create three connections: traditional, justice/progressive and contextual/unity – with jurisdictions deciding which to one join. The traditional connectional conference would continue to define marriage as defined as being between one man and one woman, it would stipulate that same-sex weddings cannot be performed, and would assert that those practicing homosexuality cannot be ordained. This proposal also mandated a covenantal commitment to a more traditional understanding of the doctrinal and moral standards of the church with enhanced accountability. The Unity connectional conference acknowledges that members are not of one mind regarding biblical interpretations related to human sexuality, in which pastors are allowed but not required to perform same-sex weddings, annual conferences are allowed but not required to ordain those practicing homosexuality, local churches are allowed but not required to receive LGBT persons as pastors, and no bishop, pastor, or congregation is compelled to act against conscience in these matters. The Progressive Connectional Conference, in which same-sex weddings are performed by all clergy, all annual conferences ordain qualified LGBT persons, and all local churches welcome LGBT pastors who match the needs of the congregation and its ministry would be legitimated.

The council of Bishops then gathered to discuss these three plans brought to them by the Way Forward Commission and the COB chose **the One Church plan** to recommend to the general conference in February of 2019.

Why did Council of Bishops choose this plan?

- It allows for contextualization.
- It allows for central conferences to retain traditional language and values.
- It best fulfills the vision of a global multi-cultural church in order to maximize our mission and achieve as much unity as possible.

- It keeps the constitution and the structure and agencies in tact
- It does not force anyone to act out of their conscience
- It has the most space, clarity, grace, context and simplicity
- It takes out the language from the discipline about homosexuality and same gender weddings and allows churches and pastors to decide about weddings and boards of ordained ministry and conferences to decide about ordination

At the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church Bishop Peggy Johnson requested a report from the Evangelical Connection (EC) and the Reconciling United Methodist of Eastern Pennsylvania (RUM-EPA).

The Evangelical Connection Report: a Traditional Plan

Representing the Evangelical Connection perspective was Rev. Joan Trout. Rev. Trout claims that “our United Methodist movement has been guided, for its 200+ year history, by ONE Book of Discipline that has detailed our understanding of Scripture and the Theology that is established by Scriptural authority.”

Rev. Trout presented seven points to defend the traditional church plan. An abridged representation of the seven points is as follows.

1. The non-traditional plan is a recipe for chaos and increased conflict.
2. To approve the one church model will harm the ministry and witness of our UM sisters and brothers in Africa and Eastern Europe/ around the world.
3. It will make the appointment process much more complex and difficult; try to navigate the process of matching pastors with church who hold the same views.

4. Though the outline of the proposal says there will be protection for pastors and congregations whose conscience will not permit them to participate in same-sex ceremonies or ordinations, how exactly will that work? Since all language prohibiting same-sex ceremonies or ordinations will be removed –
5. It will be a very confused witness to the world.
6. It would put the United Methodist Church at odds with the historic and ecumenical teaching of the Christian churches on marriage as the sacred union between one man and one woman.
7. It would require the UMC to contradict the clear teaching of Scripture, which only affirms sexual relations within the context of monogamous marriage between a man and a woman.⁹³

When one is heavily weighted on tradition or order, selective citing of the Bible and other authoritative denominational documents will naturally occur. Trout did not acknowledge that our “One book of discipline has had many, many changes.” She also did not acknowledge that many parts of the “one book of discipline” are ignored. For example, in the *Book of Discipline* states that apportionments are to be paid but many churches ignore this stipulation. The *Book of Discipline* states that there will be a United Methodist Women’s chapter in ever church and many churches opt out of this for an informal ladies Bible study and fellowship time. She said that the United Methodist church does not make decisions at a local level. While that may be the theory or polity, in actual practice everyday decisions are made that do contradict the discipline.

⁹³ Evangelical Connection of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference, “Presentation on ‘The Way Forward’” (Microsoft Word file, June 14, 2018).

A policy based on scripture and on tradition does not often take into account the contradictions contained in scripture itself. Selective literalism in a strict order plan ignores the plurality of perspectives in scripture and has no eye for the novelty, creativity, experience, mercy or freedom in scripture and tradition themselves.

Reconciling United Methodist (RUM-EPA) Presentation⁹⁴: An Experience

The program began with a power point slide of the text: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28

Jerry Noone, co-chair of the Reconciling Ministries in the EPACUMC and a lay member of a church in the of the conference led the conversation. He stated, “The language in the BOD that states ‘homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching’ is very hurtful to the LGBTQ community. I do not have childhood memories because I blocked them out. I clung to my faith in God. If not, I could have killed myself like many in the LGBTQ community have. Every time I was called a ‘fag’ I looked in the mirror and remembered I was looking at the face of God. We are nothing to be feared just another face of God here today. Maybe God has put me here to test just how Christian you really are. You have a real opportunity to show no one will have to face that kind of discrimination in God’s house, because they will still face it at work, at home and at school. What choice will you make in the coming months? Will you choose faith and the love of Jesus Christ and the value of every human being is of sacred worth. Or will you let

⁹⁴ Reconciling United Methodists of Eastern Pennsylvania, “Presentation for the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference,” (June 14, 2018).

discrimination win the day? Which side of history will you choose? I know which side I have chosen.”

Rev. Sukja Bang spoke at the presentation, asserting that “Eliminating the discriminatory language in the BOD does not mean that homophobia and discrimination is eliminated. Changes in language are good. The words themselves have been tremendously hurtful and affect the way people act. But Christ calls us to change our hearts and practices.” Then through videos the RMN of Eastern PA UMC stories were told about what life in the church is like for an LGBTQ church member or their allies. The videos were introduced by Rev. Sukja Bang with the words, “Please listen and observe carefully and prayerfully as a few members of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual conference of the United Methodist church speak from their hearts.” She argued that Christ’s call: involves agape love for all

The videos included a lesbian couple, Barbara Mitchel and Ruth Thornton, who have been together for 30 years, and who are now legally married. They joined First United Methodist Church of Germanton (fumcog) church because it was an organization fully and actively involved in social justice because people of faith are accepted at different places in their journey. They were told by their pastor that “joining is a time of exploration.” Their associate pastor was defrocked by speaking from the pulpit about love and life as a lesbian. Many left the church because of the harsh way that she was subsequently treated. Mitchell and Thornton were pained that they could not be married in their church. They were married at a Mennonite church that is open and affirming. Their wedding was supported by their pastor and church and that is why they stayed in the congregation.

Rev. Mark Salvacion, is the pastor of St. George United Methodist Church, the oldest Methodist church in continuous service in the United States. Rev. Salvacion is an ally as a

straight pastor who is open and affirming. A lesbian couple came to him asking if he would officiate at their wedding. The stark reality of the BOD set in. They could not get married in this historic sanctuary and he could not be the one to officiate. He felt sad. He recalled, “I will never forget their look of rejection on the faces of these two women. They stopped attending, and the church members were angry and hurt. Member of my congregation asked why? Because I believe in a God who loves all people equally God is offered to all regardless of their sexual orientation, I had no answer to these questions.”

Mark Stoner, a gay lay member of First United Methodist of Lancaster church spoke. He grew up in a United Methodist Church and stated that “there has always been a range of biblical interpretations. I do not want to be in a church where people do not feel they can give their version of biblical truth. I want people to be able to disagree.” He offered an analogy of being on the shore as a solid base, while progressive groups get on a boat and go their way. He compared this to a missionary who went to another country, unsure what the results would be. He said that those who want to do so can stand on the shore, while they allow others to go explore new lands and open up God’s love to everyone. The metaphor of moving toward another land while the party in favor of the traditional order stays on the shore was presented with clarity.

Anana Tinnhe is a lesbian lay member, of Arch Street United Methodist Church. Anana thanked the work of the commission on the Way Forward as well as the COB. She said, “As a Black, gender non-conforming queer woman of deep faith, I have found a spiritual home in the Arch Street United Methodist Church. Years of being in a sacred space that was far from accepting the queer young adult that I was, I was finally able to find a home at this church.” Spending her childhood in a sexual-orientation exclusive denomination, she feels at home in the new church. Anana warns that removing the language “homosexuality is incompatible with

Christian teaching” needs to be more than an attempt to prevent separation. She feels that it is an opportunity to recreate the image of the church in the image of God as well as in the spirit of John Wesley, saying “My heart is as your heart, give me your hand.” The local church option honors the particular context of the conscience of the laity and clergy of that setting. She feels that it is a small step to include same sex weddings and same sex individuals. Yet she feels that it is far too limiting. As a member of the LGBTQIA community and a member of a United Methodist church, she is committed to full inclusion, and to the removal of all racism. Going forward she imagines a United Methodist church that is committed not only to the full inclusion of the LGBTQ community but also is committed to ending racism and all systems that discriminate. According to her, there should be no tolerance of division based on who an individual loves, and there should be an allowance for the unconditional love of the Holy Spirit. She has ultimate faith this will one day be so because of her belief in the liberating love of the Holy Spirit.

The videos ended with the whole conference singing a song which was written by two men, a gay married couple: “I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All who follow Jesus all around the world, yes we’re the church together. The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place the church is a people.” (written by Richard K. Avery/ Donald S. Marsh)

The videos and the presentations were heartfelt and vulnerable. They were heavily weighted on the side of experience. This group noted that the other perspective was selective in their use of Scripture and tradition. The novelty dimension part of the polarity was palpable. What was lacking was a fuller and more robust strategic and logical response to the issue at hand. Science was left out of the equation. Data in the scientific community could have given

more validity to their heartfelt responses. As Martin Luther King asserts, a tough mind could be held together with a tender heart. The RUM-EPA did not have the EC presentation in advance, so their representatives did not respond to each of their seven points in their rebuttal. The design of the dual presentations did not allow for the “reason” dimension of the quadrilateral to be addressed adequately. In this instance science and reason is also part of the dimension of novelty because new discoveries are being made and because the generation of the new theories to account for new data is the life blood of science.

A counter case to the Evangelical Connection presentation

The counter response was written by Rev. Andrea Brown, Liz Fulmer and Rev. Darryl Stephens (a United Methodist ordained elder, a lay lesbian musician and seminary student, and a United Methodist ordained deacon and seminary professor.) They observed:

“Both quoted scripture and cited tradition, but the EC presentation took a point-by-point “reason” based approach, whereas the RUM-EPA presentation relied more heavily on “experience”, with lots of personal testimony.”

These three United Methodist then responded to the Evangelical Connection presentation. Liz Fulmer said, “I am first struck by the use of Charles Wesley’s “And Are We Yet Alive” to greet the assembly. Wesley’s lyric, “And are we yet alive, and see each other’s face?” speaks to the seeing or recognition of one’s personhood, yet the EC’s argument is rooted in the practice of denying and excluding persons on the basis of their sexual identity, a prominent component of personhood.”

The counter response team noted first that the “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” language is new (not contained in the *Book of Discipline* until 1972) and was not found any of Wesley’s writings or in the Nicene nor Apostles’ Creed. That language was not

part of the central Wesleyan tradition. Therefore, the counter response disagreed “with their making their exclusionary position a hill to die on- or a matter to leave over.”

The counter response team counter response team noted that the Evangelical Connection has resisted changing its position in light of the widely accepted scientific knowledge and the evolving social understanding of human sexuality. The response also noted there is no discrimination directed toward those who according to their conscience decide to not officiate at same sex weddings in the one church plan.⁹⁵

The Evangelical Connection claimed that we have always been governed by our one *Book of Discipline*. The counter response team pointed out that this is not true. There have been multiple books of discipline for different branches and conferences of the church, including those that permitted slavery and those that did not allow women’s ordination. The team observed, “The very nature of the Discipline as a book of law means that it is always subject to revision. It is a work in progress.”

The counter response team notes the various interpretations of homosexuality in the World Methodist Council. They asserted, “We Methodists, fortunately, have found our unity in things far more important than policing loving, romantic relationships between consenting adults.” By doing so, they were drawing attention to the plurality within the tradition, and to an implicit distinction within the tradition between things that are important for unity, and things that are not.

⁹⁵ Andrea Brown, Liz Fulmer, and Darryl W. Stephens, “Counter Case to Evangelical Connection Presentation on ‘The Way Forward’” (PDF document, August 21, 2018), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1P7xCXgXIP10MobHHJ4JeqZNFs7dWdDj8/view?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook.

The counter response team continues with a challenge to the claim there is to be no change in the tradition by citing Jesus' challenge to the authority of His day. Jesus announced, "You have heard it said ... but I say to you" in the sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel. Another example of change in the tradition in Methodist history was the pressing issue of 1798 in regards to marriage was the prohibition to marry someone "unequally yoked." This is no longer a marriage issue for any Methodist today. But this was of great concern to Methodist in the 18th century. Unequally yoked included those who were "awakened." Many in the church saw those who were unbelievers as being incompatible in marriage to those who were "faithful believers" or "awakened."

The counter response team gave a point-by-point rebuttal of the claims of the Evangelical Connection.

Concerning the issue of chaos and conflict, the counter response team sees a formless void where others like the Evangelical Connection see only threatening chaos and challenge us to trust God to bring light in the darkness. As for conflict the CRT noted that conflict is already a part of the church. That conflict comes to the surface when a pastor must respond to the pain of a person who is rejected because he or she is gay.

According to the Evangelical Connection the removal of restrictive language puts United Methodists at risk of attack in countries where homosexuality is illegal. The counter response team said the Evangelical Connection fails to note that the United Methodist Christians are already in danger in many countries. They observed, "Though frequently claiming to love their LGBTQ siblings, EC members show very little recognition of the way their anti-LGBTQ agenda leads to murder and suicide of Christians (including United Methodists) who happen to be queer in the U.S. and abroad."

The Evangelical Connection claimed that it will make the appointment process more difficult “trying to navigate the process of matching pastors with churches who hold the same views”. The counter response team responded that this is already a complex matter around subjects much broader than homosexuality. The counter response team knows that appointments at times are a mismatch. Reducing this problem of judicatory making decisions in matching congregations to pastors to this one issue leaves little room for finding the gifts and graces pastors and churches have.

The Evangelical Connection claimed that “It will ... continue the trend of pushing us toward a more congregational style of relating to one another.” The counter response team responded that this has been a trend for some time. Many factors influence the development of a more congregational style. Longer pastorates sometimes cause the congregation to take on the personality of the pastor. Less trust of institutions decreases commitment to the general church agencies and their influence. The Confessing Movement of the United Methodist church has emphasized congregationalism as a central aspect of the church. For example, the counter response team quoted the Memphis Declaration (1992) claims that holy living involves an end to holy conferencing on this subject, saying, “Let us cease to debate homosexual practice...” The counter response team ends this point with, “If we are to work toward being church together, we must resist both congregational isolation and an aversion to discussing issues upon which we may disagree.”

The Evangelical group asked if they will be marginalized or punished because of their ‘orthodox stance’ and refusal to participate in the inclusive, open and affirming stance. The counter response team then took offence at the notation of an anti-gay agenda being “the orthodox understanding of scripture”. The counter response team does not see the Bible

discriminating against an entire class of people. The counter response team believes an orthodox understanding of scripture demands love for outcasts and grace for all. The counter response team claims that the handful of verses used to discriminate are used through a counter response team claims are used through a “misleading interpretation”. The counter response team second response to the fourth point is the One-Church model does not require any pastor to perform same-sex weddings. Even though their hope would be to have all clergy meet same-sex God-centered relationships with respect and welcome, there is no penalty for failing to do that.

The counter response team noted that the Evangelical Connection fears being excluded themselves but that its members show no concern for those who have been and continue to be excluded under any plan.

The Evangelical Connections’ fifth point was that “This local option approach would proclaim that we are simply not of one mind about what God has revealed for marriage and sexuality.” In response the CRT provided Biblical examples of polygamy and concubinage which we today (except in some places such as parts of the African United Methodist churches) would not condone. Biblical examples of requiring a woman who was raped to marry her rapist can be cited as another example of a Biblical practice that is no longer accepted. The fact that a bride who could not prove her virginity could be stoned to death is yet another example.

Sixth, the Evangelical Connection asserted that “We have not, as a denomination, put for a divided witness ... on any other significant issue...” To this contention the CRT pointed out that the issue of the ordination of women has been met with much resistance and a strong “divided witness.” Some factions in the church have argued that this is not permitted by certain passages in the Bible. According to the CRT it was bold of our denomination to include women in spite of the divided witness. They noted that infant baptism has been another “divided

witness” through the years. The CRT argued against the witness of exclusion and inequality if that is what the Evangelical Connection means by the phrase “undivided.”

The Evangelical Connection also argued that “It would put the United Methodist Church at odds with the historic and ecumenical teaching of the Christian churches on marriage as the sacred union between one man and one woman.” This assertion was contested by the counter response team. They protested, “We do well always and everywhere to be at odds with historic, ecumenical teaching when that teaching attempts to separate God’s people from God’s love.” Here the counter response team noted that “historic teaching doesn’t make a bad teaching good, it just makes it old.” When the Evangelical Connection claimed that the traditionalist position is “the unanimous view held by the global church today,” the counter response team objected that the EC discounts the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the Disciples of Christ, the United Church of Canada, the Uniting Church of Australia, the Church of Scotland, and British Methodists.

As a seventh major point the Evangelical Connection cited Mark 10:6 which they claimed permits only a man and a woman to be united in marriage. To this assertion the counter response team argued that in the context the passage is about divorce and the dismissal of women who had nothing to support them after divorce. The passage is not about the single life, or about sharing tasks in relationships, or about men and women in marriage. The counter response team suggested that the Evangelical Connection is unaware of the many books of discipline used by other countries tailored to fit their nation and culture.

The Evangelical connection does not acknowledge the fluidity of hermeneutics. The meaning of scripture evolves with new awareness, new information, new science and new contexts. Everyone uses selective literalism. Everyone who takes the sacred texts seriously that

is. There are texts that become our a priori or our bottom line. Those who spend time in scripture, know there are verses we no longer hold to be universal. For example, Deuteronomy 22:11 clearly states, “Do not wear clothes made of wool and linen together.” Most Christians are not concerned about blended fabric. Or scripture tells us to go into our closet and pray and it tells us not to hide our light under a bushel.⁹⁶ Interpretations requires an awareness of context. To worship a living God, and a word in the flesh, means sacred text continue to require attention and fresh breath to have a life relevant as we evolve. Few Christians today would condone a system of slavery, yet scripture does not condemn it. In fact, verses can be quoted to demand obedience to a master.⁹⁷ We have evolved to see the ills of slavery. More to the point the very person who presented the traditional plan at the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference would not have been able to do so if we had not evolved to allow females to become clergy and speak in worship.⁹⁸ Interpretation of scripture evolves.

The Evangelical Connection assumed the Book of Discipline does not change in the various worldwide connections (known as the Central Conference). “Central conferences have the power to change and adapt within their boundaries.”⁹⁹ Cultural issues such as polygamy are handled quite differently in other parts of the world. The EC assumes all words in the social principles are to be mandates when adjusts are constantly being made in each jurisdictional context.

In the *Book of Discipline*, the Articles of Religion states historically accepted doctrines of the Methodist church along with the Confession of Faith statements from the Evangelical United

⁹⁶ Matthew 6:6, Matthew 5:15 (NRSV)

⁹⁷ Ephesians 6:5-9 (NIV)

⁹⁸ I Corinthians 14:34 (NRSV)

⁹⁹ Darryl W. Stephens, *Methodist Morals: Social Principles in the Public Church's Witness*, First [edition] (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2016), 67.

Brethren. Upon the 1968 merger of the Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren (forming the current United Methodist Denomination). These Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith cannot easily change because of what is known as restrictive rules in the bylaws. Yet the Social principles of the United Methodist church are fluid and in constant review.

The Evangelical Connection claims to obey the book of discipline and yet the discipline states, “We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ.” And it is more than a hunch the EC is not in any way concerned about disobeying that statement. Selective literalism leads to turf wars in reference to any sacred text be it the Bible or the books of church polity.

To interpret church polity using our reason would include the science we have gained since the biblical texts became canon. The Evangelical connection did not move into novelty to envision the new ways God is at work in the lives of all gender identities and same-sex unions. The Evangelical connection did not use experience to interpret the polity of the church. The Reconciling Ministries showed their experience no longer fits an incompatible with Christian teaching word for their lives which are of sacred worth.

Unlike the Articles of Religion or the Confession of Faith, “the Social Principles is a dynamic witness to an ongoing conversation about what it means to be an United Methodist.”¹⁰⁰ The Evangelical connection did not acknowledge that the Reconciling Ministers also take seriously history and the order of the United Methodist Church. In fact many in this perspective have a clear understanding of what brought the church to the place they are today.

¹⁰⁰ Stephens, 121.

The United Methodist Church has not been a congregationalist system. There is much talk about centralization and decentralization in the current conflict. With a global church and very different ways of living our faith contextually, a less connectional system might be an option. In The Way Forward report the discussion was: “The positive quality of de-centralization is freedom and contextualization; the negative trait can be chaos and confusion.”¹⁰¹ Order and novelty is a way to hold together the tension of worldwide United Methodist divisions. The order of a denomination and the novelty of the spirit moving in a particular context. The impasse seems to be about what is the denominations bottom line and what is the movement of the spirit.

As is the method of the United Methodist church, a Committee on Faith and Order was formed to share a vision of the denomination. The vision paper was called: “Wonder, Love and Praise” claiming the saving love of God creates community, the saving love of God is meant for all people and the saving love of God is transformative.¹⁰² The conflict lies in both the meaning of “all” and the meaning of “transformation.” The progressive part of the denomination focus on prevenient grace and sanctifying grace with an eye for social holiness. The evangelical wing believes justifying grace and personal holiness is the key to salvation. Prevenient grace is the act of God and the movement of the spirit long before we are aware. Justifying grace is the act of Jesus and what would be known as substitutionary atonement. Rohr from a Roman Catholic perspective notes not all believe the cross is about substitutionary atonement “For Franciscans Jesus did not need to change the mind of God about humanity, but he came to change the mind

¹⁰¹ Commission on a Way Forward, “Commission on a Way Forward’s Report to the General Conference,” 2018, 2, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/council-of-bishops/news_and_statements/documents/Way_Forward_Report_-_Final_-_ENGLISH.pdf.

¹⁰² United Methodist Communications, “Wonder, Love and Praise: Sharing a Vision of the Church,” 17, accessed April 16, 2019, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/council-of-bishops/committee-faith-order/documents/wonder-love-and-praise-full-en.pdf.

of humanity about God.... God did not need any payment to love us.”¹⁰³ Personal holiness is the emphasis of individual transformation. Social holiness is how the faith is lived out in community. Sanctifying grace is the means to continued growth of Christians after an initial commitment or conversion.

The Wonder, love and Praise vision paper sought to describe the desire for a set of beliefs and the dangers of the claim to have the correct answer. “Churches ... commonly serve human needs for order, coherence, stability, belief-reinforcement, companionship, ethical guidance, and so forth.”¹⁰⁴ “The human use may be in direct conflict with the divine purpose – as, for instance, when the church is serving, whether unwittingly or deliberately, as the instrument of an ideology of national, racial, ethnic, or gender superiority.”¹⁰⁵

Is the Evangelical connection showing “an exercise in nostalgia, trying to recover power, place and prestige in society now long gone.”¹⁰⁶ ?

Krista Tippett has spent years interview people from various faith perspectives in her radio program called On Being. Tippett formed a compilation of her interviews in a book titled: *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*. Tippett said, “Profound truth ... quickly becomes rigid, gives way to abstraction or cliché. But put a spiritual insight to a story, an experience, a face; describe when it anchors in the ground of your being; and it will change you in the telling and others in the listening.” Tippett also stated, “I can disagree with your opinions, it turns out, but I can’t disagree with your experience.”¹⁰⁷ If order is reduced to a cliché or an

¹⁰³ Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 172.

¹⁰⁴ United Methodist Communications, “Wonder, Love and Praise,” 21.

¹⁰⁵ United Methodist Communications, 22.

¹⁰⁶ United Methodist Communications, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*, 2017, 22.

abstraction, it has lost the life of its original intent. Novelty as story, a story based in the actual lives of individuals, is not up for debate. We can disagree with what we see as vital, but we cannot discount someone's experience simply because it is different from our own.

Chapter IV: Comparing and Contrasting Two Denominations in the Extreme of Order and Novelty

United Church of Christ: A Denominational Example of Novelty

In the United Church of Christ, a denomination formed in 1957 from the Congregational Christian Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, the prioritization of novelty over order can be seen with statements from a general synod such as: “Form and structure . . . must always be subservient to mission”¹⁰⁸ The understanding of mission changes with evolving contexts.

The United Church of Christ is known for its freedom as a denomination. A congregational system allows for much individual church freedom. Yet the United Church of Christ is not bound by the many expectations that the Presbyterian USA must follow through their *Book of Order*.

Although the UCC has a Statement of Faith, they are not a creedal church. The Statement of Faith’s intent is to be “a testimony rather than a test.” Let us examine the statement in order to discern the prevalence of the novelty theme.

United Church of Christ Statement of Faith—original version

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify:

He calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image and sets before him the ways of life and death.

He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself.

He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

¹⁰⁸ Louis H. Gunnemann, *United and Uniting: The Meaning of an Ecclesial Journey* (New York: United Church Press, 1987), 157.

He calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of men, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory. He promises to all who trust him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, his presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.
Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto him.
Amen.¹⁰⁹

Martin Copenhaver, a prominent United Church of Christ and former dean of Andover Newton Seminary, wrote an article titled: "United or Untied? Searching for Sources of Unity in the United Church of Christ."¹¹⁰ The "united" part of the UCC stems from Jesus's prayer in the gospel of John "That they may all be one."¹¹¹ Copenhaver claims this is an example of "inverse image projection." Inverse image projection is when a denomination continues to lift up an image when the reality is the opposite. For example, a church that constantly claims to be welcoming and showing hospitality, may in fact be distant and exclusive. Copenhaver notes, "When we call ourselves 'united' we are expressing a hope rather than describing a reality."¹¹²

Without a common creed, a common liturgical tradition or an hierarchical ecclesiastical structure with compelling authority, the UCC according to Copenhaver may be seen as "glueless." UCC does not have a coercive authority based in tradition. What is the glue that holds the denomination together? When order or tradition is lacking in order to balance the novelty or experiential side of the polarity where is the unity?

¹⁰⁹ "Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ - La Declaración de Fe de La Iglesia Unida de Cristo," United Church of Christ, accessed November 22, 2018, http://www.ucc.org/beliefs_statement-of-faith.

¹¹⁰ Martin B. Copenhaver, "United or Untied?: Searching for Sources of Unity in the United Church of Christ," *Prism* 11, no. 1 (1996): 16–23.

¹¹¹ John 17:21 (NRSV)

¹¹² Copenhaver, "United or Untied?," 16.

Copenhaver found the words of United Church of Christ President Paul Sherry who claimed that the UCC is moving into a “new attentiveness to the Word among us.”¹¹³ Sherry called it “theological ferment.” New ideas or novelty is felt to be inviting and is embraced by many. Yet what may be seen as a breath of fresh air in a stale, rigid system, may be vaper or thin fare in an already stretched spontaneous dimension. If the ferment is excitement, then vitality is on the verge of being born. But if the ferment is an uproar for the sake of embracing a passing trend, the result may be chaos.

In the UCC a widely known metaphor for its theological inclusiveness is a big tent. Copenhaver believes that attentiveness to the word allows all theological perspectives to remain in the big tent. However, he also claims that “diversity without unity does not make for community; it is more properly called disunity.”¹¹⁴ He fears that many in the UCC tent “want the church but they can do without Jesus.”¹¹⁵ He concludes that the church without Jesus may find it difficult to remained united and find the tie becoming loose.

A sentence in the United Church of Christ “Statement of Faith” strikes me as vital in the conversation of unity vs. untied. It states, “He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.” Aimlessness is novelty without order. Aimlessness is experience without tradition. This is an important statement of faith because it serves as a testimony to the need for direction from God who can save us from ourselves. Is that part of the statement of faith another inverse image projection, or is it possible to be lived as well as believed?

¹¹³ Paul H. Sherry, “On the Threshold,” July 1994, an unpublished paper, as cited in Copenhaver, “United or Untied?”

¹¹⁴ Copenhaver, “United or Untied?,” 19.

¹¹⁵ Copenhaver, “United or Untied?,” 20.

The historical image of the United Church of Christ is heavily influenced by the Constantinian Era. This as Copenhaver observes was when the church was part of the established church of the Empire. In this era the church was the “conscience of the nation.” The prophetic voice during this period involved a shared vision between civil society and religion. In this post-Constantinian era the UCC as well as all denominations are still finding their way. No longer does the society in general share a common ideal. The statement continues, “He judges men and nations by his righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.” Therefore, in a society with many who have abandoned any loyalty toward Jesus, who are these prophets and apostles in the UCC mentioned in their “Statement of Faith”?

Copenhaver cites as a metaphor the example of a church that housed orphans and older adults was razed. “When the cornerstone was cracked open a parchment was found inside with the words, ‘Die Liebe Christ dringet uns also’ (the love of Christ compels us).”¹¹⁶ This is a sign of the UCC’s intent. The love of Christ is compelling and when lived is more binding than any order or tradition.

Copenhaver advises that this motto should be adopted for the UCC: “We have absolutely nothing in common, except the only thing that matters.”¹¹⁷ Yet is there collective agreement concerning what the one thing is? Copenhaver has an image of stability and that is a Rock. The sea may be tempestuous, yet a Rock stays firm.

Using the categories of order and novelty to interpret this denomination, the United Church of Christ seems to be facing an identity crisis as well as a reluctance to claim a clear

¹¹⁶ Daniel L Johnson and Charles E Hambrick-Stowe, *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2007), 172.

¹¹⁷ Copenhaver, “United or Untied?,” 19.

sense of authority. With the question of “who are we?” and “what / who is our voice of authority?” in mind, let us look at the quadrilateral through the lens of the UCC church.

Concerning scripture, leaders in the United Church of Christ are fond of quoting, “We take the Bible much far too seriously to take it literally.”¹¹⁸ They celebrate the “new attentiveness to the word among us.”¹¹⁹ This attitude seems to combine the Word of scripture with the living word of experience. The “Statement of Faith” is a testimony to the historical Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God among us. One United Church of Christ leader observed, “The Bible was at the center of that faith and the attempt was made simply to live in light of the biblical truth, not argue or fight over its contents,”¹²⁰ and that “authority in scripture is rooted in a determination presented to us by the fact that in Jesus Christ ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.’”¹²¹ Both scripture and tradition in the UCC polity seem to be about how to live the Christian faith in the world, or what social action the text is calling us to do. Charles Shelby Rooks was executive vice president emeritus of the United Church board for homeland ministries when he wrote: “Biblical and theological reflection sometimes seems linked almost exclusively to issues the denomination is addressing in the world.”¹²²

Concerning tradition, United Church of Christ practices local church autonomy, although the local churches should be in a covenantal relation of mutual admonition and support with other settings of the church. One commentator proposed that “Tradition is viewed as little more than a resource upon which to draw as we see fit. There is little hope for unity in a church in

¹¹⁸ Copenhaver, 18.

¹¹⁹ Copenhaver, 18.

¹²⁰ Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe, *Theology and Identity*, 172.

¹²¹ Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe, 176.

¹²² Louis H. Gunnemann and Charles Shelby Rooks, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1999), 208.

which the highest authority is individual expression.”¹²³ If tradition is but a resource, easily ignored, then the authority which unites a group will be only imagined or illusive. If experience is all the church has, will there be any structure in place to hold the faith? Douglas Horton as General Secretary described the tradition of the UCC in this way: “The United Church of Christ is: Presbyterian in its legislative functions, since it works through representatives of presbyters; Episcopal in its administrative system, since it works through superintendents or episcopi; and Congregational in its judicial branch, since the congregations and several groupings make their own decisions and have no judge over them but Christ and the decent respect they have for all ... in Christ.”¹²⁴ Roger Shinn coined a phrase that holds together order and novelty: Faithful Freedom. He explains that “Faithful freedom means a perennial quest.”¹²⁵ This implied a dialectic of a faith that holds to a time-tested belief (order) and freedom (novelty) to let the fresh air of the current Holy spirit speak.

Perhaps that is why the motto changed from “united and uniting” to “God is still speaking” with the comma as the proverbial punctuation of God’s grammar. This brings to mind Frederick Buechner’s statement of justice being the grammar and mercy being the poetry of the Christian life. In Rooks’ chapter titled “Shaped and Being Shaped” I am reminded of the imagery of the potter and the clay. The task is to find the right consistency of clay and water, or order and novelty; faithfulness and freedom. The United Church of Christ is not known for its strict doctrine or tradition. Historians of the denomination point out that “Doctrinal, confessional, and creedal integrity is not the ordinary goal for synodical theological discourse except when

¹²³ Copenhaver, “United or Untied?,” 18.

¹²⁴ Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe, *Theology and Identity*, 68.

¹²⁵ Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe, 181.

ecumenical relationships force clarifying responses.”¹²⁶ Defining what people should believe in the UCC seems to happen only when necessary in dialogue with those denominations or communities of faith who seem to need clarity.

Concerning the “reason” aspect of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the United Church of Christ is known for freedom of thought. One UCC leader writes, “We seek a balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the faith of our ancestors.”¹²⁷ The UCC seeks novelty (freedom of conscience) and order (accountability to the faith of our ancestors). Authority in the UCC church allows for the reasoning and the will of the people to decide controversial issues. Gunnemann, one of the premier historians of the UCC’s early days, explains, “This is *contingent authority*, flexible and always developing in new contexts but always dependent on the *order* of the universal community of faith.”¹²⁸

The “experience” aspect of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is also given much weight. In the United Church of Christ experience seems to dominate the interpretation of scripture, church polity, and individual versions of the Word among us. This leaves much room for gathering together many Christians who were from a different denomination before embracing the UCC community. The Statement of Faith describes the Holy Spirit as creating and renewing the church and is named as the glue that binds the church together in a covenant of faithful people. A covenant in the biblical sense has a more theological nuance than a contract does. Yet I hesitate to name the Statement of Faith as any type of proverbial adhesive for it seems to be more of a

¹²⁶ Gunnemann and Rooks, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ*, 208.

¹²⁷ “Testimonies of Faith,” February 1, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100201212501/http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/UCC101/TestimoniesofFaith/tabid/88/Default.aspx>.

¹²⁸ Gunnemann, *United and Uniting*, 158.

witness and a guideline than a litmus test. One UCC leader states, “In the United Church of Christ, we respect historic Christian creeds as testimonies of God's loving purposes for humanity, but we don't use them as tests to ensure conformity of belief.”¹²⁹ United Church of Christ allows the experience of faith to be the witness. The accountability here may lack “teeth” in the eyes of those denominations with more of an emphasis on order.

An overemphasis on the side of order has not been the issue for the United Church of Christ. One of the essays suggested to help prepare ministerial candidates for ordination states, “Uniformity is impossible and undesirable. But it is not our temptation. We must be concerned about the possibility of polarization with a vacuum in the center.”¹³⁰

Some provision for order is softly implied, and an attempt is made to qualify the authority of free and novel experience. Another essay declares, “The accent on freedom and autonomy can be a reductionism... when understood as freedom from instead of freedom for. ... there are responsibilities and accountabilities... lest freedom become license.”¹³¹

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): a denominational example of order
We need not look any further than the title of the two main constitutional documents of the Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of ORDER* to see that this denomination is heavily weighted on the side of order. In a parallel volume the authoritative creeds are laid out in the *Book of Confessions*. The doctrinal standards are brought forward with clarity and specificity. The purpose of the book of confession is to declare “to its members and to the world what and

¹²⁹ “Testimonies of Faith.”

¹³⁰ Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe, *Theology and Identity*, 185.

¹³¹ Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe, 69.

what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do.”¹³² The creeds and confessions are a response to “the truth of the Gospel perceived by their authors to be at risk.”¹³³

Unlike the United Church of Christ denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is a church of creeds and confessions carefully and painstakingly laid out for all members and clergy to read and follow. Book II of the PCUSA’s constitutional documents, called *The Book of Order*, anticipates various aspects of church life including meetings, ordination, offices, weddings, baptisms, funerals, leadership and church trials to name a few.

The Book of Order has five levels ranging from mandate to suggestion. The following words clarify where in the scale a particular the statement falls: SHALL and IS TO BE is mandated; SHOULD is strongly recommended; IS APPROPRIATE is commended as suitable; MAY permissible but not required; and an ADVISORY HANDBOOK is appended. They leave little to chance. Clarity seems to be the primary Presbyterian goal.

The categories of the book fall under four letters: F covers polity; G deals with the form of government; W treats worship; D is concerned with discipline. Taken as a whole, these sections provide regulations for almost every aspect of church life.

The “G” section, Form of Government, is affectionately abbreviated as FOG. In my non-Presbyterian mind I think of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.¹³⁴ Yet that is the opposite of the FOG in the Presbyterian document. Clarity is the motive and the goal. Nothing is left to chance. There is

¹³² Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), ed., *Book of Confessions: Part 1 of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church(U.S.A.)*, Revised [edition] (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), F-2.01.

¹³³ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), F-2.01.

¹³⁴ Ira Progoff, *The Cloud of Unknowing: A New Translation of a Classic Guide to Spiritual Experience Revealing the Dynamics of the Inner Life from a Particular Historical and Religious Point of View* (New York, N.Y.: Delta, 1989).

no room for guessing. So much ministry is anticipated and laid out step by step. Of course, not every scenario can be anticipated.

Let us note the Presbyterian approach to decision-making using the Wesley Quadrilateral lens.

In regard to Scripture, both the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* contain much. The confessions are considered to be authoritative, yet they are regarded as being subordinate to Scripture. They cite the passage from Ephesians that states, “God put his power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at His right hand in heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but in the age to come.”¹³⁵ The authority of the confessions is based on their success in aptly interpreting Scripture. How to meditate on Scripture is spelled out in section W-5.3000

Concerning the use of reason, it could be asserted that in the Constitution, both the *Book of Confession* and *the Book of Order* is logically and rationally organized and justified. In the section on “Openness to the Guidance of the Holy Spirit” (F-1.04) “Continuity and change” it is stated that “As the church seeks reform and fresh direction, it looks to Jesus Christ who goes ahead of us and calls us to follow him. United with Christ in the power of the Spirit, the Church seeks¹³⁶ “not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by [our] minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is acceptable and perfect”¹³⁷ The reference to the transformation of our minds and the need for discernment suggest that rational reflection has an important role to play in the Christian life.

¹³⁵ Ephesians 1:20 (NRSV)

¹³⁶ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), eds., *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part II: Book of Order 2013-2015* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2013), F-1.04.

¹³⁷ Romans 12:2 (NRSV)

Tradition is crucial for the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The *Book of Confession* and the *Book of Order* are more than steeped in tradition, they *ARE* the tradition of the PCUSA. In reading the Constitution of the PSUSA I am having trouble seeing the difference between the official church stance with their understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. A large section of the *Book of Order* lays out the process to be pursued in case of trials or doctrinal infractions. The main concern is the preservation of tradition and the order that is based on tradition. In the *Book of Confession* there is some attempt to hold together order and novelty with the words: law and grace. It states, “The theology of grace and law ... distinguishes Reformed Christians from other Christians those who use the law of God to justify oppressive ‘order’ in society for the benefit of a few rather than to achieve a free and just society for all”¹³⁸ Order should not be oppressive, but the ordering power of tradition must be preserved.

Experience and the free movement of the Holy Spirit are mentioned but not emphasized. Although very little is written concerning religious experience or using experience as a way to interpret scriptures or make ecclesiastical decisions, the Presbyterians do seem to anticipate push back and attempt to leave some room for freedom. A section called “Openness” states, “The PCUSA seeks: ... a new openness to see both the possibilities and perils of its institutional forms in order to ensure the faithfulness and usefulness of these forms to God’s activity in the world.”¹³⁹ Also conscience seems to hold a particular authority in the *Book of Order* and may be seen as a form of moral experience. The section, “Freedom of Conscience” “So far as possible without serious departure from these standards, without infringing on the rights and views of

¹³⁸ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Confessions*, xii.

¹³⁹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), F-1.0404.

others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained.”¹⁴⁰ (G-2.0105)

The spirit of the constitutional documents is expressed in the polity section F-3.0104, which asserts, “Truth is in order to goodness ... it is of no consequence what a man’s opinions are... we are persuaded in an inseparable connection between... truth and duty.”

Duty and order are equated with truth, and this equation seems to leave little room for new or novelty thoughts and expressions. Yet taking a phrase out of context in a document does not fully express the ethos of an entire denomination. The people of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America make up the denomination and there are many instances of innovation and creativity produced within their structure. For example Frederick Buechner, who is a Presbyterian minister, sees the need for both grammar and poetry or structure and spontaneity (as quoted earlier). However, the official stance of the denomination clearly tilts toward the “order” dimension of the order/novelty dialectic.

¹⁴⁰ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part II*, G-2.0105.

Chapter V: Why does it matter?

Why does all this matter? Churches are often paralyzed when they try to move forward with an over-emphasis on either control or freedom. The dichotomy of spontaneity verses structure governs much of church's thinking and behavior today.

The difference between what is culturally relative and what is universally normative is always a question in organic theological thought. An often-quoted phrase in the United Methodist Church is important to consider when looking at the tension between order and novelty: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."¹⁴¹ Churches have been debating what is essential and what is non-essential for centuries. If we were to give freedom of thought to those who disagree with us, there would be liberty in non-essentials. John Wesley wrote in his "Catholic Spirit" sermon: "Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?"¹⁴² Whether an issue is an essential or a non-essential, in either case the primary call is to love. What if the essential IS LOVE!!! The verse after the two greatest commandments is: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."¹⁴³ Perhaps love is the dimension of order (law) and living it out in our current situation is the dimension of novelty.

A lecture I heard years ago via a video tape of John Haught speaking about evolving toward beauty through order and novelty, set me on a journey to this project. Haught said, "God

¹⁴¹ "In Necessariis Unitas, in Dubiis Libertas, in Omnibus Caritas," in *Wikipedia*, April 11, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=In_necessariis_unitas,_in_dubiis_libertas,_in_omnibus_caritas&oldid=835852922.

¹⁴² Wesley, Outler, and Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons : An Anthology.*, 301.

¹⁴³ Matthew 22:40 (NRSV)

allows both order and novelty, harmony and chaos.”¹⁴⁴ I was living in Santa Fe, New Mexico at the time, full of scientists from the Los Alamos lab and artists from Santa Fe. That was the dialectic of order and novelty, the tension of the science and art that Haught claimed led to beauty. Defining beauty is most difficult, and therefore I decided to focus on the order and novelty part of this statement. Haught knew that novelty does not go unchecked. He said, “Evolutionary novelty cannot become implanted in absolute chaos, for then there would be nothing to distinguish the new form from the old.”¹⁴⁵ His observations about science and art, and order and novelty, can be applied to the church.

This is not an easy time to be the church. Many have become bored with any formalized expression of religion (order). The new (novelty) flashing signs attract the crowds, or perhaps distract the masses. Much of church attendance at church functions was historically motivated by a desire to make social and/or business connections. There seems to be little need for this any longer. Social needs are met elsewhere. Business connections are not typically influenced by the perceived social status of the church an individual belongs to.

Yet whether we are talking of brick and mortar worship spaces or neighborhood outreach, tough minds and tender hearts, and order and novelty, are still of vital importance. Historical traditions should connect to experiential activities. The dimensions of structure and the spontaneity should be connected when we make decisions.

¹⁴⁴ Jon Piper, “John F. Haught, Purpose, Evolution and the Mystery of Life: Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Goshen Conference on Religion and Science.,” *Mennonite Life* 61 no. 3, no. September 2006 (February 24, 2014), <https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-61-no-3/article/john-f-haught-purpose-evolution-and-the-mystery-of/>.

¹⁴⁵ John F. Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, 2nd ed (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 111.

In addition to an experience in our present space and time, experience can also be about the interpretation of the past and the anticipation of the future. Order and novelty both transcend time. We also find that tradition may be an attempt to repeat a past experience of piety in a collective or uniform ritual. To live in the tension of order and novelty helps a church be as much a **movement as a monument**. The Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument have become cultural icons. They point to history in this country. A nation is not stagnant or simply a monument. The country is also a movement. Church steeples may point to a venerable past, yet the life of the church is also found in the movement of the faith in the community and the world as it builds on the past. Abraham Heschel reminds us there are dead thoughts and there are living thoughts. He writes, “A dead thought has been compared to stone which one may plant in the soil... A living thought is compared to a seed.”¹⁴⁶ Perhaps the key to being a monument and a movement is to be found in Peter’s Letter: “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house”¹⁴⁷

Claiming both memory and imagination gives us a place to begin as well as a direction toward which to move. In this area of Pennsylvania eating pork and sauerkraut on New Year’s Day is a religion. One interpretation of the rationale for this custom is the fact that pigs root while moving forward. The Roman god Janus is two-faced with one visage facing forward and one facing backwards. The Bible is rich with both memory and imagination. “Do this in remembrance of me”¹⁴⁸ Jesus said. Remembering gives us identity and keeps us from falling into

¹⁴⁶ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 23.

¹⁴⁷ I Peter 2:5 (NIV)

¹⁴⁸ Matthew 22:19 (NRSV)

the “temptation of amnesia”¹⁴⁹ On the other hand, we hear a negative connotation of excessive looking back in the words “Remember Lot’s wife”.¹⁵⁰

Yet identity anchored in tradition does not need to replace potential. The future of the church can be an exciting place when hope is more than a pipe dream. The past is not meant to become an end-in-itself, but is rather a resource for further life and growth. Abraham Heschel remarked that “when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain its message becomes meaningless.”¹⁵¹ Novelty pulls us toward new horizons so that nostalgia does not become a drug lulling us into complacency.

The United Methodist Church has inscribed in its very name the dimension of “order” or “method.” The name was given to the movement of the brothers John and Charles Wesley for having such a disciplined method. The phrase “You methodists” was often used derisively. The name has stuck for centuries. A method was the design from the beginning of the denomination’s history. However, sometimes we forget the other essential part of our original ethos. Every year a group of clergy candidates who want to be ordained in the United Methodist Church stand before their conference and answer several questions including, “Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect *in love* in this lifetime?” We often forget that phrase “*in love*” both in theory and in practice. Those who claim to adhere to the traditionalist side of the spectrum have forgotten that the point is love. In the early days of the movement perfection for many was about the type of clothes they wore. They were trying to measure their worth or

¹⁴⁹ Walter Brueggemann and Thomas G. Long, *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann: Volume 2*, First edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 42.

¹⁵⁰ Luke 17:32 (NRSV)

¹⁵¹ Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 22.

faithfulness by the way they dressed. Or they tried to measure faithfulness by who they refrained from marrying. But these practices tended to obscure the main point of the movement, which was to grow in love.

The phrase “methodical” is not the only part of the Methodist church identity past or present. Henry D. Rack wrote a book about Methodism called *Reasonable Enthusiast*¹⁵². For in addition to order and method, the Methodists were also known for enthusiasm. The sign language for Methodists is rubbing your hands together to represent enthusiasm. Both order and novelty were important factors of the early Methodist Church. John Wesley said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.”

¹⁵³ Novelty is another term for the new life of the Spirit. As the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost blew through the community in that upper room, Peter saw this as being a sign of the promise that “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”¹⁵⁴

The combination of order and novelty is everywhere, including art and pop culture. Donna De Salvo is an international curator, and currently is the Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Programs at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. On a recent PBS special she described Andy Warhol’s contribution to the use of order and novelty imagery when she said, “Warhol reflects the incredible contradictions of America and American culture, which is our strong desire for innovation and the equal desire to conform.”

¹⁵² Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

¹⁵³ “THOUGHTS UPON METHODISM. By John Wesley,” accessed January 3, 2019, http://www.imarc.cc/one_meth/vol-02-no-02.html.

¹⁵⁴ Acts 2:17 (NRSV)

Then Jeffery Brown, the PBS commentator asked, “Did he expose it or celebrate it?” “Both,” was her reply.¹⁵⁵

Warhol may have been embracing while at the same time poking fun at capitalism with his simple and symbolic art and symbols and pop images. As does the American cultural spirit, we in the church long for new and novel experience and creations while also longing for conformity and structure. The church must makes decisions and will continue to do so through the struggle between structure and spontaneity. May we continue to live in the tension.

¹⁵⁵ Jeffrey Brown, “Why Andy Warhol Retrospective Has Special Resonance in the Instagram Age,” PBS NewsHour, February 20, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-andy-warhol-retrospective-has-special-resonance-in-the-instagram-age>.

Definition of Terms

Book of Discipline – United Methodist Book of Polity

Book of Order – Presbyterian Book of Polity

EC – Evangelical Connection

EPAUMC – Eastern Pennsylvania United Methodist Conference

Justifying Grace – The gift of Christ and means to human reconciliation to God

NRSV – New Revised Standard Version

Prevenient Grace – a grace is a gift, this grace takes the initiative and moves in humans before
they are aware

RUM-EPA – Reconciling ministry of the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference of the United
Methodist Church

Sanctifying Grace – the ongoing transformation of humans through the Holy Spirit

Substitutionary atonement – the belief in the act of the cross being a payment for human sins

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