

**ABSTRACT**

**ORTHODOXY AND THE GREAT COMMISSION**

**IN THE SOUTH GEORGIA CONFERENCE**

**OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

by

Lee E. Pettis

This study sought to measure the acceptance of unorthodox theologies, such as universalism and pluralism, in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church and the possible impact of their influence, if any, on the ability of the conference to carry out the Great Commission. The study used an established survey instrument, the Christian Orthodoxy Scale, to measure first the overall orthodoxy level of a sample of clergy and laity within the conference. Personal interviews were then conducted with a number of the survey respondents to evaluate the interviewee's theology further, particularly in the areas of salvation and the existence of an eternal heaven and hell.

This study was prompted by personal experience in ministry and seminary with universalism and pluralism and the surprisingly wide acceptance of these unorthodox (heterodox) theologies revealed during the research's literature review. Although believing strongly before beginning the study that the acceptance of such theologies could affect the ability of the conference and the body of Christ to be used by God in carrying out the Great Commission with the urgency and fervor that he desires from disciples of Jesus Christ, every effort was made to be objective in this study. The research results revealed some departure within the conference from an orthodox understanding of

salvation from sin and death, God's mercy and judgment, and the existence of an eternal hell, while showing a relatively high level of orthodoxy overall.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

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OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

presented by

Lee Edward Pettis

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ORTHODOXY AND THE GREAT COMMISSION  
IN THE SOUTH GEORGIA CONFERENCE  
OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by

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Most of all, I wish to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose Holy Spirit has led me to pursue this research as part of an effort to lead our conference, our denomination, and the body of Christ to proclaim, without shame, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. My presupposition is that God is calling us as Christians to realize that we do not have to be judgmental or non-inclusive to proclaim once again the words of our savior from John 14:6 that Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." I pray that there will be no hesitancy in our denomination in affirming the authority of Scripture on this vital and important issue.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **PROBLEM**

#### **Introduction**

Many evangelical Christians today seem to sense a loss of fervor for Christian evangelism in the church, particularly in the mainline denominations. Methodism, whose camp meetings, worship services, and congregations were once a center of evangelical fervor, especially in the United States, has experienced a decline in professions of faith and baptisms evidenced by declining membership. Thoughtful evangelicals within the United Methodist Church and other mainline denominations are questioning whether some of the decline can be attributed to more than just societal trends and changes in worship styles. The possibility that a change may have occurred in the underlying theology of grace, judgment, and salvation among the clergy and laity in mainline denominations when compared to the stated doctrine of the churches needs to be explored further. This study examined the level of Christian orthodoxy among selected clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The study also considered, based on the level of orthodoxy revealed in the research, whether the political correctness of society today and the reemergence of heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism, which are perceived to be more inclusive theologies in some circles, has affected the theological understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the primary mission of the church, as given to Christians by Jesus in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. The United Methodist Church, which evolved from the founding of the Methodist Church in America in 1784, has historically been a bastion of evangelical Christianity. However, “many United Methodist leaders, including professors at our

denominational seminaries, embrace a doctrine of universalism these days,” according to James V. Heidinger (“Saved by Faith” 47). He goes on to say that this reemergence of universalism has caused some to conclude the following: “Everyone is child of God—some just don’t know it yet. So the issue of salvation really doesn’t matter. How we live here and now is what’s important” (47). Recent developments in Methodism, such as the founding of the Wesleyan Covenant Association in 2016, which states, “What links us together is our desire to witness to the transforming power of God to change and redeem human lives and societies,” point to the need for a return to a renewed focus on conversion and redemption in Methodism. Most United Methodists agree, and have historically agreed, that no one can completely understand God’s plan of salvation for humanity and for the world. As Chester E. Custer describes the pioneers of the historical traditions, which flowed into the United Methodist Church (UMC), he notes, “They believed no single doctrine could ever completely express God’s eternal Word” (51). Methodism has evolved and prospered because it does not embrace a dogmatic system of theology that claims to be the exclusive and only correct answer to the need of fallen humanity for redemption. However, God would not have blessed Methodism with the power of his Holy Spirit and the growth and evangelical fervor that have occurred over the years in the denomination if the truth of God’s Word had not been proclaimed as honestly as Methodists, who accept their fallen natures and the limitations of their human understanding, could discern.

A United Methodist theology of evangelism includes these factors: (1) fallen and lost humanity, (2) repentance, (3) prevenient grace, (4) justifying grace, (5) regeneration and sanctifying grace, and (6) Christian perfection (Campbell 48-63). John Wesley

maintains the Orthodox belief that all humans have inherited a fallen nature brought on by the sin and disobedience of Adam and Eve. A Wesleyan understanding of evangelism has at its core the belief that all humans are lost and in need of repentance and redemption through God's grace expressed and given freely to the world through Jesus Christ. Humans must recognize a need for redemption before repentance is possible. Prevenient grace is the term that God gave Wesley as an answer to this need and the dilemma of free will versus predestination or universalism. Both predestination and universalism are much easier answers for many humans to believe and understand. Instead most Methodists believe that God's ways and thoughts are much higher than human understanding. Thomas C. Oden explains the illumination brought on by God's prevenient grace by saying, "The grace of illumination seeks out and addresses fallen humanity precisely amid its utter inability to behold, discern, or respond to God" (*Transforming Power* 39). God's prevenient grace enables humans to realize their need for God and to respond to God. As the human heart is illuminated and made aware of its sinfulness through prevenient grace, repentance becomes possible. Through sincere repentance and a desire to seek God brought on by prevenient grace, God's grace begins to flow. Wesley gives terminology to the different aspects and stages of grace as it works in the lives of fallen humans. As discussed in more detail later in this research, justifying grace occurs when humans realize their need for Christ, open their hearts to him, and are given the gift of faith in God's redeeming grace through Jesus Christ. Wesley describes justification as that great work God does for individuals and rebirth, or regeneration, as that great work God does in humans by renewing their fallen nature (Collins and Tyson 45). At the point of justification, a person is made righteous before God through the

sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, is given the free gift of eternal life, and begins a journey of regeneration, sanctification, and salvation from sin and death through faith in the grace given to the world through Jesus Christ alone. Absolute perfection in heaven, or complete restoration to the image of God, in which humans were originally created, lies at the end of the journey of faith for those persons who persist and persevere in their faith. Wesley's often misunderstood concept of Christian perfection, or entire sanctification, which is explained further in this research, is the belief that God's grace can create, either suddenly or gradually, a state of near perfection in a human heart in this life even before a person's faith response is rewarded with the eternity of heaven. As Ted A. Campbell explains, "One implication of the Methodist's 'Arminian' belief is the related belief that all human beings have free will to follow or reject Christ as a result of grace" (51). He goes on to say that even though Methodists understand and expect God to be at work in every human being, even non-Christians, they also understand that a free human response to grace is required for salvation. This free human response to grace has historically been the primary objective of Christian evangelism, which Christians are called to assist God in accomplishing in the world in making disciples for Jesus Christ. The literature review portion of this study revealed that a significant number of writers and theologians in recent years no longer understand a need for any human response to God's grace. Many liberal theologians today seem to understand free grace as being universally effective for all humanity without the need for a free will response by individual humans.

Methodists understand the free human response Campbell discusses as beginning at conversion and continuing throughout the lifetime of the believer. As Kenneth J.



Collins and John H. Tyson, in their book on conversion, explain, “For John Wesley salvation was both instantaneous and gradual” (43). Human salvation is not just a one-time event but is a lifelong journey of living daily in the joy, wonder, strength, peace, humility, security, and awe that God-given faith can produce in a fallen human. This glorious faith journey is also not primarily for a person’s own benefit but for the use of God in glorifying him with the objective of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Conversion has always been at the center of the orthodox and Wesleyan understanding of the purpose of evangelism. Collins and Tyson caution against the popular concept of conversion as a human decision: “Wesley’s understanding of conversion is not decisionistic; the focus is always on divine agency, not human. That is, conversion is first and foremost an act of God that is transformative in its effects” (45). The literature review portion of this study examined the possibility that conversion is not deemed a necessary objective of evangelism for many Christian theologians today. This study also examines the possibility of the conclusion reached by Collins and Tyson: “With the loss of some of the historic disciplines of Methodism (which had fostered both accountability and spiritual earnestness) has come the concomitant loss of an emphasis on conversion and even on the use of ‘soteriological language’” (11). This research explored whether or not these historical disciplines of Methodism are continuing as a basis for Christian evangelism within the South Georgia Conference when making disciples for Jesus Christ.

Many encouraging signs of renewal and revival exist in twenty-first-century Christianity as churches, Christian theologians, and individual Christians assess the

health of the body of Christ in its current context. Despite records of declining membership and declining attendance, some places have seen dynamic growth as well as renewed fervor and enthusiasm for the gospel of Jesus Christ. United Methodism in the United States peaked at over eleven million members in the 1960s, but by 2002 reported a 25 percent decrease to 8.2 million (Frank 25). The merger in 1968 of the Evangelical United Brethren Church with 738,000 members and the Methodist Church with 10,289,000 members increased the combined membership of the newly formed United Methodist Church but failed to reverse the trend of decline that had already begun in the 1960s (Norwood 429). Although the UMC has experienced growth worldwide, the church in the United States has continued its overall decline in the past five decades with a loss of 138,988 members in 2011, 91,811 in 2012, and 92,256 in 2013 (Hahn). However, the growth in some United Methodist conferences, such as the Kentucky Conference, and in individual congregations within the UMC denomination brings thoughtful Christians to ask why some areas are experiencing growth while others are in decline. United Methodist leaders often seem to attribute the growth in some areas to worship style and/or church organization and structure with contemporary worship and small group ministries regarded as the accepted engines for growth in many US churches. However, the increase in contemporary worship and small groups cannot explain the passion for Jesus Christ and the explosive growth seen in some areas of the world, such as Africa and Latin America. This research primarily focuses on whether or not a change has occurred in the understanding of the UMC's evangelical mission in making disciples for Jesus Christ within the South Georgia Conference based on a shift in soteriological theology from historical Wesleyan thinking and orthodox Christian beliefs to other liberal

theological beliefs such as universalism. Heidinger in his recent book *The Rise of Theological Liberalism and the Decline of American Methodism* maintains that the malaise and decline with which Methodism struggles today can be traced back to the rise of liberal theology in the early 1900s (xiv). The possibility also exists that the passion and explosive growth of the gospel of Jesus Christ in some areas within the UMC may be attributed to an outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. Although this possibility cannot be measured, many orthodox Methodists are questioning whether God is blessing these areas and congregations with Spirit-driven vitality and growth because of their clear understanding of the command of Jesus Christ in the Great Commission. The Holy Spirit's presence, or lack of presence, affects the vitality of worship and may explain why some congregations are experiencing enthusiastic and dynamic worship and ministry while others are not. However, this study only measured the theological understanding of the Great Commission in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC to determine whether the conference's understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and his call to "[g]o and make disciples" (Matt 28:19) has been affected by heterodox and liberal theologies.

In John 4:23-24, Jesus spoke to the woman at the well with a message for the Samaritans who were not part of God's chosen people at the time and who did know what they were worshipping:

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (ESV)

Jesus is telling Christians today, as he also told the woman at the well, that in order for the Spirit to be present in a mighty way, believers must be honestly and sincerely seeking the truth of God's Word. Just as God's Spirit was not present with the Samaritans in their

pagan worship, the Spirit simply will not be powerfully present in or associated with churches that are not proclaiming what orthodox Christians over the centuries have embraced as the truth. People are hungry for the truth of God's Word. The presence and power of God's Holy Spirit in those places where the truth of God's Word is being earnestly, humbly, and genuinely proclaimed and taught without the hindrance of theological heterodoxy will draw the multitudes to Jesus and ensure the growth of the body of Christ in those places.

This study also explored the effect of heterodoxy on the understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ that Christians in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC are called to proclaim in the Great Commission. If Christians are unsure about what the good news really is, or if theological heterodoxy has distorted the understanding of many Christians to the point that no clarity exists in the Christian witness being proclaimed, Christians in the South Georgia Conference could be unclear on the objectives of making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This study examined the possibility that the lack of clarity in Christian witness, due to the effects of liberal and unorthodox or heterodox theologies, may be a primary hindrance to the vitality of the church and the growth of the body of Christ in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC and in the UMC as a whole. Heidenger refers to John Lawson's statement that "unless we are informed with sound scriptural doctrine, we will be something less than the body of Christ" (*Rise of Theological Liberalism* 12) and will become little more than a religious group that addresses social problems and issues but "will lack the power and self-confidence to call the peoples of the world to be reconciled to God and become life long disciples of Jesus Christ" (12).

Conservative evangelical Christians in mainline denominations look to a number of issues they believe are diminishing the vibrancy and effectiveness of ministries in some areas and leading some denominations, such as the UMC, towards decline. This study measured the level of orthodox theology in the South Georgia conference of the UMC and the impact that a significant departure from an orthodox understanding of God's call through the Great Commission to "[g]o and make disciples" (Matt 28:19) may have on the growth or decline of the UMC and other denominations. Wesley's *ordo salutis* focuses on divine agency or God's grace and the changes that grace makes in the human heart. The Great Commission commands those who are being changed by God's grace to share that grace with others. This research focused on the understanding in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC of the continuing change that God's grace makes in human hearts through the *ordo salutis* and not on the methodology through which Christians are called to assist God in making this change. This study examined whether a change has occurred in understanding in the South Georgia Conference of the work of God's grace and the impact of any such change in understanding, if it exists, from an orthodox comprehension of Wesley's *ordo salutis*.

Some Christians believe that changing societal attitudes in many congregations with regard to issues such as homosexuality, sin, or the authority of Scripture have negatively influenced the Christian witness of the church. Orthodox Christians point to what is believed to be blatant disregard for and disobedience to the Discipline by clergy, bishops, and some annual conferences within the UMC and unwillingness by the church's hierarchy to enforce, over the past decade, the provisions of the Discipline that uphold the authority of Scripture. Others point towards the influence of other religions

and liberal, humanist, and universalist theologies in an increasingly diverse world. This study measured the acceptance of orthodox theological beliefs in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. Because some acceptance of heterodox theologies existed, the study investigated possible reasons for the increase in heterodoxy and the decline in orthodoxy. The study then discusses whether a decline in orthodoxy could be one of the primary reasons for the decline of the UMC in many areas and congregations.

This study considered the heterodox and universalist arguments, which are advanced as more enlightened and progressive alternatives for Christian belief. It also measured them by biblical and apostolic norms and the theological arguments of respected Christian theologians over the years. Two of the most influential and often studied twentieth-century theologians, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who are not Wesleyan but are considered by many to be benchmarks for modern orthodox thinking, have been interpreted by some modern writers as having underlying universalist tendencies. This research investigated some of their writings with the purpose of determining if the arguments of those who interpret them to be universalists have any validity. Because of the importance of their work and the controversy over their stance on universalism, and therefore the objectives of Christian evangelism, this study could not ignore them completely.

This research also investigated the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of the conference's concept of the mission of Christian evangelism by identifying and analyzing the theological understanding of God's purpose in sending his church to make disciples through the Great Commission of twenty-six clergy and lay participants (senior pastor

and lay representative) from a fifty-congregation sample within the South Georgia Conference. The study used an orthodoxy scale designed to measure the orthodoxy of the pastor and lay leaders of these churches. The study examined what these Christians believe regarding Jesus Christ as God's only son and his uniqueness as His chosen method of grace and reconciliation for humanity. The study also examines the effect that any departure from orthodoxy may have on the ability of the church to make disciples and the determination and passion for carrying out the Great Commission. The interview portion of the research addresses the participants' views on just what the good news that Christians are proclaiming really is and the effect that good news can have on the lives of those whom God uses in the church to assist him in transforming others into disciples of Jesus Christ.

An underlying premise in the study is the orthodox belief that salvation from sin and death is based solely on faith in Jesus Christ. Associated with this premise is the task of determining whether these pastors and lay leaders believe that humankind needs salvation from eternal damnation or whether they subscribe to the universalist idea that all will be saved, which negates the need for salvation. This study examined the possibility that when the church of Jesus Christ forgets that its primary mission is to share the good news of Jesus with the world, decline is often the outcome. If the church has doubts about whether Jesus really is the way, the truth, and the life, as Jesus said in John 14:6, the church has no good news to proclaim. The mission statement of the UMC states that its mission is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation for the world" (*Book of Discipline* 91). This study explored the possibility that the departure from this mission statement and the acceptance of heterodox and liberal theologies in some UMC

congregations may be a major factor in contributing to the membership decline experienced by the UMC in the past several decades.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to measure the level of orthodoxy among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, to determine what factors contribute to that level of orthodoxy and the impact this current climate of theological understanding has on the ability of the conference to fulfill the Great Commission to “[g]o and make disciples” (Matt 28:19).

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to answer three questions in determining the theological Orthodoxy of the clergy and lay leaders chosen to participate in the survey. The three questions were answered based on the respondents’ agreement or disagreement with twenty-four statements designed as indicators of theological orthodoxy or heterodoxy followed up by individual interviews with a smaller sample. The respondents were asked to give their level of agreement or disagreement with each of the twenty-four statements contained in the Christian Orthodoxy Scale by indicating that they strongly agree, moderately agree, slightly agree, strongly disagree, moderately disagree, or slightly disagree. The basis for determining the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of the respondents is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

#### **Research Question #1**

What is the level of orthodoxy, as measured by the Christian Orthodoxy Scale, among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church?



**Research Question #2**

What factors seem to contribute to the level of orthodoxy among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church?

**Research Question #3**

What impact does this current climate of theological understanding have on the ability of the conference to fulfill the Great Commission to “[g]o and make disciples” (Matt 28:19)?

**Definition of Terms**

*Orthodox theology* refers to “integrated biblical teachings as interpreted in its most consensual classic period” (*Rebirth of Orthodoxy* 29) according to Thomas C. Oden. It is a belief system, based on ancient Spirit-guided consensual scriptural teachings, that maintains, among other beliefs, that humankind fell into a state of sin in the Garden of Eden with the original sin of Adam and Eve. This fall also brought about the death of humans physical bodies and the condemnation of human souls rather than eternal life on earth as God had originally planned. God sent Jesus Christ into the world to reconcile and restore humanity to a right relationship with him through the atonement of his death on the cross for humanity’s sins and the resurrection of his body from the grave to overcome death. However, faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is required of persons in order for them to participate in salvation from sin and death. Salvation and eternal life in heaven are possible only through faith in Christ with no other requirement on the part of humans (*Book of Discipline* 47). Other foundational beliefs in orthodox theology are the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the existence of heaven and hell as actual places and the only

two eternal destinations available for humans, the divinity and humanness of Christ, and the Holy Trinity.

### **Ministry Project**

The focus of my dissertation research project was an exploratory examination of the current level of orthodox theological understanding of the mission statement of the UMC by a group of pastors and laity within the South Georgia Conference of the UMC. The research utilized the results of an orthodoxy scale or attitude survey conducted among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference. The survey was e-mailed directly to the senior clergy with a request to forward it to one member of the lay leadership from each church. No ordination or ministry status requirement existed for the clergy selected. The responses were analyzed by quantitative measurements. Twelve interview participants were selected entirely at random from the population of all survey respondents. All of the interviews were conducted by telephone. The details of the methodology for the analysis are explained in Chapter 3.

The primary focus of the research was determining the theological orthodoxy of the clergy and lay leadership within this fifty-church sample within the South Georgia Conference. The research also examined the relative importance of the Great Commission to these church leaders in carrying out the mission of the church. This study also explored the theological understanding of the clergy and laity of the impact on human lives of assisting God's grace in making disciples for Jesus Christ. The study also examined how the current level of orthodoxy might be impacting the ability of the churches to accomplish God's purpose in humanity by sending Christians forth to assist

him in making disciples. Jesus Christ calls His church to make disciples in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

This study explored the possibility that a loss of urgency on the part of Christ's church has occurred in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the world and whether this loss of urgency is due to a lack of clarity in the church's understanding of Christian witness. This study maintains that a loss of urgency can be inferred from a significant change from an orthodox understanding of judgment—the existence of hell and a wrath to come.

The church's motivation for sharing the good news of the gospel is "1) that faith-sharing is grounded in God's love; 2) it fulfills the great commission; and 3) it focuses on total redemption" (Fox and Morris 24). The rise of heterodox theology may be a factor that has influenced official orthodox theology, as stated in the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, in the South Georgia Conference, and throughout Methodism. This study attempted to determine whether a shift had occurred in the understanding of the primary mission as Christ's church from the official UMC mission statement and from sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ as he calls the church to do in the Great Commission towards presenting a gospel of love and social justice to the world with very little emphasis on personal salvation and the salvation of humankind.

### **Context**

The context to which the study can be applied, and from which the sample was chosen, is the South Georgia Conference of the UMC. The sample of fifty churches was

chosen from this conference, which makes the results applicable to the conference. Because of the sensitive and somewhat controversial nature of the research, a convenience sample was used made up of churches whose pastors have had some relationship with me to elicit a better response rate than an entirely random sample. The convenience sample was chosen without regard for any perceived theological stance on the part of the pastor or ethnic makeup or demographics of the congregation or the community served by the church. The reason for choosing only churches with one hundred or more members was to try to include a population of all age groups in the study. Church attendance was not considered in selecting the participants. Because small churches tend to be predominately made up of older members who are often more orthodox and conservative, churches with fewer than one hundred members were excluded.

### **Methodology**

The research utilized only quantitative measurements to answer research question #1 and used a Christian Orthodoxy Scale (also referred to as the survey in this research) with twenty-four statements designed to measure the orthodoxy of the participants. The Christian Orthodoxy Scale and the statements used in the scale were constructed by J. Timothy Fullerton and Bruce Hunsberger and previously published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* in 1982. The items in the scale consisted of twelve statements considered orthodox and twelve considered heterodox or unorthodox. Scoring of the respondents' level of agreement or disagreement was dependent on whether the statement was an orthodox or heterodox statement. Strong agreement with the orthodox statements in the scale was given the highest score of seven, and strong agreement with the

heterodox statements on the scale was given the lowest score of one. No response was given a score of four. The higher the score of the respondent, the more orthodox their answers were considered to be with the highest possible score being 168 with a score of seven on all twenty-four statements.

The research used qualitative measurements to answer research questions #2 and #3, consisting of semi-structured interviews with twelve randomly chosen participants from the population of actual respondents to the Christian Orthodoxy Scale. The interviews sought to determine what factors might have influenced the participants in developing their theology and what how their current theological understanding might influence them and their churches' desire and ability to carry out Christian evangelism. The participants were also asked where they attended seminary or course of study, if they had attended, and what and who may have had the greatest impact on their theological journey.

### **Participants**

The survey was directed to the senior pastor from fifty churches in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC selected through a convenience sample. The senior pastors were asked to let me know if they were willing to participate in the research. If the senior pastors were willing to participate, they each forwarded a copy of the survey and the letter of consent to the lay leader of the congregation, asking for his or her participation as well. In the event that the lay leader was unwilling to participate, the senior pastor chose another representative of the lay leadership in the congregation. The total number of possible participants in the survey was one hundred, made up of two participants from each from the fifty congregations. The total number of interviewees

was twelve, consisting of a group randomly selected from those who responded to the survey.

### **Instrumentation**

My research utilized two instruments. The first was an established survey developed by Fullerton and Hunsberger in 1982 known as the Christian Orthodoxy Scale. It consists of twenty-four quantitative questions in the form of statements with which the participants were asked to agree or disagree, using a Likert-like scale of one to three or negative one to negative three. An answer of negative three indicated strong disagreement, negative two indicated moderate disagreement, negative one indicated slight disagreement, a zero indicated neither agreement nor disagreement, one indicated slight agreement, two indicated moderate agreement, and three indicated strong agreement.

The second instrument was a semi-structured interview conducted with twelve randomly selected participants chosen from those who took the survey. Because of the sensitive nature of the research, a semi-structured interview format was chosen rather than direct questions only. A semi-structured format allows the researcher greater flexibility to pursue matters as situations dictate (Sensing 107). The interview questions were designed to invite the participants to explain their theological journey that has resulted in their current theological position on the issues being researched. Prompts were used in conjunction with the questions when appropriate during the interview, rather than direct questions, on particularly controversial subjects such as the existence of hell. Instead of putting the respondents in a defensive position in which they might not want to share their opinions openly on such topics, these types of issues were addressed in a

conversational mode in order to invite more honest participation. The interviews were all recorded to ensure the accuracy of the results. Of course, the participants were made aware of the recording in the letter of consent and assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

The survey utilized only quantitative measurements with twelve orthodox statements and twelve heterodox statements regarding the theological beliefs of the participants. In addition, twelve of the participants were selected to be interviewed using the second instrument, a personal interview by phone, utilizing a semi-structured interview method.

### **Data Collection**

The surveys were sent by e-mail to the participants with a request to return their answers within fourteen days after receipt of the survey. No incentives were offered to the participants for their participation in the survey. Responses were accepted either through e-mail or the US Postal Service. Flexibility in receiving the responses in the study ensured that participants were able to respond in the method most convenient for them.

### **Data Analysis**

The twenty-four quantitative questions on the Christian Orthodoxy Scale were scored based on the recommended scoring scale published in *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* in 1982 (Hunsberger and Fullerton). The items in the scale consisted of twelve statements considered orthodox and twelve considered heterodox. Scoring of the respondents' level of agreement or disagreement was dependent on whether the statement was an orthodox or heterodox statement. Strong agreement with

the orthodox statements in the scale was given the highest score of seven and strong agreement with the heterodox statements on the scale was given the lowest score of one. No response was given a score of four. The higher the total resulting score was, the more orthodox the theological understanding of the participants was assumed to be. The maximum score possible was 168, which is a score of seven in response to all twenty-four statements.

The survey responses were grouped based on their total scores. A higher score indicated a greater degree of orthodoxy. The lower the total score of the respondent, the greater their degree of heterodox theological viewpoints, such as universalism and pluralism. However, none of the survey respondents' total scores indicated that they held predominately unorthodox theological viewpoints.

The answers to each individual statement were also analyzed based on the respondents' level of agreement with the statements. A number of charts were prepared, showing the responses given for each statement and the statements with the highest degree of strong agreement, moderate agreement, slight agreement, neutrality, slight disagreement, moderate disagreement, and strong disagreement. A number of interesting findings were observed, which are discussed and detailed in Chapters 4 and 5.

A comparison of the answers given by the survey respondents and the interview participants was also discussed. Emphasis was placed on the theological position of the participants on how humans acquire the faith necessary for salvation from sin and death and their beliefs on the existence of Satan, heaven, and hell.



### **Generalizability**

This study was limited in scope to the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The study was also limited to fifty churches with one hundred or more members within the conference. The sample size of fifty churches and one hundred participants also became a delimitation, which could affect the reliability of the survey. Although the survey results could be an indicator of orthodoxy of clergy and laity in other conferences within the UMC, and even other denominations, no conclusions should be made outside of the conference surveyed.

Even though the results of the study may be applicable to the entire United Methodist Church worldwide, and particularly in the United States, I believe they are most applicable to the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church. Regional differences within the UMC concerning orthodox versus heterodox theology make possible some comparison of the results to the Southeastern Jurisdiction. The Southeastern Jurisdiction is in a region of the United States that has been historically conservative both theologically and politically. Therefore, enough theological uniformity exists within the Southeastern Jurisdiction that the results of the study might best be understood and applied there. The South Georgia Conference would appear to be representative of the Southeastern Jurisdiction as a whole. However, the study might, with caution, also be applied to the entire UMC and even the body of Christ as a whole.

### **Theological Foundation**

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Methodism and United Methodism in particular, gained the reputation as a nondoctrinal denomination. From 1972 until 1988, the language of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* reinforced the belief by many

evangelical Christians that the denomination did not know what it believed in by including what was called theological pluralism in the stated doctrine of the church. This attempt to embrace theological diversity at all costs was finally taken out of the *Book of Discipline* by the 1984 General Conference and replaced by an emphasis on the “primacy of Scripture” (Heidinger, *The Rise of Theological Liberalism* 3).

Wesley, who is rightly understood as not being a dogmatic theologian, never envisions Methodism as a theologically pluralistic movement. Wesley makes an important distinction between “essential doctrines” and mere “opinions” (Heidinger, *The Rise of Theological Liberalism* 28). Although Wesleyan scholars differ slightly on the doctrines Wesley considers essential, justification by faith is on every serious Wesleyan scholar’s list. Robert Chiles cited Colin Williams when adding original sin, the deity of Christ, the Trinity, and the work of the Holy Spirit as essential Wesleyan doctrines (16-17). Other theologians have added the doctrine of Christian perfection, the atonement, and the universality of sin to the list (Heidinger, *Rise of Theological Liberalism* 28). I add the virgin birth of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, reconciliation of persons to humanity’s original state of perfection, and the existence of heaven and hell to the list of essential orthodox beliefs that Wesley would surely consider nonnegotiable. However, the largest portion of the research is devoted to the theology of justification by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Jesus Christ gave Christians a mandate through Scripture in the Great Commission, contained in Matthew 28:19-20, to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world by going into the world to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Scripture declares in many

places that Jesus Christ is God's only vehicle of reconciliation and revelation to humankind. The Apostle Paul says in Colossians 1:19-20, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Humans are told in Scripture that only through faith in Christ can they be delivered from sin and given the gift of eternal life. Peter stresses in Acts 4:12, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Scripture emphatically states in many places that faith in Jesus Christ is the only requirement for salvation. Paul notes in Galatians 2:16, "A man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." Even Jesus emphasized that he is the only way to salvation in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." Scripture is not alone in asserting that faith in Christ is the key to salvation. As C. S. Lewis says "We are told that Christ was killed for us, that His death has washed out our sins, and that by dying he disabled death itself. That is the formula. That is what has to be believed" (54). Lewis' position that Christians must believe in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ as God's sole formula for reconciliation with and the redemption of fallen humanity directly contradicts the theologies of universalism, pluralism and other heterodox thinking. Lewis explains the pantheistic ideas at the root of most heterodoxy, including universalism and pluralism:

These people would say that the wiser you become the less you want to call anything good or bad, and the more clearly you would see that everything is good in one way and bad in another, and that nothing could have been different. (40)

Universalism and pluralism have both subscribed to the pantheistic ideas of such faiths as Buddhism, Hinduism, and New Age philosophies that see humankind as inherently good with no need for a formula of salvation constructed by some outside deity. Pantheists would declare that humans just need to find the truth, which is already within them, by discovering their inner selves more fully. Universalism, disguised under many modern theologies such as religious pluralism, contradicts Scripture as well as many of the historical doctrines of Christianity proposed and affirmed by Christian theologians and the church for centuries. Some of these doctrines are salvation by faith; original sin; the depravity of humankind, reconciliation, regeneration, and sanctification; free will and Christian perfection; and, the belief that humans were originally created in the image of God. Universalism proclaims that God will eventually pardon all humans from their sin and grant everyone eternal life without any requirement of faith on the part of humankind. This theology negates God's desire to sanctify and regenerate humans because it implies that humans are already reconciled with God as they are. Universalism implies that humanity still exists in the image of God, in which humans were originally created, with no need for salvation from sin and death. This thinking directly contradicts orthodox theology, which teaches that all of humanity is depraved and corrupted by original sin. The doctrine of salvation through faith in Christ has been completely contradicted by the modern-day theologies of religious pluralism. Pluralism's rejection of faith in Christ as a necessity for salvation and Christ as God's unique revelation of himself to humankind is expressed by S. Mark Heim: "The only truly unique component of the Christian identity is communion in Christ. But we should not frame this uniqueness as simply one separate kind of relation with God over against any other mode of relation

with God” (17). Pluralists view Jesus Christ as just one of many ways that God has revealed himself to humans, which negates the necessity for faith in him alone.

Another important doctrine, which is being compromised by universalist/pluralist theology, is the belief that humankind was originally created in the image of God. The historical Christian doctrine of reconciliation, which proposes that only through Christ are humans once again reconciled to God after the Fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden, includes the concept that only through the perfection of Jesus is the original perfection of humankind restored. Universalist/pluralist theologies attempt to tear down this doctrine of the reconciliation of humankind to humanity’s original godly image through Christ by proposing that all persons will eventually be reconciled (universalism) or that other paths to reconciliation with God exist (pluralism). While both universalists and pluralists might not always dispute reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ, they do not view Christ as the only vessel for God’s communion or reconciliation with humankind.

The Bible begins with the story of God’s creation of the universe and of humankind, which he made in his image. The story of the Bible then moves throughout the Scriptures towards the end of that same creation and the culmination of the kingdom of God. After the Fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden, the story of how God begins to seek reconciliation with humanity is told throughout the Scriptures. Fallen and sinful humankind also seeks wholeness and completeness, which can only be found in God. The Bible is the story of God’s and humanity’s mutual pursuit as creation and humankind move closer and closer to the end of God’s plan for creation. His creation in Genesis is

the beginning of the present age and the new and eternal age of God's kingdom will begin after Christ returns.

This movement towards the end of the present age is built around God's plan of salvation and regeneration through faith. Jesus Christ is the pivotal figure in God's plan to reconcile fallen and sinful humankind to him. Only faith in Christ, described in many Scriptures, provides humanity the ability to be able to move forward into that new and eternal age. Humanity is currently caught in between the already and the not yet. Humans are caught between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ. His first coming is God's single and only plan to reconcile the human race and restore humanity to the image of God, which humans were initially created to reflect. Everything in the Holy Scriptures points in some way towards the events of Jesus' first coming and his final return at the end of the age.

This plan of reconciliation has life as its primary goal. Adam and Eve, the first humans, were intended to live forever. Death was not a part of God's original plan for humankind. Through Adam and Eve's original sin in the Garden of Eden, the physical death of the human body entered the world. God's plan for humans then changed from ridding the world of sin and evil to bringing new life to the world. Throughout the Scriptures God's plan is moving towards a new form of eternal life, which is resurrection life, rather than the eternal physical life of human bodies. God intervened in the Old Testament in many places to rescue the lineage, which produced the savior of the world, Jesus Christ. This lineage was protected in order for Jesus to be born. God's plan of salvation and regeneration through Christ, which realized this new life for humankind, is captured in the first ten verses of Ephesians 2. Humans can now realize this new and

eternal resurrected life through faith in Jesus Christ. Mortimer Arias declares, “What Jesus proclaimed was that the Kingdom of God is now present and operative in his own person and ministry” (14). The kingdom of God is, therefore, both a present reality and a future promise.

Wesley believes that God’s grace turns humans toward God and sanctifies them, after having accepted his grace and as they continue in faith. Humans became inherently evil after the Fall and are, therefore, incapable of good without the assistance of God’s grace. Even turning to God requires the assistance of God’s grace. Prevenient grace, which is God’s grace that enables “one to choose further to cooperate with saving grace” (Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity* 243) is the grace that convicts humans and turns them to God through repentance. This turning to God is conversion, which is defined by John Calvin as follows: “Conversion is a reversal of disposition and personal moral direction. Conversion involves a turning away from sin (repentance) and a turning to Christ (faith), two phases of a single act of turning” (Oden, *Life in The Spirit* 101). Conversion is the point at which justification begins. Oden refers to Barth’s definition of justification in defining it as a declaration by God that a human being, however sinful, who trusts in the atoning work of Christ is treated or accounted as righteous and has entered into an upright relation with God through Christ (108). Salvation from sin and death begins for human beings at justification through conversion involving both repentance and faith in Christ.

In Wesley’s view, salvation is a comprehensive term that captures the whole sweep of God’s restoring grace, which includes justifying and sanctifying grace. Wesley believes that regeneration and sanctification begin at justification and are a part of the

salvation process. As Wesley explains, “Exactly as we are justified by faith, so are we sanctified by faith. Faith is the condition, and the only condition of sanctification, exactly as it is of justification” (Outler, *Works of John Wesley*, 163). Kenneth J. Collins elaborates on Wesley’s position:

The term “sanctified” understood in a broad and inclusive way (as Wesley himself sometimes did) implies both regeneration, as its inception, and entire sanctification, as its perfection. That is sinners are justified as well as regenerated by grace through faith alone. (*Theology of John Wesley* 196)

Even though justification is a specific event in which humans accept the grace God offers them through Jesus Christ, this event is the beginning of a process of moving towards perfection or entire sanctification. Wesley stresses that justification was a pardon from past sins only (*Scripture Way* 90). Collins explains this distinctive feature of Wesleyan theology in which grace is always resistible and salvation from sin and death is an ongoing process:

Justification does not simply deal with the issue of punishment to the exclusion of a consideration of the actual transgression itself. To do so would result in antinomianism, making the moral law void through faith, in the sense that God’s justifying activity would be viewed as a license to sin or—worse yet—permission to remain comfortable in sin, since all penalty has been removed. (89)

God’s providence, or the “expression of the divine will, power and goodness of God through which the Creator preserves creatures, cooperates with what is coming to pass through their actions, and guides creatures in their long-range purposes” (qtd. in Oden, *Living God* 270; John Calvin, vols 20, 21) does not exclude but actually enables free choice according to Oden (*Living God* 295). Free choice or free will, instigated by free grace, is the primary cornerstone of Wesleyan theology, which separates it from the five points of Calvinist predestinationism, which are (1) unconditional election or particular



predestination, (2) limited atonement, (3) natural inability or total depravity, (4) irresistible grace, and (5) final perseverance (Wynkoop 59). Although Wesley maintains that Scripture did teach foreknowledge, or God knowing all things in advance, “he argued strongly against a predestinarian view which denied human free will to accept or reject God’s offer of salvation” (Yrigoyen 28). Wesley actually emphasizes free, or prevenient, grace as he believed that any good in man, even the free will to respond to grace, was by the free grace of God. Wesley believes, as did the Calvinists, that humans are corrupt and incapable of responding to grace in their natural state. However, he did not subscribe to the Calvinist view of total depravity, which necessitated the belief in unconditional election or predestination by God without human involvement because of what Calvin thought to be the natural inability of man to respond to grace. Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace solves the issue of humanity’s total depravity by making a person’s response dependant on grace. Grace is always resistable, according to Wesley, in stark contrast to the Calvinist view, through free will given to humans through God’s free grace (Wynkoop 69).

While maintaining a belief in free will and avoiding predestinationism, Wesley’s theology of conversion and salvation is not decisionistic but always places the emphasis on divine agency through God’s grace (Collins and Tyson 45). Although Wesley is not a systematic theologian who describes his theology in a series of steps, an *ordo salutis* can be determined by a careful study of his work. Albert C. Outler refers to Wesley’s sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation” as “the most successful summary of the Wesleyan vision of the *ordo salutis*” (qtd. in Collins and Vickers 581) of all of his sermons. From this sermon, one can see that Wesley’s concept of the order of salvation is grounded in

and defined by God's grace and the human response to grace. In this sermon, the order of salvation is defined by identifying the types of grace that God gives to humanity. Most Wesleyan theologians would agree that Wesley's *ordo salutis* is as follows:

1. Prevenient grace—grace that goes before humans and turns them toward God;
2. Convicting grace—grace that brings humans to repentance through sin awareness;
3. Justifying grace—grace that gives humans faith in Jesus Christ as savior and Lord;
4. Sanctifying grace—grace that continues to move the human heart towards perfection; and,
5. Glorifying grace—the grace that brings humans to absolute perfection in heaven.

Although Wesley always focuses on divine agency rather than human decision, a response to grace from humans is necessary for grace to become effective. James W. Holsinger, Jr. explains further:

God's grace in the lives of believers results in the transformation of their lives. A clear result is one that results in the actualization of grace. Thus, convincing grace, for example, leads to conviction, regenerating grace results in the new birth, entirely sanctifying grace issues in entire sanctification, and so forth. (36)

These forms of grace are explored further in Chapter 2. The important thing to remember regarding Wesley's order of salvation is that he always views even the human response to God's grace as a gift from God (Collins and Vickers 581-90).

Humans are saved, not only from physical death but also from the power of sin through faith in Christ. Even though absolute perfection, in which humans have no

inclination towards sin, is something humans cannot attain until they reach heaven, Christian perfection in this life is absolutely possible through God's grace.

Scripture says that God originally created humans as perfect beings in his likeness. Wesley believes humanity lost that original state and that all of humankind is now in a natural state (*John Wesley* 199) of sin and depravity without the work of God's grace. Humanity's original state, as God created, is different from the natural state to which Wesley refers. God does not create evil; therefore, humans were not created by God to sin. Because of the disobedience of Adam, all of humankind inherited this inclination to sin, which is humanity's natural state. Wesley refers to this inclination as inward sin and believes that humans can never be free of it in this life. However, Wesley believes that humans can be free of outward sin or actual sin. God's grace, at the point of justification, frees humans from the power of outward sin. Wesley maintains that absolute perfection, which means the absence of even an inclination towards sin, cannot be attained by fallen humans in this life. In his 1741 sermon, "Christian Perfection," Wesley states, "Nor can we expect till then to be wholly free from temptation. Such perfection belongeth not to this life" (qtd. In Outler and Heitzenrater 73). As God's sanctifying grace moves humans closer to perfection, as they continue in faith, the power of sin diminishes in human lives. Collins explains, "Entire sanctification or Christian perfection describes, in other words, the characteristics of holy love reigning in the human heart, a love that only embraces the love of God and neighbor, but that also excludes all sin" (*Theology of John Wesley* 298). Although Christian perfection was always a difficult doctrine for Wesley to defend, he remains steadfast in his defense of this teaching

because he believed Scripture consistently referred to it (Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity* 320).

Thomas à Kempis explains the possibility of Christian perfection in one of Wesley's favorite books, *The Imitation of Christ*:

Why are some of the saints so perfect and so given to contemplation? Because they tried to mortify entirely in themselves all earthly desires, and thus are able to attach themselves entirely to God with all their heart and freely to concentrate their innermost thoughts. (20)

Wesley believes that God's Holy Spirit could work within humans to obtain a state of near perfection in this life, which would culminate in the final absolute perfection that Christians would be granted in heaven. Ephesians 2:10 speaks to humanity's creation in the image of God: "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Wesley believes that God's grace is capable of restoring near perfection in human beings in this life (Cannon 241).

Although some contemporary theologians have moved away from the crucial doctrines of original sin; depravity of humankind; justification, reconciliation, regeneration, and sanctification; and, salvation by faith by adopting a universalist theology, which sees no need for salvation and denies that a place of eternal damnation exists, Scripture explains these doctrines as the cornerstones of orthodox Christian theology. For many, Jesus has become just an example of love rather than the Savior of the world. However, mercy and grace are not possible without judgment. Those who profess that all will be saved, or that nothing exists from which to be saved, are denying the very reason for which God sent Jesus into the world. Humans would not need Jesus Christ at all if they were not depraved and in need of God's saving grace. Liberal and unorthodox theology, which seems to have gained wider acceptance in many areas of the

UMC and other mainline denominations, has diluted and compromised the historic doctrines of the Christian faith. The definition of sin has become narrower and narrower to the point that sin has become an outdated or offensive term to many liberal theologians in the twenty-first century. C. S. Lewis explains:

A recovery of the old sense of sin is essential to Christianity. Christ takes it for granted that men are bad. Until we really feel this assumption of His to be true, though we are a part of the world he came to save, we are not part of the audience to whom His words are addressed. (580)

The church cannot call for humans to come to Christ in humble repentance unless a firm belief in the sinfulness of the human condition without Christ exists.

These doctrines, which are being contradicted and compromised by today's universalist/pluralist theologians, cannot be discarded or compromised without the loss of basic Christian identity. Christians, by subscribing to pluralist theology, which is really just a new variation of universalism, are denying that Christ is God's unique instrument of reconciliation to humankind. The belief that the truth of God's plan of salvation is found in many other holy books minimizes God's Holy Word contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Recognition of many other valid paths to salvation, regeneration, sanctification, and reconciliation with God other than Jesus, undermine the Christian understanding of the reason Jesus Christ came into this world. Orthodox Christians are encouraged to see revival, enthusiasm, and growth in many areas of Methodism and in the body of Christ overall, where "the true worshipers" referred to in John 4:23 are worshipping "the Father in spirit and truth." Orthodox Christians are praying for those areas in all denominations that are seeing declines in membership and attendance. Only God's Holy Spirit can lead the church of Jesus Christ back to the truth

that Jesus states in John 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

### **Overview**

Chapter 2 of the research examines the departures from orthodoxy found in today’s heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism and compares them to the foundations of orthodox theology and particularly Wesleyan theology. The research objectively examines the major differences between heterodox theology and prevailing traditional orthodox theology and analyzes the results as they relate to the purpose and relevance of the study. Chapter 3 explains in detail the methodology used in the study. Chapter 4 presents the results of the data collection and data analysis with a summary of the findings. Chapter 5 discusses the findings of the study and their implications and applicability to other ministry settings.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE

#### Introduction

Many orthodox Wesleyan Christians believe that a gradual, but escalating, departure within Wesleyan denominations in the last century from the essentials of the faith that John Wesley stressed in his ministry has occurred. Many believe that the United Methodist Church, in particular, has lost not only its identity in this departure from its historical and still officially stated theology, but also its vitality and the fervency of its Christian witness. In just the past twenty years or so, a great reawakening of the Spirit in many places within Methodism and a call for a return to the historical roots of Methodism have taken place. The purpose of this research was to investigate whether a departure from historical orthodox doctrine, which Wesley called the “essentials of the faith” (qtd. in Heidinger, *Rise of Theological Liberalism* 28) has actually occurred. In Chapter 2’s literature review, this study examined current and past theological writings to investigate where a departure from the essentials of orthodoxy has occurred, not only in the Methodism but also within Christian academia and other areas of the body of Christ.

For the purposes of this study, the essentials of the faith are defined as

1. Salvation by faith in Christ alone;
2. Original sin;
3. The deity of Christ;
4. The bodily resurrection of Christ;
5. The Holy Trinity;
6. The atonement of the cross;

7. Universality of sin and the depravity of humanity;
8. Reconciliation, justification, regeneration, and sanctification through God's grace;
9. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ; and,
10. The existence of heaven, hell, and Satan (Stokes 26-122).

This study focused the greatest attention on the first essential of the faith, salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone, as the literature review revealed the greatest departure from orthodoxy on this fundamental cornerstone of the Christian faith.

Wesley defines the only requirement for membership in the early Methodist societies as a desire to flee the wrath to come. In today's theologically sophisticated and diverse world, many Methodists and other Christians seem not to believe that a wrath to come exists for those who reject Jesus Christ and God's offer of salvation through faith in him. Many who have succumbed to what they believe to be a more politically correct, loving, inoffensive, and inclusive gospel do not want to believe in any form of judgment at all in part because to proclaim that a loving God will not judge anyone is so much easier. However, as Andrew Murray states, "It is God on the judgment seat whose face you will have to meet personally. It is God himself, personally, who met you to pardon your sins" (61). The resurgence of universalism in some Christian seminaries and churches may be fueling the decline in Methodism and in other Christian denominations by quenching the Holy Spirit. As stated in Chapter 1, the dynamic presence of God's Holy Spirit in worship services and in the life of the church is critical for church growth and the spread of the gospel. If a wrath to come does not exist, then the necessity to share the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to save humans from the impending wrath is



eliminated. The acceptance of universalist theology often clothed under other names and mixed with other modern politically correct heterodox theologies, which are less offensive to nonbelievers, could be one of the reasons for the decline seen in many churches and denominations, including the United Methodist Church.

The literature review seeks to give examples of the growing acceptance of universalism and heterodoxy in today's world, while at the same time exploring the evangelical call to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation from sin, death, and the wrath to come in both Scripture and orthodox Christian literature. The church of today must remain true to the Spirit-inspired apostolic witness, which fueled its growth and was passed down to it through the centuries.

### **Defining the Gospel**

The UMC and the body of Christ appear to be suffering from a recent identity crisis, particularly in the past few decades. The church appears to be unsure of exactly what the gospel of Jesus Christ is in the twenty-first century. According to Oden, the Second Helvetic Confession “defined the gospel as ‘glad and joyous news, in which, first by John the Baptist, then by Christ the Lord himself, and afterwards by the apostles and their successors, is preached to us in the world that God has now performed what he promised from the beginning of the world’” (*Classic Christianity* 220). However, many Christian seminaries today are focusing their teaching efforts on an array of new and more inclusive theologies that, if embraced, lead the church adopting an anything-goes theology of the gospel. In the eyes of many orthodox Christians, the church appears to have lost sight of its mission. In fact, the church appears to be unclear and divided on

what the church's mission actually is. In a recent newsletter from the confessing movement on 11 August 2016, Dr. Riley B. Case articulated the church's lack of clarity:

I was in a study with some other UM clergy. We were more theologically diverse than probably was good for us. We were arguing the question, "What is the gospel?" We agreed gospel meant "good news" but what was the Good News? Each one gave a definition. Here are some responses: "There are new possibilities of freedom in the way of Jesus"; "Liberation, as from structures and powers—political, social, and economic—that would enslave us"; "Love"; "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And (and I am not kidding), not on this occasion but on another occasion a district superintendent giving devotions defined the gospel as "There is transcendent meaning amidst the exigencies of life."

This incident took place some years ago. If it had taken place in 2016 we would have had definitions that included words like "inclusiveness," "justice," and "diversity."

One pastor in the group was intrigued enough by the discussion that he went back to his church and had his Bible study group write down their responses to our question, "What is the gospel?" He shared these with us at the next meeting. Good steady United Methodist lay people! They had not been confused by fad ideology. The answers ran something like this: "John 3:16 God so loved that he gave his only begotten son"; "Christ died on the cross for our sins"; "Jesus shed his blood that we might be saved."

We as United Methodists have serious problems. It is not just that we can't agree on the Biblical teachings on sexual morality. We don't have common understandings on the authority of Scripture. We can't agree on what it means to honor covenants and promises. But far worse, we cannot agree on what are the most elementary Christian truths, such as "What is the gospel?"

As the Confessing Movement's newsletter explains, the mission of the UMC to go and make disciples for the transformation of the world becomes clouded by the church's lack of clarity in understanding what the church hopes to accomplish in this mission. Most Christians would agree that the church is called to a number of objectives in carrying out the mission of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world. However, the primary overriding objective must always be the salvation of individual human beings from sin and death. As Oden stresses, "The incomparable justice of God requires a final judgment, for in this life many if not most evils remain unjudged or crudely judged"

(*Classic Christianity* 814). The church must recognize that the primary purpose of Christian witness, which is also the primary reason for the very existence of the Church, is to prepare humans for this final judgment. This study investigates the extent to which the South Georgia Conference adheres to the primacy of this mission.

One primary issue that Christians must learn to overcome causes the cloud of uncertainty with which the church goes about carrying out its mission of making disciples in the twenty-first century. The issue that undermines the fervor of and causes reluctance in Christian witness in the twenty-first century is that not everyone will be saved from sin and death through eternal damnation. The church has succumbed to many new and improved forms of fad theology in order to avoid dealing with the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:13-14:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

The words of Jesus in this text make even evangelical Christians uncomfortable at times. This study does not focus on how narrow the gate is by debating the respective population percentages of heaven or hell but investigates the tendency to defy the authority of Scripture and reject the existence of hell altogether. Denying the existence of hell becomes part of a much easier and less offensive gospel message to proclaim. Hugh Hewitt explains the tendency of Christians to avoid the subject of judgment:

Christians are compelled to believe that faith in Christ is the exclusive means of gaining salvation. This is a difficult thing to believe, because so many Christians know good and, indeed, holy, people who are not Christians. Aware of this “narrow gate” problem and uncomfortable with the prospect of having their friends condemned, they throw Scripture overboard. (177)

A gospel that teaches the exclusivity of Christ as savior of the world is understandably more difficult for Christians to proclaim than to seek commonality with other religions.

The uncertainty of the church regarding the gospel it is proclaiming is rooted in the uncertainty of the church regarding the church's ecclesiology. The zeal in the search for the historical Jesus movement in recent years is a symptom of this uncertainty about who Jesus Christ really was and is. The historical Jesus movement focuses on the human Jesus and not on the divine Christ. Edwin Lewis explains the struggle between the two concepts of Jesus Christ:

What then is the object of the Christian faith? Not a man who once lived and died, but a Contemporary Reality, a God whose awful holiness is "covered" by one is both our representative, and his, so that it is "our flesh that we see in the Godhead," that "flesh" which was historically Jesus of Nazareth but is eternally the divine Christ whose disclosure and apprehension Jesus lived and died to make possible. (188)

The church must see itself as God's companion in revealing this divine Christ to the world. As Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger explain, "The church is the creation and covenantal companion of the God who exists as the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit in eternal communion. The church belongs to the triune God" (19). A church that loses sight of the divine nature of Christ loses its identity as a participant in sharing the divine message of the gospel of Christ, which is a gospel of redemption.

The search for the historical Jesus movement in the twentieth and twenty-first century, with its low view of the authority of Scripture, has also led to the growth of skepticism about many of the "essentials of the faith" to which Wesley and others held firmly. Ben Witherington, III examines and disputes the work of John Dominick Crossan's *The Historical Jesus*: "Crossan by contrast argues that the earliest Christians only knew that Jesus died on the cross. They had all abandoned him, apparently even the

women, and they had no clue where or by whom he was buried” (75). Witherington goes on to say that Crossan believed that the bodily resurrection of Jesus did not take place. He believed that the accounts of the resurrection were merely accounts of a vision or apparition some time later. According to Witherington, Crossan maintained that the Christian faith is an Easter faith.

Another issue faced by Christians in proclaiming a gospel of salvation through faith in Christ alone is that the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ makes all other religions wrong on the issue of salvation. Although Christianity shares the belief in one supreme being with both the Jewish faith and Islam, Christianity stands alone in the belief that God came into the world in human form (Beverly 217). Christianity’s message that faith in this human form of God, Jesus Christ, is a requirement for salvation is also at odds with the inclusiveness of politically correct ideologies. A human form of God is hard for many people to accept because the humanity of Christ seems to diminish his divinity in the eyes of many. The need for Christ’s humanity is explained by Zacharias, “the irony here is that though Jesus was divine, He could not lay claim to His power without forfeiting His mission” (177). The virgin birth of a human Jesus is also disputed by many modern theologians, including Crossan who maintains that the biblical references to Mary’s virginity were only speaking of her status when she was married to Joseph (Witherington 91). A divinely conceived human form of God is hard for many of today’s scientific and rational theologians to accept.

Twenty-first century political correctness also teaches inclusiveness and tolerance rather than exclusivity. Political correctness stands as a major obstacle to the exclusive truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century. The necessity that many

theologians and church leaders today feel to make the gospel more palatable to the masses and less offensive to non-Christians has led to a resurgence of universalism and other fad theologies such as pluralism, which is just a new spin on classic universalism. Many in Christian academia have taken up the mantle of pluralism as a more progressive and enlightened interpretation of the gospel and attempt to depict orthodox Christians as narrow-minded fundamentalists. Paul warns the church against the idea that new theologies are automatically superior to the apostolic witness passed down by the orthodox church in Romans 1:22 when he says, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools.” Leslie Newbigin defines pluralism as “the belief that the differences in religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perspectives of the one truth” (14). The any-God-goes theology of pluralism opens the theological door to the theologies of the agnostics, who are undecided about God, New Age theologies, which promote humans as the masters of their own destinies, and atheists, who believe that God does not exist. In describing the historical progression of liberal theology’s growing rejection of anything orthodox, James D. Smart says, “Sooner or later the suggestion was bound to be made that even the concept of God belonged to the ancient world which we have outgrown so that the really honest Christian should reexpress his faith in purely human terms” (122). If the church is to proclaim the gospel, it must find clarity in defining the gospel in an age when its validity is increasingly called into question.

At the core of the struggle by the church to define the gospel lies the debate in modern theology over the authority of Scripture. Theologians such as Immanuel Kant and John Locke began to question the authority of Scripture in earnest during the Enlightenment. As Luke Timothy Johnson explains, “If the reformation principle of sola

scriptura (Scripture alone) put the authority of the Bible on a pinnacle, the enlightenment principle of sola ratio (reason alone) put the Bible's authority in peril" ("Bible's Authority" 62). This study does not intend to examine the question of biblical authority extensively. However, because the study addresses the question of how Christians understand the mission of the church, the gospel, and the Great Commission, the issue of biblical authority cannot be completely ignored. Foundational to a high view of Scripture is the belief that writers of Scripture were not writing about God but were directly influenced by the Holy Spirit to translate God's Word into written form. As explained by one of the earliest church fathers, "The Spirit so guided the writers that without circumventing their own human willing, knowing, language personal temperaments, or any other distinctively personal factors, God's own Word was recalled and transmitted with complete adequacy and sufficiency" (Jerome 554). Orthodox Christianity has always maintained that the Bible is the Word of God. Therefore, the authority that the Bible has for readers is derived from the authority of the God of the Bible (Fretheim 47). Another foundational belief of those who maintain a high view of scriptural authority is the belief that the Holy Spirit not only inspired the original writers to translate God's Word correctly but also has protected it from distortion over the years (Oden, *Classic Christianity* 554).

A high view of the authority of Scripture leads orthodox Christians to a scriptural worldview that sees spiritual and moral truth as objective and universal. In this worldview, God determines truth and truth lies in God's word. Those Christians with a postmodernist worldview and a lower opinion of scriptural authority understand "scriptural/moral truth as subjective and relative" (Renfroe 88). A lower view of

scriptural authority lends itself to less reliance on Scripture and grants more importance to reason, tradition, and experience in the church's teachings. However, orthodox Christianity also maintains that the Holy Spirit has protected not only Scripture but tradition as well throughout the history of the church. "That councils convened between 325 and 787 CE have been accurately remembered" (Oden, *Rebirth of Orthodoxy* 48) is astonishing. Oden argues that the accuracy of this remembering demonstrates that the Spirit is working to center the faithful in the scriptural truth. Without a high view of Scripture, the church cannot justify a high view of the gospel or even of Jesus himself. James Smart declares, "Let the Scriptures cease to be heard and soon the remembered Christ becomes an imagined Christ, shaped by the religiosity and unconscious desires of his worshippers" (25). The church cannot effectively share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world without believing in the authority of the Word that contains his written revelation to humankind.

### **Defining Evangelism**

In an increasingly global society in which Christianity in America seems to be declining from a position as the dominant religion, the UMC and the body of Christ are increasingly unsure about what Christian evangelism is intended to accomplish. The church seems to be moving away from the goal of conversion towards a goal of sharing a social justice gospel, which seeks to find common ground with other faiths. "Nowadays however, and almost suddenly, 'evangelism' has become a bandwagon trend—with all sorts of different groups eager to be aboard" (Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* 47), argues Outler. Conversion to Christianity has become an unnecessary and even offensive objective to many progressive-minded Christians and theologians. Outler explains "Much



of our talk about evangelism remains confused and in need of a careful theological sorting-out” (48). According to Outler, evangelism has since the fifth century and still does proclaim “salvation by faith in Christ crucified, salvation as a gift of God’s unmerited grace, provided freely in and through Christ’s suffering love, with no prior moral achievement or merit from the human side” (48). However, in many progressive and liberal theological circles, evangelism has become an outdated and unnecessary mission for the church. William J. Abraham points to the lack of scholarly attention given to evangelism by saying, “one of the undeniable features of modern theology is the scant attention it has given to the subject of evangelism” (1). Abraham goes on to say that we do not know exactly what to define as evangelism in modern theology (7). The church’s understanding of the objectives of the mission of the UMC of making disciples for the transformation of the world has become increasingly clouded and unclear in this environment.

Orthodox Christians have always asserted that the fundamental purpose of Christian evangelism is to make Christ known in the world. Even with a cloud of uncertainty hanging over the church’s understanding of evangelism in the twenty-first century, most Christians would agree that making Christ known remains the intent of Christian evangelism. However, what Christians hope to assist God in accomplishing in making Christ known has become an extremely murky concept. The church’s first priority in evangelistic mission has historically been perceived as the preaching of the gospel (Newbigin 131). However, the battle between those who believe that the declaratory function of the church must take priority and those who think that the first priority of Christian evangelism is action for challenging injustice, prejudice, and

oppression, asserting ideals of justice and peace and ministering to the physical needs of humanity has heated up in the past few decades. Thoughtful Christians would have to agree that both of these priorities are needed as components of Christian evangelism. For Wesley, “the scope of evangelism was never less than the fullness of Christian experience —‘holiness of heart and a life conformable to the same’” (Outler, *Evangelism and Theology* 21). Outler goes on to emphasize that evangelism must also be visible in social effects:

Christian proclamation must take on visible form and the Christian community must be committed to social reform, or else it will stultify our Lord’s prayer that God’s righteous will be done on earth—here and now, in justice and love and peace—as always it is being done in heaven. Outward witness in daily living is the necessary confirmation of any inward experience of inward faith. (22)

Outler goes on to conclude that the Word, which is made audible, must also become the Word which we as the church make visible, if lives are going to be touched by the Word which God made flesh in the form of Jesus Christ (22). The gospel message is both hope-filled and holistic, encompassing every area of life and requiring a holistic proclamation in word and deed (Harper and Metzger 251). However, regardless of which of these human efforts Christians perceive as a greater priority, the question of what God is hoping to accomplish through the church in Christian evangelism remains the most important question. This study investigated the Christian understanding of God’s motivation in making Christ known to the world.

Because the most important concern on the hearts of Christians in carrying out Christian evangelism must be an overriding desire to accomplish God’s purpose, the church must remember that we are joining God in his mission. At a gathering of Christian missionaries in Ghana in the 1950s, the conference’s official statement proclaimed:

The Christian Mission is Christ's, not ours. Prior to all of our efforts and activities, prior to all of our gifts of service and devotion, God sent his Son into the world. And he came in the form of a servant—a servant who suffered even to the point of the Cross. This conviction is the only true motive of Christian mission and the only standard by which the spirit, method and modes of Christian missionary organizations must be judged. We believe that it is urgent that this word of judgment and mercy should be given full freedom to cleanse and redeem our present activities, lest our human pride in our activities hinder the free course of God's mission in the world. (International Missionary Council 88)

Obedience to a command from Christ has been the perceived motivation of many Christians in carrying out the Great Commission. When Christians go out to evangelize with the only motivation being obedience to the marching orders of Christ, the tendency is to focus on their own efforts to achieve God's desired outcome: "This fails to ask questions of what lies beneath the command. Why was the command given?" (Hunsberger 60). David Bosch, in examining the Great Commission in Matthew 28 to go and make disciples offers these observations: (1) "The task of the disciples is no longer merely that of proclaiming, but of enlisting people into their fellowship"; (2) "Matthew is clearly not thinking of first-level decisions only, to be followed later by a second-level decision"; and, (3) "following Jesus suggests a journey which, in fact, never ends in this life" (81). Clearly, the Great Commission is calling Christians to join God in bringing others into a lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. However, the question of why the command was given and the goal of God's Spirit when bringing humans into a lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ remains. Robert E. Coleman may answer this question best by defining the overriding objective of God through Christ Jesus: "He intended to save out of the world a people for himself and to build a church of the Spirit which would never perish" (17). Just as the Spirit will never die, the church will never die when led by the Spirit.

If Coleman's definition of the primary objective of God in sending Jesus Christ into the world to reconcile humanity to him is correct, then God's objective for the church in Christian evangelism through carrying out the Great Commission should be the same. Proclamation of the gospel, working to end oppression and prejudice, seeking justice for humanity, and ministering to the physical needs of humans by feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, and providing other basic human necessities can all be used as methods through which God can employ the church to accomplish this objective.

However, these worthy goals can never become the primary objectives of the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came into the world to bring life. He clearly proclaims that an alternative to life exists for those who reject him when he says in John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." The life that Jesus says he offers to humankind is both eternal and abundant. Life in the world without Christ is both temporary and unsatisfying. The mission of the church is to come alongside God, through the work of Holy Spirit, in bringing humans into this eternal and abundant life it has through Jesus Christ. However, the church must also believe in an evil adversary, Satan, who wishes to steal and kill the life given to humans through Christ. Without the recognition of an enemy that threatens human life by turning humans away from saving faith in Christ, the realization of the struggle for human souls is minimized.

Bosch summarizes the mission of the apostle Paul, which should be the mission of the church in Christian evangelism:

The purpose of Paul's mission, then, is to lead people to salvation in Christ. The anthropological perspective is, however, not the ultimate objective of his ministry. In and through his mission he is preparing the

world for God's coming glory and for the day when all the universe will praise him. (135)

Bosch's summary of Paul's purpose in mission is very much in keeping with the purpose that Coleman describes in summarizing Christ's purpose in the world. The church must always keep this fundamental and overriding purpose in mind when carrying out the Great Commission and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The church must remember that the primary purpose is not the transformation of the existing world because it is only temporary. The transformation that is sought in the lives of individual humans who will be allowed to participate through faith in Christ in a future transformed world is not something that God needs assistance in accomplishing. The church must believe that not all humans will be allowed to participate in this future glorious kingdom of God. Christian evangelism's primary goal must be the salvation of individual humans through the Holy Spirit leading a person to faith in Christ, which will allow individual humans the opportunity for abundant life as a part of God's present kingdom and eternal life as part of God's future kingdom. The message of the missional church is one of both a present and future kingdom:

The gospel of this kingdom is the good news that God the father loves – even us, who have turned our backs on him and who have risen up against him—and invites us to enter by repentant faith into saving relationship with himself through this Son in the Spirit, in which we receive forgiveness of our sins. (Harper and Metzger 250)

The church must proclaim and live in the Holy Kingdom revealed to humanity through the person of Jesus Christ.

Steve Seamands says, in addressing the tendency in the twenty-first century to focus on the needs of the human condition in Christian evangelism: “Human self-esteem, not Christ, has become the object of faith: the pursuit of happiness, not the pursuit of

holiness, has become the goal of the Christian life” (22). The move towards secular humanism by some in the church and in academia has encompassed all facets of theology. New Age thinking attempts to promote each human being as the master of their own universe without the need for redemption or regeneration through a holy God. The idea that even if a God exists, surely a loving God embraces humanity as it is without the need for judgment, has led to attempts to mold the gospel to fit into twenty-first century culture. Rob Renfro describes this trend in theology:

But when postmoderns and progressives promote tolerance, they seem to have something different in mind. The new tolerance requires more than allowing someone to say what he wants to say or live how he want to live. Today’s tolerance requires you to embrace and even celebrate the other person’s moral choices and lifestyle as being good and right—if for no other reason than the person believes they are good and right. (109)

The postmodern attempt to deny the existence of sin through a tolerant theology, which in effect condones and embraces sin, may be an answer to the problem presented by a strictly theist viewpoint of God. Strict theism holds God, as creator of the universe, responsible for the consequences of the sins of humanity (Galloway 1929). Postmodern humanism negates the need for placing the blame for sin on humans or on God by denying the existence of sin. When the church denies that sin exists, the necessity of Christian evangelism is negated, and no need for salvation from sin and death through Jesus Christ exists.

Walter Brueggemann describes Christian evangelism as a drama in terms of three scenes, which are as yet unfinished. The first scene is one of combat and struggle between powerful forces who battle for control of the turf, the payoffs, and the future. In the second scene, an additional character, the announcer and proclaimer, is introduced into the first scene. In the third scene the announcer has spoken, the conflict is over, the

announcing has ended and the listener must make an appropriate response (18). The Church of Jesus Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit is the announcer of God's kingdom. However, as Brueggemann explains, the story being played out in these three scenes is ongoing. The church must see Christian evangelism, through these three scenes, as a struggle between both good and evil and life and death, and the good news of God's kingdom, revealed to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, as the final and victorious outcome of the conflict.

### **Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy**

The lack of clarity and focus in the UMC and the body of Christ regarding the church's understanding of the objectives of Jesus Christ in sending Christians out under the Great Commission is fueled by the tendency of many twenty-first-century Christians to reject orthodox theology and embrace any Christian teaching that appears to be modern and progressive. Considering the church's history of condoning prejudice and oppression of the poor, many modern theologians argue that a new outlook on theology is needed. Oden also points to what he calls modern chauvanism, which began to arise in the wake of the modern scientific era from 1789 to 1989. Modern chauvanism is a belief in the intrinsic inferiority of all premodern ideas and texts, including orthodox Christianity (*Rebirth of Orthodoxy* 8). "Secular ideologues defend their moral high ground by alleging that classic Christian teaching has been so complicit with corrupt social and economic systems ... that it has lost all credibility" (113), explains Oden. The fight for social justice in the twenty-first century has led some theologians to question the apostolic witness of the church throughout history.

Oden defines orthodoxy as “nothing more than the ancient consensual tradition of spirit-guided discernment of scripture” (*Rebirth of Orthodoxy* 31). The church must place a high value on the orthodox tradition as having been guided and protected by God throughout the ages. The body of Christ must recover the idea that the divine Christ has kept the human Jesus and the apostolic witness of his earthly ministry from disappearing. According to E. Lewis, “Christ must continue to save Jesus” (190).

E. Lewis believes that the church has turned away from its Christocentric emphasis to a humanitarian Christology: “What we are actually doing, however, is supposing that unregenerate men can be like Jesus!” (190). When the church’s concept of the gospel changes from being Christ centered to being human centered, the church of Jesus Christ cannot survive. Unless Christ is the one who is understood to be the divine causality in effecting redemption in humans, understanding why the church needs a doctrine of him at all is difficult (E. Lewis 190). The tendency towards a humanitarian Christology in twenty-first-century theology is at the root of the lack of clarity in the church’s understanding of its mission and in the growth of universalism, pluralism, and New Age theologies.

However, Oden believes that in the midst of Christian academia and the church’s turn towards this humanitarian Christology, a growing rebirth of orthodoxy in many Christian circles has also occurred: “Modern narcissism remains amazed at the tenacity of orthodoxy” (Oden, *Rebirth of Orthodoxy* 50). Oden sees hope for a rebirth of fervor in orthodoxy in the growth of conservative movements within mainline denominations whose hierarchies have grown progressively more liberal in the past few decades: “The Holy Spirit is encouraging the growth of evangelical and confessing movements within



mainline denominations—movements that are calling their churches back to classical Christianity” (66). Oden seems to concur with one of the premises of this study, which is that heterodox theologies are quenching the Holy Spirit in many mainline churches today, when he explains his hope for the future of today’s church in a return to orthodoxy:

Can the ancient faith rehabilitate a tradition-deprived culture? Is this asking too much? We can be encouraged by previous historical periods in which such a renewal has in fact happened. But it will only happen if contemporary believers follow the guidance of intergenerational consensual teaching. Only this approach is blessed by the Holy Spirit. (125)

Methodism grew rapidly during one of those historical periods, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As explained by Halford E. Luccock and Paul Hutchinson, “Methodism was a spirit; it was a movement: it was a life” (178) in that period. Clarity in the orthodox message being proclaimed and lived by Methodists during that era was evident. The mission of the church in making disciples for Jesus Christ was blessed with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit because the church understood and held firmly and clearly to the apostolic witness of what its mission was. The prayers of orthodox Christians in the twenty-first century cry out to God for a return, in Methodism and the body of Christ, to a clear orthodox understanding of the church’s mission.

Orthodox Christians also see hope for a vibrant rebirth of orthodoxy in the rapid growth of unashamedly evangelical congregations both within and outside of mainline denominations. The rapid growth of some of the megachurches in America today is being fed by a new fervor that often finds its mission in a traditional understanding of the objectives of evangelism. Saddleback Church, which began in the living room of the pastor’s home in southern California, has grown since 1980 to over 10,000 people in worship attendance each week through being committed to evangelistic conversion

growth (Warren 12). Rick Warren, Saddleback's pastor, says that the methods used for evangelism are not what is important: "I always refuse to debate which method of evangelism works best.... We should never criticize any method that God is blessing" (Warren 156). This study also shares Warren's belief that not the church's methods but a clear understanding of the mission of Christian evangelism is what's important in the evangelistic success. After all, without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, which accompany the truth of the gospel when it is being carried forth and lived by the church according to the apostolic witness handed down to Christians by the church, all evangelistic methodology is meaningless and ineffective.

The success of the church in evangelism through an orthodox understanding of making disciples under the Great Commission can be seen throughout the UMC as well. One of the evangelistic success stories in the South Georgia Conference over the past two decades is Harvest Church in Warner Robins, Georgia. Harvest, which reported an average attendance of 2,859 in 2014, has seen over 2,800 professions of faith in fifteen short years of existence. Jim Cowart, the founding pastor of Harvest, and his wife, Jennifer, are unapologetic about their orthodox understanding of God's evangelical call on the church in the Great Commission as being the conversion of humans to life-changing discipleship as followers of Christ: "We are a UMC (United Methodist Church) connecting people to God, and inspiring life change through Jesus" ("Welcome to Harvest"). When looking at other churches in the South Georgia Conference, throughout the UMC and the body of Christ as a whole, which have experienced the most growth in recent decades, the majority are churches whose leaders have an orthodox

understanding of what God desires to accomplish in humanity by sending forth his church to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Crucial to the concept of orthodoxy is the concept of right remembering. This theological premise of orthodoxy was first articulated by the monk Vincent about AD 450. He wrote the *Commonitorium* or the *Commonitory* in English or “act of remembrance,” which “remains the most significant text on ecumenical method of the first millennium” (Oden, *Rebirth of Orthodoxy* 156). Oden maintains that the revival of interest in Vincent’s work is very closely interwoven with the rebirth of orthodoxy. Vincent’s concept of right remembering is based on the belief that the Holy Spirit promises to help believers in remembering correctly (159). Oden explains, “Only right remembering can remedy our persistent tendency towards self-righteousness” (175). Vincent of Lerins maintained that if scriptural interpretation were left entirely up to human nature, then Christians could not count on the correctness of the apostolic witness: “Our sinful nature is possessed by a permanent desire to change religion, to add something and to take something away” (ch. 5, FC 7:275). The confusion that the church is experiencing in the twenty-first century regarding the objectives of making disciples of Jesus Christ can be directly attributed to a desire to change religion, or orthodoxy, to be compatible with the ideologies of a modern culture. The many unorthodox (heterodox) theologies, which are prevalent today, place very little value on the right remembering that the church has received through the apostolic witness of traditional orthodox theology and the Holy Scriptures.

Heterodox theology attempts to change the right remembering of the apostolic witness. Thomas Oden explains the identity crisis of the church in the twenty-first century:

The most crucial sign of the church in the Protestant tradition is the pure preaching of God's Word. If those authorized to teach Christian doctrine publicly cherish heterodox opinion so as to lead astray the whole laity, who have a right to hear the gospel, the church is to that extent misplacing its identity as the church. (*Classic Christianity* 718)

Oden calls on those entrusted to teach Christian doctrine to return to the pure apostolic witness handed down through the Holy Scriptures and orthodox Christianity over the ages rather than the latest and newest fad theology of the era.

Wesley recognized in 1744 that an identity crisis in the church had begun even then. As his sermon "Scriptural Christianity" testified, he believed that few evidences of genuine repentance and faith in the audience he addressed in his last sermon as the don at Oxford University in England were apparent (Oden, *Christ and Salvation* 113). Wesley believed that a return to scriptural holiness and scriptural Christianity was needed even in that era. Wesley questioned whether scriptural Christianity even existed at Oxford during that time. Orthodox Methodists today can only imagine what Wesley's opinion would be of the scriptural Christianity being taught in many United Methodist seminaries in the twenty-first century. Even in 1744, Wesley cried out in "Scriptural Christianity" for a return to orthodoxy as received through the apostolic witness:

Such was a Christian in ancient days. Such was every one of those who "when they heard" the threatening of the chief priests and elders' [sic] lifted up their voice to God with one accord ... and were all filled with the Holy Ghost. (Wesley, *Sermons* 238)

Wesley went on to conclude that only God's Holy Spirit could restore scriptural Christianity or orthodoxy in the church. In this sermon, he asked the question, "By whom

should this Christianity be restored?” (245). Wesley’s answer, “Lord, save, or we perish! Take us out of the mire, that we sink not” (245), rings even truer today than it did in 1744.

Many orthodox United Methodists today are also calling for a return to scriptural Christianity in the UMC denomination and the body of Christ. However, as Don Adams points out, “Just saying ‘I believe in the Bible’ does not end the battle as to the nature of its authority” (1). Despite the arguments of some who want to place equal emphasis on the four elements of the Wesleyan quadrilateral—Scripture, reason, experience and tradition, both Wesley and “United Methodists believe that the primary authority for the Christian journey, for Christian thought, and for Christian action is Holy Scripture” (Joyner 25). Methodists have always maintained that the Bible is the Word of God although John Wesley did not spend a lot of time trying to defend it academically. He was more burdened with turning Scripture loose, believing that it would prove itself to others in the same way that it had to him (Adams 3).

A high view on the authority of Scripture is the underlying basis for other UMC doctrinal beliefs. A Methodist understanding of grace founded on Wesley’s *ordo salutis* is discussed in Chapter 1. Other UMC doctrinal traditions include the historical Christian faith in the triune God (Jones 99) and the work of the Holy Spirit as the conveyor of grace, the inspirer of Scripture and the bestower of gifts (115-18). Methodists also maintain an orthodox understanding of original sin, or the Fall, which resulted in the corrupt nature of all humanity (151). The divinity of Christ, who was both fully God and fully human and born of a virgin, is also affirmed by UMC doctrine (112-13). UMC doctrine also includes the belief in the atonement of the cross. The cross demonstrates

“that there are no lengths to which God will not go on our behalf” (Stokes 70) and shows that human salvation is made available at the price of God’s suffering. Methodists also join other orthodox Christians in embracing the understanding that God’s grace is available to all (Jones 180) while also emphasizing the necessity of human acceptance of God’s grace for salvation (180-82). Methodists also recognize the terrible contrast between heaven and hell and the reality of divine judgment for all humans based on the acceptance of and faith in God’s grace through Jesus Christ (Stokes 121-22). Other nonessential UMC doctrines include a UMC understanding on the two recognized sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion and additional means of grace that God uses to reach humanity, such as the church, prayer, Scripture, and fasting. This research is not focused on these nonessential UMC doctrinal beliefs.

### **Orthodox Theological Foundations on Salvation**

Orthodox Christianity has maintained and firmly held since the early church began, as recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts, that salvation from sin and death can be found only through faith in Jesus Christ: “The truth has become an event in Jesus. An event in in which we are individually called to participate” (Oden, *Rebirth of Orthodoxy* 53). Orthodox Christianity has always asserted that humans are called by God to participate in the resurrection of Jesus Christ through faith in him alone in order to receive the free gift of eternal life offered to humanity through Christ.

Despite claims by some that such great twentieth-century theologians as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer had allowed universalism to creep into their personal theology, the established orthodox church has always maintained and emphasized what Jesus himself said in John 14:6 that he was the only way to the Father. This study later

examines the writings of both Barth and Bonhoeffer in more detail in order to refute the assertions by some in the universalist and pluralist camps that these two orthodox theologians were, in fact, in agreement with them. As the UMC *Book of Discipline* states, “United Methodists share a common heritage with Christians of every age and nation. This heritage is grounded in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, which is the measure of all valid Christian teaching” (46). Historically, Methodism has held to this apostolic witness, as has Orthodox Christianity as a whole.

From the very beginning, the Church of Jesus Christ has maintained that salvation from sin and death is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ. Bishop Eusebius’s account of the first three hundred years of the Christian Church points to the fact that the Christian gospel of salvation through Christ alone was being proclaimed by such men as Clement of Alexandria, Constantine, and Origen. Eusebius proclaimed that Christ is God’s chosen savior for humanity:

So in her turn the church should reap the benefits of the savior’s labors. For having received from him the promise of much better things than these, she longs to receive permanently and for all time the much greater glory of the regeneration of the resurrection of an imperishable with the choir of the angels of light in the kingdom of God beyond the skies, and with Christ Jesus himself the great benefactor and savior. (316)

Throughout the Church’s history, the predominant and orthodox belief was one of salvation from sin and death through faith in Jesus Christ alone. However, in the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church strayed somewhat from the orthodox view on faith as the only requirement for salvation by selling indulgences, which were supposed to buy a person’s way to heaven. The Roman Catholic Church also began to stray towards other works-based thinking with such requirements as church membership for salvation.

During the great Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, in which a schism with

the Roman Catholic Church was initiated by such men as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldrych Zwingli, the historical orthodox theological position on salvation was once again reinforced. Luther proclaimed the Orthodox belief with his doctrine of *sola fide*, or faith alone (*Theologia Germanica* 172).

Jesus himself declared in John 14:6 that he is the way, and the truth, and the life and that no human can come to the Father except through him. Therefore, orthodoxy, as it relates to salvation, is best defined as adherence to Luther's doctrine of *sola fide*. Faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord has always been the foundation of orthodox theology. Any departure from the doctrine of *sola fide* that leaves out the requirement of the cooperation of humans in a faith response, prompted by God's grace, as the only necessity for salvation from sin and death becomes heterodoxy. Heterodoxy in the form of universalism and pluralism emphasizes that Christ died for all but leaves out the necessity of a faith response to God's grace.

Karl Barth, when examining the relationship of Christ to humans, states, "He, and no other one, shall conquer in the battle" (*Church Dogmatics* 93). The battle to which Barth refers is with sin and death that Christians face because of their fallen nature. God has provided humans with one cure to begin to heal their fallen nature. His name is Jesus Christ. Christians are called to allow God to use them as vessels to bring others who do not yet know Jesus, or have rejected him in the past, into the family of God through faith in Christ. As Bonhoeffer writes, "The church of Jesus cannot arbitrarily break off all contact with those who refuse his call" (*Cost of Discipleship* 189). Jesus commissioned all Christians in Matthew 28:18 to make disciples of all nations and to baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Oden describes this evangelical call



to the Church as a command to go preach a gospel of repentance, faith, and personal salvation:

The terms of salvation are conditions under which God's saving action may be received—repentance and faith. They are the simple terms of the earliest Christian preaching: repent and believe. To make the call to repentance and faith plausible is the task of Christian preaching. When neglected, every other aspect of the mission of the church stands imperiled.... The purpose of preaching is to draw the hearer toward saving faith in God. (*Classic Christianity* 561)

The church must believe that a wrath to come exists for those humans who reject God's free offer of grace through Jesus Christ or no urgency in completing the Great Commission exists. If Christians subscribe to the universalist idea that everyone will be saved, no need for evangelism exists at all. The church is called to do more than just share God's love with the world. It is called to allow God to use it to help him rescue the world from the wrath to come while at the same time sharing his love with the world and making disciples for Christ. Urgency in carrying out the Great Commission, and even the need for evangelism at all, are tied directly to whether or not the church believes that faith in Jesus is the only way that God offers salvation to humanity.

### **Universalism from a Historical Perspective**

Universalism is not a new phenomenon in Christian theology. The motivation for both early and modern universalist theology may have been first articulated by Origen who "observed that in conversations with non-Christians he first tried to establish points of commonality before introducing the name of Christ" (Wilken 28). Finding common ground with other faiths has merit but not with the belief that somehow a gospel that is more inclusive, less different, and more similar to other religions will ultimately be more appealing to those who do not yet know Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. One of

the underlying premises of universalism is that religion is really just a way for humans to find morality. Emil Brunner spoke out against this universalist proposal when he said, “To try to discover an ‘original moral common sense’ behind these influences of the various religions is simply a wild goose chase” (33). However, this type of theology has led many in the history of Christian faith and even more in modern Christianity to believe that conversion is not necessary because all religions are really worshipping the same God or that God will eventually pardon and grant eternal life to everyone.

Origen’s concept of Jesus Christ was one of the Logos, or divine wisdom, made flesh. In his treatise, *First Principles*, he put wisdom as the first in his list of titles for Christ (Wilken 94). Since he believed that sin was ultimately only negative as a lack of pure knowledge, Jesus’ ministry was essentially an example and an instruction on living to humanity. He maintained that the “the way of Jesus was the way of wisdom” (Irvin and Sunquist 124). Origen believed that all spirits would be eventually rescued and glorified in the form of their own original individual life. He maintained that “because Christ redeemed all human flesh, all would be saved in eternity” (246). However, Origen tried to maintain the celestial hopes and representations of heaven taught in the Church. John Wesley would have agreed with some of Origen’s theology, as he believed in a progressive purification of believers’ souls until they would know the truth and God just as the Son knew him. When Christians would see God face to face, they would attain a full possession of the Holy Spirit in union with God, much like Wesley’s concept of absolute perfection (Wilken 21). Origen believed in different means of attainment of this union with God with the most important being his concept of a purifying fire that would cleanse the evil from the world and lead to cosmic renovation. Even though Origen

proposed his own concept of universalism, his theology also valued orthodoxy. His *On First Principles* contains a rule by which Christians could judge which theological interpretations to believe and which not to believe: “We maintain that that only is to be believed as the truth which in no way conflicts with the tradition of the church and the apostles” (1-2). How he reconciled this rule with his universalist beliefs remains a mystery.

Currents of universalism have remained in Christian thought from the era of Origen in the second and third century until today. However, the modern resurgence of universalism may have begun with Frederick Schleiermacher at the turn of the nineteenth century. Known as the founder of liberal theology, Schleiermacher broke away from the prevailing orthodox thinking of his era by attempting to rebuild Protestant theology in the wake of the Enlightenment and Kant’s emphasis on reason. He stresses that “Christianity is a religion of redemption, by which Schleiermacher meant a passage out of evil, enabled by some other agent than the self, which is redeemed” (Clements 40). He believed emphatically that religion was primarily feeling and that theology was secondary (35):

Religion is an immediate, or original, experience of self-consciousness in the form of feeling. It is immediate, in that it is not derived from any other experience or exercise of the mind.... Religion is not an act of knowledge nor the result of a process of knowing. (qtd. in Cross 119)

Schleiermacher’s idea that theology was secondary to feeling started a trend towards less reliance on orthodoxy and more latitude in theological interpretation. Jose Miguel Bonino summarizes the liberal framework for theology that began with Schleiermacher:

The basic image of the social and political image of committed liberal Christianity is that of a Christ who liberates the human person, in body, soul, and all secular dimensions as well. He is not only the liberator from sin, from the vitiated relationships between human beings and their

Creator, but the liberator of the totality of the concrete world here and now. (16)

Liberal theologians, following Schleiermacher's lead, began to understand Christ as more than just the Savior and Lord of God's eternal kingdom but as the one who would bring justice and mercy to the world.

In looking back at the history of humankind's religion, Schleiermacher asserts that religion developed to the stage of faith in one God. In the highest stage of faith "history shows only three great communions: the Jewish, the Christian, and the Mohammedan" (qtd. in Cross 129). However, Schleiermacher believes that revelation exists in all religious communions: "None can claim that its own possession of divine communication is full and perfect truth and that all others are false" (qtd. in Cross 134). This belief that God's truth has been revealed to humankind in ways other than through Jesus Christ, though controversial, began to find support in some Christian circles. The natural progression of this line of thought is that Christianity is just another religion through which God has revealed himself to humans and that Jesus is just one of many ways to God. This type of pluralist theology, which is in direct conflict with the words of Jesus in John 14:6, stating that only he is the way, the truth, and the life, has found more widespread and increasing support in Christian theology since the era of Schleiermacher and because of his work. As one can see, adherence to universalist/ pluralist theologies requires a less stringent belief in the authority of Scripture. Schleiermacher's liberal theology not only ushered in a new wave of universalism/ pluralism but also contributed to the decline of belief in the authority of Scripture in all aspects of Christian thinking, which is even more prevalent today.

Following the Protestant Reformation, an evangelical movement swept Protestant Europe and the American colonies from 1730 to 1750 and had a profound impact on American Protestantism. The Great Awakening resulted from powerful preaching that convicted people with a deep sense of their sinfulness and their personal need for salvation through Jesus Christ. The theology of the Great Awakening remained primarily orthodox and was focused on salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone. The Great Awakening made Christianity intensely personal to average people by instilling this sense of spiritual conviction and moving away from ritual, ceremony, hierarchy, and liturgy. Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield were two of the leading preachers during the Great Awakening (Kelly).

After the first Great Awakening, a Second Great Awakening took place in America from about 1790 until about 1820. Membership began to rise rapidly among Baptist and Methodist denominations whose preachers were leaders in the movement. By the late 1850s, the Second Great Awakening had reached its peak and begun to decline. This period was marked by emotion, enthusiasm, and an appeal to the supernatural power of the Spirit while rejecting the focus on rationalism and deism of some of the earlier movements. Camp meetings became popular as methods for evangelical revival during this period ("Second Great Awakening").

Universalism also began to emerge again as a part of the Second Great Awakening. Adams Streeter founded some of the first Universalist Churches in America in Oxford and Milford, Massachusetts, in the 1780s (Hughs). The American universalists began to point to Origen and others in teaching that universalism was the most common interpretation of the gospel in early Christianity. They did not believe in the possibility of

hell but did propose an afterlife for all persons. John Murray, known as the “Father of American Universalism,” was a student of the Welshman James Rely and preached Rely’s universalist form of Methodism in America. Murray and his wife, Judith, helped organize the first national Universalist convention in 1790 where John represented the New England states (Smith). A number of universalist denominations began to be formed from this rise in universalism as a part of the Second Great Awakening with some of them still existing today. Universalism in America during the Second Great Awakening was actually a part of the revivalism that swept across America during this period. As a reaction to Calvinist predestination for the elect, many universalists maintained that the Holy Spirit influenced all people. Although the influence can still be seen of these early American universalists in the theology of the twenty-first century, most universalists today shun any form of revivalism and find more common ground in liberal theology.

### **Universalism in the Twenty-First Century**

Although universalist theology, or the belief that a loving God will save everyone, has been around for some time, it has found a new following with the publication of books by such people as Rob Bell, Marcus J. Borg, and Robin R. Meyers and even supposedly evangelical authors such as William H. Willimon who question the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ alone as Savior and Lord as a requirement of saving faith. These recent books, some of which are by respected Christian pastors, have only added fuel to the fires of universalist fervor within the academic community. Theologians such as Heim, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, and Karl Rahner have been quietly winning allegiance to universalism under the banner of religious pluralism within the academic community for some time.

Although much of academia has long tried to distance itself from being labeled evangelical in any way, the recent addition of clergy, particularly formerly evangelical clergy, to the universalist ranks should be a cause of great concerns to the body of Christ. However, the purpose of this research was to try to determine if the recent wave of universalism and other heterodox theologies have affected the current theology of the UMC in the South Georgia Conference. The church seems to be growing in areas where the clergy and lay leadership have remained orthodox in their beliefs. Orthodox Christians in the UMC are praying for God's continued blessing on those churches where the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is shared without compromise to political correctness and misguided inclusivism. The church can grow the body of Christ without altering the gospel to fit an increasingly diverse and secular world. The church can share God's love with the world and be inclusive without watering down the gospel in an attempt to make it more palatable to the masses of unchurched people in the world today. This dissertation examined the acceptance of heterodox and universalist theology in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC. God will send his Holy Spirit and produce growth in churches that proclaim the truth that orthodox Christianity has proclaimed for centuries and do not succumb to the political correctness of today's new wave of heterodox and universalist theology.

Many evangelical Christians have been shocked and have felt betrayed by Willimon's recent book. Although he never openly endorses a universalist theology of salvation, Willimon seems to imply that hell is not a place of eternal damnation and torment for the many who have already rejected Jesus Christ during their lifetime in this world and for those who will reject him in the future. Understanding how Willimon

reconciles his thinly veiled agreement with Origen's universalist tendencies with the teachings of Jesus is difficult when he states, "When someone is lost does that mean simply that he or she has not yet been found?" (72). Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14, "The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many," and, "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." Willimon seems to agree with Origen that hell is not a place of eternal damnation but a place of temporary correction for those who have rejected Christ (71). The viewpoint is similar to the thinking of universalists within the Second Great Awakening in the USA who maintained that all of God's punishments for sin are corrective and remedial. Willimon cites some of Origen's writings as a way to defend the idea that everyone will eventually be saved. Willimon misses the point that God does not condemn anyone to eternal damnation when he criticizes Christians who believe in hell as a place of eternal torment: "Then we should rejoice at God's willful condemnation of the damned" (89). One would question whether Willimon, a United Methodist, has a complete understanding of Wesley's concept of free will and might be ignoring Jesus himself who plainly said in John 3:18, "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Jesus never said that God condemns humans, but rather humans condemn themselves because of unbelief.

Willimon goes on to state, "The hope that all may be saved, that hell may be empty, offends some Christians. For them it as if there is only so much God to go around" (88). Of course, God's desire is that all humans be restored to the perfection in which they were created and saved from eternal damnation. However, Willimon is



missing the point that our God-given free will makes salvation for all impossible. Free will in the hands of a fallen and stubborn human race prevents God's prevenient grace from turning everyone to saving faith in Jesus Christ despite God's desire that everyone be saved. The fact that hell may be populated in no ways diminishes the fact that God's grace is available to everyone and that his grace is greater than humans can comprehend. There is plenty of God to go around if humans would only allow him to open eyes and hearts to understand the need for his grace instead of stubbornly clinging to human self-sufficiency.

In John 12:32, Jesus stated, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." Willimon uses this Scripture to justify his later statement that to "deny universal salvation as implication and possibility, as hope and desire is to limit and to restrict, the power and grace of God" (66). Willimon is completely missing one of the key points of Wesleyan holiness theology when he makes such statements. John Wesley always agrees with and argues for Martin Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone, or *sola fide*, while at the same time stressing that no one could continue to be saved without doing God's will on this earth (Stokes 122). The faith necessary for salvation fills the believer with the Holy Spirit, which compels those who have surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ to try to do God's will on this earth. Even though God's desire is that all persons surrender and allow his grace to give them this faith, another belief in Methodism prevents salvation from occurring with all persons. Wesley believes that grace is both free and cooperant (Collins, *Theology of John Wesley* 12), which is a concept of grace that includes the need for human cooperation in God's grace. In other words, even though God's desire is that all persons are able to receive saving faith through his free grace, the

cooperant aspect of a person's response to that free grace, which requires simultaneous coordination in accepting it, makes all humans receiving that faith impossible due to God's gift of free will to humankind. Willimon ignores free will completely and almost borders on Calvinist predestination when he argues while explaining Jesus' words in John 12:32: "When he is lifted up, he will indiscriminately draw all to himself. All" (64). I think Wesley would argue that God's prevenient grace has and always will be drawing all to Jesus. However, the belief that God's grace is pursuing all humans does not mean that all will respond to God's prevenient grace and satisfy the cooperant aspect of God's free grace.

Willimon also assumes that Jesus is talking about everyone when he said in John 12:32 that he will draw all people to himself. However, I do not believe that Jesus meant everyone. According to the *ESV Study Bible*, "all people, in context, means 'all kinds of people,' that is, both Jews and Gentiles" (Crossway Bibles 2049). Willimon, by assuming that Jesus is saying that he will not only draw but, in fact, capture everyone who has ever lived or will ever live in this world to himself, is stretching the interpretation of this Scripture to fit his preconceived universalist theological position.

Although I agree very much with Willimon that "if Jesus Christ doesn't love sinners enough to reach out and save sinners, I'll be damned" (92), this statement misses the point that even though Jesus reaches out to all of us sinners, all will not respond to the pull of God's prevenient grace. Willimon makes the classic universalist mistake of implying that because God's grace is available to all, that all will eventually respond to it. Willimon, in effect, equates those who believe that not all will respond to God's grace with those who want to limit the availability of God to those who think and look like

them. Willimon's call to evangelism, saying, "Too many of us as church leaders have been content to hunker down in the vineyard with the few faithful bequeathed to us by the evangelism of previous generations" (132), rings all the more true considering the orthodox belief that the eternal lives of those Christians are called to evangelize are at stake. If, as Willimon asserts, "valid objections can be raised against eternal widespread damnation ... [and] to ascribe eternal everlasting life to the damned seems odd" (74), no need for evangelism even exists. As Luke Timothy Johnson states, "There is no mercy without judgment." If, as Willimon seems to believe, this judgment is only temporary for those who have rejected Christ but permanent for those who have accepted him, then God would not have called the church of Jesus Christ to evangelism in the Great Commission. If God will eventually pardon those who reject Christ after a period of damnation, which amounts only to temporary correction, Jesus would not refer to this damnation as destruction in Matthew 7. Even Barth, who, according to Willimon, inspired much of his thinking on salvation with his *Church Dogmatics*, does not seem to refer to hell as place of temporary correction. Barth seems to speak of the permanence of both salvation and damnation: "Between God and man there stands the person of Jesus Christ – in him God's plan for man is disclosed, God's judgement on man fulfilled, God's redemption of man accomplished" (110). Through the redemption God offers humans through faith in Christ, the permanence of heaven can be chosen by humans rather than the permanence of hell.

Although Willimon stops short of endorsing the idea that salvation is possible through means other than faith in Jesus Christ and justifies his universalist theology with the idea that hell is only a temporary place, other recent well-known authors and

theologians have gone further. Bell ignores many of the teachings of Jesus completely when he takes the position that Jesus has already forgiven all persons without any need for humans to ask for it (188). In Bell's version of salvation, faith in Christ is not even a prerequisite for salvation because when Jesus cried out from the cross in Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," salvation was finalized.

Salvation had been accomplished for all of humanity with that statement. Humans are forgiven and saved with no need in the future for repentance, faith, or any other human responses to God's free grace available to all. Bell's theology is much more palatable to a world that desires everything for nothing, including God's grace. Humans have no need to seek the transformation available through God's sanctifying grace. Salvation has been accomplished for people of all faiths without any person even having to hear the name of Jesus, according to Bell. The church of Jesus Christ would have no reason to exist other than to share God's love with the world if Bell's theology were true. If the only true and living God can be revealed to humankind apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ given to us through his Word as revealed in the New Testament, then humanity has no need for evangelism and, in fact, no need for Jesus Christ.

Karl Barth, whom some theologians claim inspired their own universalist theology, states in describing evangelical theology, "The qualifying attribute 'evangelical' recalls both the New Testament and at the same time the reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century" (*Evangelical Theology* 5). Barth goes on to say, "Such theology intends to apprehend, to understand, and to speak of the God of the gospel, in the midst of the variety of all other theologies and in distinction from them" (6). Barth disagrees completely with Bell's assertion that all will be saved regardless of which God is

worshipped: “The separation and distinction of this one true God from all others can only be continually his deed” (6). When Bell, Willimon, and other universalists argue that all will be saved, they are, in essence, denying that faith in the one true God, the New Testament revealed to humankind in the person of Jesus Christ, is a requirement for salvation. When Barth points to evangelical theology recalling the Reformation, he surely means that he was affirming Luther’s doctrine of *solo fide*. Wesley would agree, as would Luther and Barth, that the single requirement for salvation, as described in the doctrine of *solo fide*, must be faith in the God of the New Testament described by Barth and revealed by God to humankind through Jesus Christ.

Bell, Willimon, and others who have fallen victim to the deception of universalism are, in effect, denying the Holy Trinity and returning to a form of unitarianism, which is foreign to the Reformation, orthodox Methodism, and God’s Word. As Mack B. Stokes explains, “in Unitarianism God’s aims and actions are not sufficiently clear for a decisive response” (44). The gospel described by Bell and Willimon is actually a unitarian gospel that denies the Holy Trinity. This feel-good theology, which basically denies eternal judgment for those who reject Christ, is at odds with our basic Methodist doctrines, which state, when describing Jesus Christ, that “He is eternal savior and mediator, who intercedes for us, and by him all men will be judged” (*Book of Discipline* 71). Universalism seeks to deny eternal judgment by making any potential judgment temporary, as in Willimon’s case, or nonexistent, as in Bell’s case. Bell and Willimon are seeking to avoid the true reality that “Christians have always recognized the terrible contrast between heaven and hell” (Stokes 121) by replacing this reality with a theology that sees no contrast between the eternal outlook of Christians

who live by faith in Christ and all others. While this feel-good theology may be pleasing and much more palatable to the many humans who do not see a need to believe in the gospel, much less have the faith to follow Christ, this research will show that it also nullifies the need for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be proclaimed to all the world and for his church to follow the directions of Jesus in the Great Commission. At the beginning of the twentieth century, William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, listed “Heaven without Hell” as one of the six greatest dangers that the church would face in the new century (qtd. in D. S. Olford 18). Surely Booth’s prediction has come true and rings even more true today because “just as people are prepared at times to talk about God but ignore Jesus Christ, so they are willing enough to talk about heaven but to pass over hell as no more than a myth” (18). The existence of hell has always been a difficult reality for both universalist and liberal theologians to accept.

An orthodox understanding of the call of Jesus Christ in the Great Commission to go and make disciples for Jesus Christ includes the belief that a place of eternal torment does exist for those who have rejected or failed to believe and have faith in the pardon from sin, death, and eternal damnation offered freely to human beings through Christ. Methodism and the UMC have historically upheld the belief that a primary goal of Christian evangelism is to assist God in delivering humans from eternal damnation in hell. Wesley maintains the “desire to flee from the wrath to come” (*Book of Discipline* 76) to be so important that it was the only condition for admission into early Methodist Societies. One must question why the primacy of this condition for membership, which is still expressed today, appears to be discounted by many as an evangelism goal in much of

today's theology on evangelism and even as an objective of the Methodist mission in making disciples for Christ.

Wesley would certainly disagree with Bell, who describes hell as a place of eternal damnation passed over as a myth, but heaven is also described, not as an eternal place which is "somewhere else" (24) but as a place that in the new age to come will be here on earth (33). Bell's concept of loving God is of one who is, in the end, only capable of mercy. Bell misses the point that humans do not condemn themselves through their sin but through faithlessness: "Failure, we see again and again, isn't final, judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction" (88). Bell has no understanding of Luther's doctrine of *solo fide* and again places the emphasis on human works, which God will eventually correct, rather than on faith in Christ, which justifies humanity. His concept of hell becomes one in which people are tortured by the consequences of their sin until God eventually corrects them, rather than redeems them because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Bell falls into the same trap as Willimon with this either/or theology:

To summarize then, we need a loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic serious word to describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for us. We need a word that refers to the big wide, terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts all the way to the massive society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God's world God's way. And for that, the word "hell" works quite well. Let's keep it. (93)

Bell's explanation of hell as being a condition that humans experience in this life when they fail to live a godly life not only denies the scriptural witness of hell as being an eternal place but also contradicts Luther's doctrine of *solo fide*. According to Bell, persons are judged not on their faith in Jesus Christ but by their works. Hell, which Bell claims is something that persons experience only in this life, is the result of their failure

to live by God's commandments and according to his will, not because they have rejected God's grace given to humans freely through faith in Christ. This type of either/or thinking sees God instead as the punisher rather than as a merciful God if Christians admit to the reality of an eternal hell. Both Bell and Willimon's either/or thinking fails to recognize that love and mercy can coexist in the same God along with judgment (Brown 31). This type of theology tries to resolve the conflict of this type of either/or thinking by "theorizing that love/mercy will move God to suspend all judgment" (33). A loving and merciful God does not have to abandon judgment on human beings' rejection of his remedy for the human condition, Jesus Christ, in order to become merciful.

### **A Universalist Misunderstanding of Grace**

At the core of much of the universalist thinking, which has invaded Christian theology over the years, is a flawed understanding of God's grace when compared to the view of Christian orthodox theology. Many universalists tend to see God's judgment of humans as something that God somehow brought about. Universalists sometimes fail to recognize that humans are, in fact, saved by God's free grace from the judgment, which humanity brought upon themselves, not from a judgment that God is imposing upon humankind. Christian universalism, which was a doctrine first taught in the late eighteenth century by the Universalist Church of America, promoted universal reconciliation. They believed, as many such as Willimon seem to today, in temporary correction in something similar to purgatory from which those who arrived there would eventually be given an eternal pardon to heaven at some point.

At the core of universalism's misunderstanding of grace is a sort of works-based theology that perceives a God who should not condemn any human being while knowing



that all humans have been corrupted by the Fall. Because all human beings will fall into sin, then all persons will be condemned to a place of eternal punishment for all sinners, if such a place exists, universalists often, in effect, argue. The implied assumption is that a loving and merciful God must pardon all humans rather than condemning them. This either/or thinking displays a lack of understanding of God's grace given to humanity through Jesus Christ. Luther addresses the issue of humanity's inability to attain righteousness on their own without God's grace through Christ. Luther maintains that only through alien righteousness, or the righteousness of another, can humans be given proper righteousness as they work with the alien righteousness of Christ offered freely to all persons.

A flawed understanding of God's grace displayed in universalism as a sort of love and mercy only gospel and resulting from this flawed theology, seems to have become more prevalent in recent years in the pulpits of many churches. However, without the possibility of judgment, the gospel loses its power, its urgency, and its truth. Humankind has no need for the gospel of Jesus Christ because a God whose only course of true mercy and love is to pardon all humans has already preempted Jesus in bringing grace to all of humanity from the beginning.

However, this false and misleading gospel of love and mercy only is not a gospel of salvation at all but just an attempt to justify the disobedience of humankind beginning with original sin. God will not honor and bless such a false gospel that, in essence, dismisses the human need for Christ. God's Holy Spirit does not honor with his presence the proclamation of a gospel that under the pretense of love and mercy denies the very grace that God has bestowed on humans when he sent Jesus Christ. I truly believe that the

Holy Spirit will not be powerfully present in worship or Christian education when such a false gospel is proclaimed or taught. The quenching of the Holy Spirit because of the proclamation of a false universalist gospel may be one of the primary reasons for church decline in so many areas and denominations in recent times.

One of the scriptural examples that Bell uses to justify his contention that hell is not an eternal place but instead is the agony that people who are not living godly lives go through in this life is the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:

The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame. (Luke 16:22-24)

Bell's argument is that the rich man is actually still alive because he is asking for water. Bell states, "He's dead, but he hasn't died" (76), asserting that the rich man has not yet died to self or been born again. In other words, his contention is that the rich man is experiencing a dead spirit, but his physical body is still living. How any theologian could come up with such an exegetical conclusion on this Scripture is amazing. However, some universalists will twist the Scripture to fit their predetermined conclusions on salvation and eternity. For "the rich man also died and was buried" to die and be buried without the death of his physical body is improbable. The burial of his body certainly illustrates that the rich man probably died a physical death: "Failure to receive burial could have been interpreted as divine punishment on earth, but no such misfortune occurred" (Buttrick 291). To go through the grieving and funeral processes of that period and bury a person who was not yet completely dead seems almost impossible.

Bell completely disregards other Scriptures in this story in Luke 16 that are widely held to affirm the existence of both an eternal heaven and an eternal hell. As the English Study Bible explains, being carried away to Abraham's side or Abraham's bosom is something that "means he was welcomed into the fellowship of other believers already in heaven" (Crossway Bibles 1991). The ESV Study Bible explains further: "But the rich man went to Hades (the place of the wicked, the dead, or 'hell,' a place of torment)" (1991). Although Bell wants to deny the existence of both an eternal heaven, which is somewhere else other than on earth, and an eternal hell altogether, most orthodox interpreters have agreed for centuries under the direction of God's Holy Spirit that "the story seems clearly to teach that, immediately after death, both believers and unbelievers have a conscious awareness of their eternal status and enter at once into suffering or blessing" (1991). Bell even argues against the dead being able to communicate or even be aware of their eternal status when he poses the questions, "People in hell can communicate with people in bliss? The rich man is in the fire, and he can talk? He's surviving?" (74). Bell mentions earthly impossibilities when they fit into his arguments but ignores what Scripture says in Matthew 19:26: "with God all things are possible." Humans cannot understand entirely what heaven or hell will be like and do not know what will be possible or impossible in eternity.

Another Scripture that Bell uses to defend his position that all humans will eventually be saved is Philippians 2:10-11, which states, "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." However, an interesting observation is that Bell conveniently leaves out "in heaven and on earth and under the

earth” when he quotes this Scripture in order to try to make its meaning fit better with his preconceived universalist notion of salvation. By leaving out this part of the verse, Bell rewrites this Scripture to agree with his idea that heaven and hell are not actual places separate and distinct from the earth. Bell also completely disregards God’s plan of salvation through Jesus Christ:

The writers of the scriptures consistently affirm that we are part of the same family. What we have in common—regardless of our tribe, language, customs, beliefs, or religion—outweighs our differences. This is why God wants all people to be saved. (99)

Bell’s logic is the same thinking that is at the core of all universalist theology. A loving and merciful God who created all things will surely save all things in eternal bliss.

Bell then goes on to list a number of Scriptures, including his rewritten version of Philippians 2:10, which he says support the idea that all people will be saved. Among them is Psalm 65:2: “To you all flesh will come,” or, “all people will come to God.” Bell’s argument above that God wants all people to be saved is certainly true and supported by Scripture. However, the fatal flaw in Bell’s exegesis and reasoning is that just because all people will one day stand before God as told in Psalm 65, does not mean that all people will be saved when they stand before him in judgment. While certainly true that to God “shall all flesh come” as Psalm 65 states, the fact that all flesh will come before God does not mean that all flesh will receive a pardon when persons stand before God. By leaving out “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” from Philippians 2:10, Bell fails to deal with the obvious implication of this Scripture that some of those who are confessing “that Jesus Christ is Lord” have already stood before Christ and God the

Father in judgment and are already in heaven or under the earth, which represents death and hell.

Although Bell's either/or theology outlined in his celebrated and applauded New York Times best-selling book is easily recognized as poorly thought out and constructed by most serious theologians, other more scholarly authors have joined the universalist bandwagon in recent years. Meyers and Borg have written extensively in efforts to minimize the need for personal salvation with new language and supposedly new perspectives that are nothing more than old universalism with a new disguise.

Orthodox theologians today surely wonder how the church of Jesus Christ can maintain an evangelistic mission with conversion, justification, regeneration, and sanctification as disciple-making objectives amid the politically correct inclusiveness and universalism of so much of today's Christian thought. If all of humanity will somehow eventually be saved, without the necessity of some response to God's grace, then no need for Christian evangelism exists in any form as well as no need for the savior, Jesus Christ, whom Christians claim to profess through the gospel as the only son of God.

According to Meyers, his book is written "on behalf of those who have walked away from the church because they recognize intellectual dishonesty as the original sin of orthodoxy" (13). Meyers falls into the trap of promoting works-based righteousness when he makes statements such as, "There is not a single word in that sermon about what to believe, only words about what to do" (14), when discussing the Sermon on the Mount. From a quick survey of his book, one concludes that Meyers really does not even believe in salvation of any kind but, in fact, believes that somehow human goodness can motivate humans to follow Jesus by doing as he did. The titles of the first two chapters in his book

reveal a lot about his worked-based theology and his complete misunderstanding of grace.

In fact, I do not think that Meyers even sees a need for God's grace in the world. When discussing the era in which Jesus lived, he not only questions Jesus as Savior but actually questions whether Jesus was divine: "It should be humbling for Christians to remember that great figures were always being called sons of god when alive and more simply gods when dead" (31). Meyer's disdain for Christian theology or any exclusivist religious theology is obvious: "Will we allow the idolatry of any particular religious tradition, book or doctrine to replace the unifying message at the heart of the universal religious impulse?" (30). Meyers seems to believe that any religion that proposes any form of god other than a universal nameless one is idolatry. Meyers' concept of god as just a "universal religious impulse" is one that even non-Christians would have a hard time worshipping as a deity. Meyers is obviously wrestling with what Wesley describes as prevenient grace. God has placed in all humanity a desire to know him. However, the desire to know him is not what Christians are called to worship and share with humanity. God himself as revealed to humanity through Jesus Christ is the message his followers are to proclaim. Jean-Pierre de Caussade describes God's desire to know humans and the desire to know him:

The Holy Spirit has pointed out in infallible and incontestable characters, some moments in that ocean of time, in the Sacred Scriptures. In them we see by what secret and mysterious ways he has brought Jesus before the world. Amidst the confusion of the races of men can be distinguished the origin, race and genealogy of this, the first born. The whole of the Old Testament is but an outline of the profound mystery of this divine work; it contains only what is necessary to relate concerning the advent of Jesus Christ. (22)

God revealed himself to humanity through a name that is above every name, and he is so much more than just a universal religious impulse.

Meyers goes on to deny the resurrection in Chapter 4 of his book and describes orthodox Christians as those who “think they must believe the impossible in order to feel the implausible” (77). He demeans orthodox Christians as those who think that “before they can sing the Hallelujah Chorus, they must check their brains at the door” (77). Meyers goes on to agree with Crossan who says, “I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time can bring dead people back to life” (60). I pray that United Methodism and the body of Christ will never change their belief in Jesus’ resurrection, stated in the article 111 of the articles of religion, which states, “Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man’s nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all men at the last day” (*Book of Discipline* 64). Meyers’ theology differs from many universalists in that he discounts the need for a savior at all. In Meyers’ theology, all have no need for salvation because the Fall had no effect on humankind as a whole:

To claim, as Augustine did, that we are all permanently infected by Adams’ sin and that this new condition is incurable, save by profession of faith in the atoning sacrifice of the new Adam, Jesus Christ, is to declare that creation is inescapably bad, but selectively redeemable. Yet the Biblical account of creation says something entirely different, that we are made in the image and likeness of God, expressed by the Beautiful Latin phrase *imago Dei*. It says that we are born inescapably good, as part of a good creation, and yet lose our way by making bad choices. We do so not because we are carriers of sin, but because we are deluded by ego, trapped by fear and paralyzed by insecurity. We may make mistakes, but we are not a mistake. This truth lies slumbering within us, as Socrates understood, and must be mined by the teacher, not canceled or covered over by a savior. (103)

Although many universalists do not openly endorse Meyers' agreement with a new age philosophy that humankind is inherently good and that salvation from sin and even death is not needed by humans, I believe that this underlying thought process is at the heart of most universalist theology.

Meyers apparently sees no need for a messiah or savior for humankind at all. Humanity is inherently good; therefore, humans do not need a savior from sin. Humans are all going to live forever, so no need for a savior from death exists. Instead, humans need a teacher, which is what Jesus has become to those who adhere to this type of theology and to most universalists. The sad but inevitable result as more universalism seeps into the church of Jesus Christ is that less need is present for persons to worship and exalt Christ as he is little more than a teacher just like Socrates, Buddha, Mohammed, and Plato. The church of Jesus Christ is declining and will continue to decline where this type of theology is being taught, preached, and proclaimed.

Orthodox Christians thank God that many more believers still affirm that God sent a Lord and Savior, not just another teacher, when he sent Jesus into the world. Although Wesley would agree with Meyers' assertion that humans should start following Jesus, Wesley and most Christian theologians over the years have recognized that the only way to achieve holiness and perfection is through surrender to God's sanctifying grace through faith in, love for, and worship of his son, Jesus Christ. Meyers apparently does not believe that Christ exists as a deity at all, as the title to his book suggests when he describes "how to stop worshipping Christ" before he adds, "and start following Jesus." In Meyers' theology, the human example of Jesus' life is what God sent into the world, not himself in human form at all. Meyers' book is an example of the tendency of



universalists to replace God with themselves, as they really see no need for him at all. Because God created humans in his image, and because they still are reflecting his image, universalism fulfills the human desire to become God and do away with any need for worship or surrender. The universalist philosophy is that humanity needs is a Jesus, who just like Plato, Buddha, and Socrates, helps humans to bring out the God in each person so that humans can take their rightful place on the throne of their individual creation and as caretakers of the creation that God entrusted to them. Universalism seems to propose that humans really do not need God's interference. What Meyers and the many other universalist voices in the world today are actually saying is that humans really do not need the God who created them anymore.

While the theology of Meyers is easy to dismiss as a theology, which, in effect, attempts to discount and even reject the need for God and even strives to put humankind in the position of God, Borg is much more cunning and clever in his universalist arguments. The more subtle universalism, subscribed to by many in the religious pluralism camps, is convincingly articulated by Borg. In his book Borg gives some very good arguments about the church's overemphasis on eternal life as the only object of salvation. I believe most Wesleyan theologians would agree with these ideas. Not until the final chapter of his book does one discover that what he understands as the heart of Christianity actually falls within what he describes as a "sacramental understanding of religion" (213), which sees Christianity as just another human creation or "construction in response to the experiences of the sacred" (214). Borg does not reject humanity's need for God or God's grace as Meyers does. He simply concludes, "It is impossible for some of us to believe that only Christians can be in a saving relationship to God" (220). When

Borg argues “that seeing the similarities between Christianity and other religions adds to the credibility of Christianity rather than threatening it” (221), he discloses one of the primary motivations that is at the heart of all universalism and/or pluralism. That motivation is to create a Christianity that is palatable and inoffensive to people of all faiths regardless of how the gospel is twisted to fit into this inclusive-at-all-costs motivation. It is a philosophy that seeks to argue that everything is OK with God. God is so loving and kind that no judgment by God exists, only grace. It is a theology that sees Jesus, as Meyers did, as nothing more than a role model or teacher rather than the only son of God. It is the same old either/or theology, with a little different twist, that does not believe that grace/mercy and judgment can coexist in the same God.

Borg’s arguments in which he stresses that “eternal life has a strong present dimension” (75) are very much in keeping with John Wesley’s belief that salvation is a process towards Christian perfection, a journey that begins at justification, moves towards Christian perfection or entire sanctification in this life, and ends with absolute perfection in heaven. However, Borg makes the classic mistake of believing that the faith required for our salvation is something that humans must accomplish when he states, “If one must be a Christian in order to be in a right relationship with God, then there is a requirement, and we are no longer talking about grace” (220). The faith requirement that Borg argues against is not achieved through human effort but is a gift from God.

The Christian Orthodoxy Scale survey and the individual interviews in this research investigate the understanding of the respondents as to the source of faith. Wesley argues that human nature alone is not capable of saving faith:

Of yourselves comes neither your faith nor your salvation. It is the gift of God, the free, undeserved gift—the faith through which ye are saved, as

well as the salvation which he of his own good pleasure, his mere favour, annexes thereto. (qtd. in Outler and Heitzenrater 45)

In other words, even saving faith is not a requirement, as Borg argues, but an act of God's grace towards humans. I believe that Wesley would agree with Borg that both salvation and eternal life have "a strong present dimension" (75). Wesley, in describing salvation, says that it is "a present salvation. It is something attainable, yea, actually attained on earth, by those who are partakers of this faith" (qtd in Outler and Heitzenrater 42).

Wesley goes on to describe salvation as salvation from sin, fear, the power of sin, and the guilt of it yet never mentions eternal life at all other than in saying, "Through faith we are born again into a new life in which we are delivered from guilt and punishment" (44).

Obviously, Wesley would concur with Borg that this new born-again eternal life has a strong present dimension. To Wesley, the reason for God's grace towards humans was always centered more in restoring humans to the holy image in which he created them rather than granting humankind an eternal pardon.

In his sermon "On Repentance in Believers," Wesley describes justification as the beginning of transformation:

We allow that at the very moment of justification we are born again; in That instant we experience that inward change from darkness into Marvelous light.... But are we then entirely changed? Are we wholly transformed into the image of him that created us? Far from it (qtd. in Outler and Heitzenrater 415).

I think that Wesley would concur with Borg who says, "To know God in the present is to experience the life of the age to come" (174), and, "salvation, thus means becoming whole and being healed" (175) from the sin of the human condition. Wesley's concept of Christian perfection, which God desires from humans in this life, is described in the UMC *Book of Discipline's* confession of faith:

New birth is the first step in this process of sanctification. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart “habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor” and as “having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked.” (51)

The Articles of Religion of the UMC also emphasize, in Article XI, Wesley’s belief that God’s grace is capable of transforming humans into a state of Christian perfection either gradually or instantaneously by saying “Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously” (*Book of Discipline* 104). For Christians, being made whole through entire sanctification into Christian perfection in this life is a process that can occur suddenly, or gradually, or that can continue throughout this life unaccomplished until the absolute perfection of eternity with God.

Borg does not deny the existence of an afterlife in a place other than earth as Bell and Meyers do. However, his understanding of God’s grace is where Borg and most proponents of religious pluralism part ways with orthodox theologians such as Wesley. Borg’s argument, “if our relationship with God is based on grace, then it is not based on requirements, not even the requirement of being Christian” (220) is actually similar in some ways to the arguments of the predestinationists, which Wesley so vigorously opposed. What Borg is saying, in effect, is that grace is not irresistible, the classic argument used in predestination theology to limit God’s grace to the few elect whom God had already determined to be the benefactors. Borg, as do almost all universalists and pluralists, perhaps without realizing it, uses the argument that grace is irresistible as well, but to all. A great irony exists in the fact that today’s universalists and pluralists, who want to include everyone as the benefactors of God’s grace, are actually agreeing with a cornerstone of the theology of Calvinist predestinationism, which sought to exclude everyone except for God’s predetermined elect by proposing once again that God’s grace

is irresistible. God's grace is free, but God gives humans the free will to accept or reject his grace.

In fact, Wesley recognizes this conflict in theology as early as 1739 when a schism developed between him and George Whitefield prior to a revival. Wesley's Arminian beliefs led him to reject any form of Calvinism, which Whitefield was not yet ready to do: "Wesley had preached against predestination...believing that this kind of preaching was a necessary corollary of preaching universal redemption by faith" (qtd. in Outler and Heitzenrater 49). Wesley's fear that Calvinism would lead to universalism is certainly coming true today. As Wesley states in his sermon "Free Grace," "but if this be so then is all preaching vain. It is needless to them that are elected" (52). Wesley would make the same argument against today's universalist and pluralist belief that all are elected that he made against Calvinist predestination in his era. Wesley's argument against the Calvinists in his 1752 essay *Predestination Calmly Considered*—"Do you think to evade this by saying his mercy is more displayed in irresistibly saving the elect than it would be in giving the choice of salvation to all men and actual salvation to those that accepted it" (*John Wesley* 452)—would also be valid today when responding to the false gospel of universalism and pluralism. When Borg, Meyers, Bell, and Willimon point to Scripture to support their idea that God's grace is irresistible, Wesley might say the same thing he did in 1752: "How so? Make this appear if you can" (452). God's grace is free but it is also always resistible.

Borg, in explaining why he even chooses to be a Christian when he believes, "The claim that Christianity is the only way to salvation.... It's a pretty strange notion" (221) says that he still identifies as a Christian because "the Christian tradition is familiar, it is

home for me. I was born into it and grew up in it” (223). Borg admits that he has had to “unlearn some of what he was taught” (223). I suspect he had to unlearn a great deal, if not most, of what he was taught in order to reconcile it with his current theology and conclude that all religions “affirm a way, a path and the paths are all recognizable variants of the same path” (216) and that “the enduring religions are all paths up the same mountain,... not paths to an afterlife, but to life centered in the sacred in the here and now” (218). Other than improving the state of human morality through accountability with others, no need for religion would exist at all if Borg’s ideas were correct.

If what Borg argues is true, Christians should be happy that their religion has endured for over two thousand years. He seems to assert, at times, that only enduring religions are on the same path to a life centered in the sacred. Orthodox Christians know the truth and are not remaining Christians just because their traditions are familiar and they feel at home. Bruce Chilton, a fairly liberal scholar of world religions, says the following when discussing the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity:

All three faiths ... have developed visions of what that transformation will be like. For Islam, it is a matter of renewal (*tajdid*), a return to the pristine state of humanity, when people lived as intended by Allah. In Judaism, prophetic action brings about the *tiqqun 'olam*, the repair of the world’s wounds. Christianity anticipates a final judgement (Parousia in Greek) when Jesus will be the standard of a justice that vindicates human gentleness against all the violence of this world. (11)

While I may not agree with Chilton completely, I suspect that he would argue against Borg’s idea that believers of any faith are all on “paths up the same mountain” (218). Persons cannot be on the same path when where they are seeking to go is different.

### **The Theological Orthodoxy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth**

Two of the most respected orthodox theologians of the twentieth century are Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. However, arguments have been made that Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were actually universalists or had strong universalist tendencies in their writings. This study did find evidence of the universalism that some claim these theologians maintained. In fact, this research has led me to conclude that the opposite is true. This study shows that both of these great orthodox theologians believed that God is loving and merciful and that God's eternal judgment does not diminish his grace.

Bonhoeffer clearly shows in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, that he believed that Christians should share the gospel in an evangelical manner with a goal of conversion along with social change and becoming vessels for sharing God's love with the world as cooperative goals. Bonhoeffer clearly believed in an eternal judgment based on faith, or lack of faith, in Christ during this life:

Vice and sin may be forgiven, according to the word of Jesus, but the man who rejects the word of salvation has thrown away his last chance. To refuse to believe in the gospel is the worst sin imaginable, and if that happens the messengers can do nothing but leave the place. (211)

Bonhoeffer believed in the orthodox idea of heaven and hell as the two eternal places in which all of humans will one day spend eternity. The individuals who have rejected Jesus when their physical life on this earth is over have no further hope of salvation according to Bonhoeffer as they have thrown away their "last chance" (211). Willimon and Origen's concept of hell as a place of temporary correction can find no support in the theology of Bonhoeffer or in Scripture.

Bonhoeffer believed that faith in Christ was the only way to eternal life as he explained when discussing what he called the great divide:

For he is himself the way, the narrow way and the strait gate. He, and he alone, is our journey's end. When we know that, we are able to proceed along the narrow way through the strait gate of the cross, and on to eternal life, and the very narrowness of the road will increase our certainty. (*Cost of Discipleship* 191)

Not only did Bonhoeffer believe in heaven and hell as the two eternal options humans will face after judgment by Christ, but he may have believed in a sparsely populated heaven, which is the complete opposite of universalist theology. When discussing those who were not on the narrow path to heaven, he states, "Never let a disciple of Jesus pin his hopes on large numbers.... The rest of the world are many, and they will always be many. But they are on the road to perdition" (190). This study does not attempt to answer the questions posed in a debate over a highly populated versus a scarcely populated heaven but documents the orthodox position that both heaven and hell exist as the only two options in eternity for human beings.

Bonhoeffer also did not fall into the universalist and predestinationist trap of concluding that God's grace is irresistible and even concurred with Wesley that God's grace remains resistible even after justification. Clearly, he believed that Christians could fall from grace:

Falling away from Christ is at the same time falling away from one's own true nature. There is only one way to turn back, ... not the occasional mistake or going astray, not the breaking of an abstract law, but falling away from the form of the one who would take form in us and lead us and to our true form. (*Ethics* 135)

Bonhoeffer prefaced this statement with the explanation that "the real, the judged, and the renewed human being exists only in the form of Jesus Christ.... Only the person taken on in Christ is the real human being" (134). In other words, individuals are not even human, in the way that God intended for them to be when he created them, without Christ



controlling them. The control that Jesus exerts over a person's wretched humanness can only be accomplished through faith and surrender but is always resistible because God gave humans the free will to resist. Therefore, humans will be judged one day, and the deciding factor will not be their works but whether or not they accepted or resisted God's grace given through Jesus Christ. As I stated earlier, universalism, pluralism, and predestinationism all have at the heart of their theology a tragically flawed understanding of God's grace and its resistibility.

Barth, who some say endorsed universalism in his *Church Dogmatics*, actually wrote a book titled *Evangelical Theology* in which he endorsed an orthodox understanding of grace and salvation and emphasized the need for Christian evangelism of the lost: "Faith is the event and history without which no one can become and be a Christian" (100). By adding *and be* after the word *become*, Barth is implying that God's grace is resistible; otherwise, humans could just become Christians and not have to continue to be Christians. Barth explains, "Theology can be useful only when it does not retreat from the divine judgment that accompanies the work of all men" (149). He also analyzed humanity's need for acceptance of God's resistible grace:

In God's judgment, all theological as well as human existence can have no justification, no fame, no endurance. It can only turn to dust and ashes before God. Yes just this is the hope of man's work and word, because God's wrath is the fire of his love, and because his grace is hidden under the contradiction of his judgement, and draws near to its revelation in this judgment upon all theological as well as human existence. (152)

Not even a hint of the either/or thinking of universalist and pluralists is seen in these statements by Barth. Mercy/love and judgment can coexist in the same God. In fact, according to Barth, God's grace is revealed, though hidden, in what universalists perceive as the contradiction of his judgment.

In response to the idea that Barth may have envisioned the possibility of a way to avoid the condemnation alternative in the judgment forthcoming for all human existence apart from faith in Jesus Christ, I offer the following simple and straightforward proclamation from Barth: “But the voice which reigns, the voice by which we were taught by God himself concerning God, was the voice of Jesus Christ (*Church Dogmatics* 87). No hint of any departure from orthodox salvation theology is seen in this statement by Barth.

### **Pluralism in North American Academia**

A growing new emergence of universalism in the Christian academic world under the label of religious pluralism has occurred in recent decades, which is an attempt by some theologians to make the gospel and the church more inclusive without denying Christ completely. This study investigated the extent to which pluralism, by denying Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and being taught in many Christian seminaries as legitimate theology to young, impressionable future pastors and leaders in the body of Christ, might have affected the proclamation, teaching, and sharing of the gospel in today’s world. This study measures the effect that the teaching of pluralistic theology in our seminaries has had on the theology of the clergy in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC. With the growing liberalization of many seminaries, those faculty members to whom God’s Holy Spirit has given the discernment to recognize the threat to God’s kingdom posed by pluralism may be the minority in some parts of academia.

This study has chosen a group of pluralistic theologians from various segments of academia to demonstrate the pluralistic theology that is often being taught to future pastors in the UMC and other denominations. Karl Rahner, S. Mark Heim, Perry

Schmidt-Leukel, and a host of other theologians have joined Borg in proclaiming that the truth of what they teach is a new and enlightened theology of God's grace and salvation. Orthodox theologians must have the courage to critique this new wave of religious pluralism and the church must recognize it for what it is, which is a cunning deception being used by Satan himself.

Karl Rahner, an early pluralist, while making his proposition that all believers of any faith are really just "anonymous Christians" says, "Anyone who does not say in his heart that there is no God, but testifies to him by the radical acceptance of his being, is a believer" (395). Rahner goes on to argue that belief in any form of God is sufficient for salvation because believers of other religions actually have faith in Christ without knowing it. His arguments represent a little different twist on what is actually classic universalism and were made in response to the pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Church by Vatican Council II.

In his 2001 article, Heim makes the argument that because the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity reinforces the idea that "only such a complex view of God can account for the relation with God that takes place in Christ" (14), one can conclude, therefore, that "there cannot, then be one simple way of relating to God" (14). While most orthodox Christians would probably agree with Heim's reasoning so far, he logically moves on to the following conclusion based on his concept of the complexity of the Trinity:

It is impossible to believe in the Trinity instead of the distinctive claims of other religions. If Trinity is real, then at least some of these specific religious claims and ends must be real also. If they were all false, then Christianity could not be true. (15)

One can see where this line of thought is leading, but the basis for it is hard to comprehend as reasonable. Heim goes on basically to agree with those who “envision the afterlife as a parliament of world religions—where Jesus and Buddha and Shankara and Muhammed and Confucius and Mahavira and Moses, along with the shamans, bodhisattvas and spirit guides of all descriptions would converse and commune together” (Heim 18). The fact that the Triune God whom Christians understand and worship as the Holy Trinity is beyond human comprehension does not mean that this same Trinity works to bring divine truth through all of the other religions of the world. Daniel T. Niles explains that even the concept of faith has different meaning for Christians compared with other religions:

As one lives and works with men of other faiths, one is made constantly aware not only of the fact that Christians have beliefs different from those who are not Christian, but also of the fact that they believe in a different way. The very act of faith is different. (216)

Many Christians, particularly those who subscribe to Wesleyan theology, would agree with Heim that God’s grace is continually seeking all of humanity. Wesley describes this form of grace as prevenient grace, or the grace that goes before us. However, Heim’s argument seems to be that just because God’s prevenient grace is always seeking all of humanity that somehow his grace, through the work of the Holy Spirit, has imparted divine truth, capable of bringing salvation to humans, upon many of the world’s religions other than Christianity. Wesley would certainly take issue with this conclusion. Although Wesley’s concept of prevenient grace can be defined as “the grace that operates before our experience of conversion” (Harper 34), the goal of that grace is the very reason that God’s grace must operate outside of the body of Christ. Conversion, transformation, and reconciliation are what God is seeking as he seeks all of humankind with his prevenient

grace. Imparting or sowing seeds of divine truth that lead to other paths to salvation outside of his chosen plan for the redemption and reconciliation of humankind, which he planned and has accomplished through Jesus Christ, are not the purpose of God's grace, when seeking the unconverted and lost humans of the world. Heim's theology makes the same mistake, though different variations of it are at the heart of all universalism and pluralism. The mistake is a basic misunderstanding of God's grace based on an either/or philosophy that God's judgment cannot exist alongside his grace and mercy. Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace addresses this misunderstanding and gives insight into why universalism, pluralism, and predestinationism are all deeply flawed theologies that ignore the free will God has bestowed upon humans.

Steve Harper describes creating awareness and giving humans "response-ability" as the two ways in which prevenient grace works in their lives even though God's grace is for all and in all (37). The action of God's prevenient grace in granting the free gift of response-ability is the concept that universalist theologians cannot seem to grasp. Universalists insist, sometimes without saying so as is true in the case of Heim, that the free will necessary for response-ability creates a requirement on the part of humankind, which amounts to a works-based requirement that cannot exist if God's grace is truly free. Calvinism's theology of predestination insists that God has already decided who is saved and who is damned and denies that any response is needed through free will. Steve Harper makes an excellent defense from a Wesleyan perspective against this assertion:

Here is an important point in Wesleyan theology. We have been told in Christianity that we are responsible for the sins we commit. Wesley saw that this could not be so if God has irrevocably decreed our destiny before the foundation of the world. Absolute decree undercuts absolute responsibility. Wesley taught that we can be held accountable only if we have genuine power of choice. Through grace we can truly be responsible!

There is risk here. If God has given us the power to choose through prevenient grace, he runs the risk of our choosing against him. But Wesley believed that wherever love was in operation, risk was always present. Love must be freely given and freely received. We have no problem seeing our free gift of love through Jesus Christ. Wesley wants us to see that our response to that gift is also free. In that kind of freedom there can be genuine relationship. (38)

This freedom component of God's love, which seeks an individual, yet freely given, relationship with each human, as well as a relationship with all of humankind, is what I believe universalists struggle and grapple with the most and have such a hard time accepting as truth. Universalists want to envision and embrace a concept of God's grace and salvation, if a need for it is even recognized, in which his grace is all tied up in a neat, clearly understood gift package that contains no risk either to humans or God but also contains no relationship with him other than whatever can be formulated, articulated, created, imagined, and completely understood with imperfect human reasoning and without the guidance of his Holy Spirit. As Harper explains, such a concise, neat, and all-inclusive vision of God's grace is not plausible or possible because only when humans have the freedom to respond can the loving and entirely free relationship exist into which God created humankind and into which he desires to restore humanity through faith in Jesus Christ.

Schmidt-Leukel may have best described the recently reinvented label of religious pluralism through which many theologians today are really just putting a new twist on classic universalism:

Pluralism, as understood here is not a religious position above the existing religions. As such it would turn into a new religion that claims for itself to be superior to all the others.... A pluralist position from within the Christian tradition would thus entail that some other religions (at least one religion, but usually the major world religions) are in a theological sense

on a par with Christianity. They testify to the same ultimate transcendent reality ... and with an equal salvific potential. (88)

Pluralism, which this study has examined in depth, is similar but not identical to universalism.

Without trying to explain or delve into an extensive analysis on the differences in recent pluralist theologies and other forms of universalism historically, which cannot feasibly be done within the scope or focus of this dissertation, another variation in theology has emerged as a middle ground position between pluralism and exclusivism. This study has already explored pluralism, which can be defined as Schmidt-Leukel does. Exclusivism is simply just a phrase used for those Christians and any people of any other faith who believe that their religion contains the only true interpretation of God or salvation. According to many of today's theologians, exclusivism is no longer a defensible theology in this age of religious diversity and pluralism. Therefore, theologians such as David Cheetham defend their positions by explaining inclusivism as an alternative, which they believe "includes the strength of other positions while addressing their respective weaknesses" (63). Cheetham and other adherents to inclusivism attempt to maintain the integrity of the gospel message of salvation as a "Christian-specific notion" (74) by proposing that "Christianity could fulfill all religions ... fulfilling the 'universal' human religious need" (74). In other words, Jesus and the Holy Trinity are actually present and active in other religions. Cheetham cites the work of Jacques Dupuis who speaks about "mutual complementarity" (32). Dupuis maintains that other religions are not just stepping-stones towards Christian revelation but represent their own additional and autonomous benefits according to Cheetham. He uses Dupuis as an example of an inclusivist theologian whom he believed may have engaged in

“stretching inclusivism to its limits (some think too far)” (75). This dissertation does not try to explore further the differences between inclusivism and pluralism.

This research investigated the effect that heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism have had on the understanding of the mission of church, particularly in the South Georgia Conference. Even though, at times, the lines between pluralism and inclusivism can seem to be blurred, inclusivists maintain that they are not in the same theological camp as those who support universalism and pluralism.

Carl E. Braaten, an orthodox theologian whom pluralists and inclusivists would probably label as an exclusivist, has written extensively about how orthodox Christians should respond to this new wave of universalism rebranded under new and more enlightened terminologies. Braaten questions “how Christianity could defend itself in relation to the offspring of Western enlightenment—scientific positivism, secular humanism, atheistic nihilism and anti-Christian theologies” (394), which he believes has been an issue since Kant and on to Tillich. Regardless of how broadly theologians interpret what Wesley describes as prevenient grace, and no matter how much more appealing the new wave of universalism/pluralism might sound to many of the world’s masses of unconverted non-Christians and to many liberal progressive Christians as well and “even though God reveals himself in many ways,... God’s supreme gift of salvation is through Christ alone” (395). This truth cannot be compromised. Braaten and most of orthodox Christianity has proclaimed this simple, basic, and nonnegotiable truth for centuries just as the Savior himself did. Robert G. Tuttle explains, “If God is a triangle and I believe God is a circle, God does not become a circle to accommodate who or what I believe God to be” (86). Today’s new wave of universalism and pluralism is nothing



more than an attempt to make God into a circle to fit preconceived notions of him. These theologies are growing ever more popular in academia and creeping steadily into the church of Jesus Christ, threatening its very existence as an evangelistic body that carries out Jesus' command in the Great Commission. This new and more enlightened theology is nothing more than an attempt to modify the gospel to make it more palatable to the masses who do not recognize a need to follow Jesus Christ faithfully and to satisfy a misguided motivation to be more loving, welcoming, and inclusive to all regardless of how much the truth of God's Word has to be distorted or his Spirit quenched to do so.

Wesley would certainly agree with Braaten's statement on salvation just as the many Christians and Methodists who are walking daily with Jesus, God's only Son, surely do. When Wesley cried out from his deathbed on 2 March 1791, "Best of all, God is with us" (qtd. in Collins, *John Wesley* 268), he was certainly talking about the Triune God revealed only to humankind through his only son, Jesus Christ. As the Church of Jesus Christ, Christians simply cannot compromise this essential truth of the gospel as the good news of Jesus Christ is shared with the world. If salvation from sin and death can be found in any name other than Jesus Christ, Christians have no good news to proclaim. This study measures the effect that heterodox theologies such as pluralism and universalism have had on the theology of the clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC with whom the conference has trusted the sharing of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Research Design**

The study used both a standardized survey and researcher-designed interview questions. Because the research had two objectives, (1) an explanation of the orthodoxy

level in the South Georgia Conference, and (2) an exploration of the factors that may have contributed to the level of orthodoxy and the impact the level of orthodoxy may have on the theological understanding of the command of Jesus Christ in the Great Commission, quantitative research was used to answer question research question #1 and qualitative research was used to explore research question #2 (Creswell 73). The survey, which used a quantitative design, was intended to determine the ratio of orthodox versus heterodox theology in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The interview, or qualitative, portion of the research was used to determine the factors that have impacted the level of orthodoxy of clergy and laity in the conference and their understanding of God's purpose in calling the church to make disciples for Christ through the Great Commission. Qualitative research was also included in the study because it is the preferred method for DMin projects (Sensing 62). A survey of the lay and clergy leadership in fifty churches within the conference was used to determine the level of orthodox theology compared to heterodox theology.

The interview portion of the research was conducted using a semi-structured interview method. All of the structured interview questions were designed to invite the participants to share openly and honestly regarding their own theological journey on the issues addressed. Because of the sensitive nature of the issues being researched, open-ended and probing questions that might result in more honest and less defensive answers than more direct questions were used. A semi-structured interview approach allows the interviewer to pursue matters as situations dictate (Sensing 107). Utilizing the structured questions listed in Chapter 3, I probed the participants further on certain issues using prompts at appropriate times based on the respondents' answers to the structured

questions. Prompts were used on particularly controversial issues such as the respondents' position on the existence of hell rather than direct questions.

Research is “a process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue” (Creswell 3). Therefore, the four phases of the project were (1) survey/information gathering, (2) interviews/information gathering, (3) data analysis, and (4) conclusions based on the data collected. Phase number one, or information gathering, was the e-mailing of the surveys and the gathering and scoring of the completed surveys. Phase 2, or the interview/information gathering stage, involved interviewing twelve of the survey respondents selected from all of those who had completed a survey. All of the survey respondents were invited to participate in an interview. The first twelve of the twenty-six persons who completed a survey who expressed willingness to participate in an interview were chosen for interviews. The third phase, or the data analysis phase, involved reviewing notes from the interviews and analyzing the completed surveys to determine the orthodoxy level of the conference and what factors may have contributed to its current theological climate. The fourth phase, or the conclusions phase, involved making determinations regarding the current theological climate in the South Georgia Conference and the impact that the current theological climate has on the ability of the conference to carry out the Great Commission and make disciples for Jesus Christ.

### **Summary**

If the theologies of universalism and pluralism and other heterodox theologies are gaining wider acceptance, they may have also had an effect on the urgency with which Christians share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world. As these heterodox theologies

become even more widely accepted within the body of Christ, many more Christians may conclude that evangelism is not even necessary. This conclusion may have already been reached in many liberal progressive Christian circles where sharing God's love with the world, through a social-only gospel, has become the focus of any so-called evangelism. In fact, evangelism may have become a word that is not even an acceptable term in some circles within the body of Christ today. I do not believe that God will bless a church with growth and vitality if that church ignores the fulfillment of the Great Commission, the most important of God's calls on his disciples. The church must also have a clear and unified understanding, supported by the orthodox apostolic witness and Scripture, of what God is calling the church to assist him in accomplishing in the Great Commission. God's Holy Spirit will not bless the proclamation of a politically correct gospel, which understands Jesus Christ to be one of many paths to God.

This study examined the degree of acceptance of heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC. Many orthodox evangelicals believe that the absence of the Holy Spirit in churches, in which a watered-down gospel that denies Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life has become the predominant theology, is a major factor affecting church vitality. This research attempted by using a survey and individual interviews to measure the effect that the growing acceptance of heterodox theologies, including universalism and pluralism, have had on the theology of United Methodist clergy and laity within the South Georgia Conference. The surveys sought to measure the overall orthodoxy of the clergy and laity in the conference. The interviews sought to analyze more deeply the theological understanding of the participants regarding the mission that God is calling the church to

assist him in accomplishing in carrying out the Great Commission in making disciples of Jesus Christ. Both the survey and the interviews were based on the premise that the theological understanding of this mission is of utmost importance to the church as it responds to Jesus' call to go and make disciples. Therefore, this research focused on the understanding of the mission of Christian evangelism, not on the specifics of how it is carried out. The results of the survey and the interviews are presented in Chapters 4 and 5. The results were analyzed in these two chapters to determine if the beliefs of the clergy and lay respondents, in this critical area of theological understanding, have been effected by universalism, pluralism, and other heterodox theologies.

Many orthodox evangelical Christians today, along with many Methodists and Wesleyans, question whether most clergy and laity in the mainline Christian denominations in the United States and worldwide, really believe what is said in the professions of faith as stated in and passed down through their doctrinal heritage. No more critical and important area exists in which to measure the discernment of the purpose of God's call on the church of Jesus Christ than through the understanding of his command in the Great Commission to go and make disciples. This research attempts to find an answer to the three questions, as a part of that search for doctrinal identity in the body of Christ as a whole by using the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church as a sample population.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Problem and Purpose

As a prelude to detailing the methodology used in the study, it may be beneficial to look again at the effect of heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism on the vitality and Christian witness of the church and particularly the UMC. This study focused on the level of orthodox theology in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC. The study also examined the possible reasons for any departure from orthodoxy on the part of the participants and the effect it may have on the ability of the church to carry out the Great Commission and make disciples for Jesus Christ. As churches, Christian theologians, and individual Christians assess the health of the body of Christ in the current context, many encouraging signs of renewal and revival in twenty-first-century Christianity can be seen. Despite records of declining membership and attendance in many denominations, dynamic growth and renewed fervor and enthusiasm for the gospel of Jesus Christ can be seen in some geographic areas and individual congregations in areas, which are experiencing declining attendance. Despite worldwide growth, the United Methodist church in the US continues its overall decline of the past few decades with a loss of 138,988 members in 2011, 91,811 in 2012, and 92,256 in 2013 (*2011 State of the Church*) according to the United Methodist website [umc.org](http://umc.org). However, the growth in some United Methodist conferences such as the Kentucky Conference and in individual congregations within the UMC denomination brings thoughtful Christians to ask why some areas are experiencing growth while others are in decline. United Methodists seem to have attributed the growth in some areas to worship style and church

organization and structure with contemporary worship and small group ministries being deemed the accepted engines for growth in many US churches. However, more contemporary worship styles and the accountability and connectedness of small group ministries as vehicles for growth cannot explain the passion for Jesus Christ and the explosive growth seen in some areas of the world such as Africa and Latin America. Growth in certain congregations and certain geographic areas seem not to be dependent on worship styles, church organization, or in fact, any church growth formulas at all. The passion and explosive growth of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the areas within the UMC that are experiencing it could be evidence of an outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. The Spirit's presence in those areas of the UMC and the body of Christ that have a fervor for Christian evangelism based on an orthodox and Spirit-led understanding of God's purpose in the Great Commission, could be an explanation for the growth. While this study did not attempt to find any correlation between growth or decline and an orthodox theological understanding of Christian evangelism or a progressive, often heterodox or even universalist understanding of God's purpose in Christian witness, the possibility of such a correlation is one of the things that prompted me to do this research.

This study did not attempt to make any research conclusions about why the UMC and the body of Christ has recently seen such an outpouring of God's Spirit in some areas and not in others. The research was limited to measuring the level of orthodox theology and the possible acceptance of unorthodox or heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC, the factors behind any change in theology, and the impact any change may have had on Christian evangelism in the conference. Most Christians would agree that God will bless those churches that are

proclaiming the truth of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ with the presence of his Holy Spirit. However, this study only examines what clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference perceive to be the truth regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ and God's objectives for the church as it assists God in carrying out the Great Commission. The answers to the survey and the interview results demonstrate whether the UMC clergy and laity surveyed in the conference agree with the orthodox position of the denomination as stated in its official doctrine and handed down in the writings of traditional Methodism.

In John 4:23-24, Jesus said, "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." Jesus told his church that in order for the Spirit to be present in a mighty way, Christians must be honestly and sincerely seeking the truth of God's Word. The possibility exists that the apparent absence of the Holy Spirit in areas and congregations experiencing decline within the UMC is partially the result of theologies that have abandoned the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ in favor of political correctness. God's Spirit may not be powerfully present in or associated with gospel proclamation in churches that are not proclaiming the truth. Humanity is hungry for the truth of God's Word. The presence and power of God's Holy Spirit in those places where the truth of God's Word is being earnestly, humbly, genuinely proclaimed and taught could be a key factor that will draw the multitudes to Jesus and ensure the growth of the body of Christ.

Many conservative Christians point to a number of issues they believe are diminishing the vibrancy and effectiveness of ministries in some areas, including some



within the UMC and leading the church towards decline. Many Methodists and other Christians point towards the effect that changing societal attitudes have had on many congregations concerning issues such as homosexuality, tolerance for sin, or the authority of Scripture. Others point towards the influence of other religions and humanist theologies in an increasingly diverse world. However, the possibility exists that one of the greatest threats to the Christian faith, which could also be a primary reason for the decline of the UMC in many areas and congregations, is coming from within its own ranks. This study, by examining the theology of clergy and laity in the South Georgia Annual Conference of the UMC, explores whether or not what many believe is a growing acceptance in many congregations, in UMC seminaries, and in the hierarchy of the church itself of heterodox theologies such as universalism or pluralism, may have diluted and compromised the witness of the denomination. The possibility that God's Holy Spirit has fewer places to affirm and assure those who are worshipping in Spirit and in truth is a real possibility even in a traditionally orthodox conference such as South Georgia.

When the church of Jesus Christ forgets that its primary mission is to share the good news of Jesus with the world, a loss of passion for the gospel is often the outcome. If the church has doubts about whether Jesus really is the only way to God as he said in John 14:6, it has no good news to proclaim. The mission statement of the UMC states that its mission is making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation for the world (*Book of Discipline* 91). This study explored whether a departure from the UMC's mission statement with the acceptance of unorthodox theologies such as universalism/pluralism in the South Georgia Conference could be a contributing factor in the membership decline experienced by the UMC in the past several decades.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to measure the level of orthodoxy among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church to determine what factors contribute to that level of orthodoxy and the impact this current climate of theological understanding has on the ability of the conference to fulfill the Great Commission to “[g]o and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19).

### **Research Questions and/or Hypotheses**

This study sought to answer three questions in determining the theological orthodoxy of the clergy and lay leaders chosen to participate in the survey. The three research questions were answered based on the survey respondents’ agreement or disagreement with twenty-four statements designed as indicators of theological orthodoxy or heterodoxy and on the individual interview results. The respondents were each asked to give their level of agreement or disagreement with each of the twenty-four statements in the Christian Orthodoxy Scale by indicating whether they strongly agree, moderately agree, slightly agree, strongly disagree, moderately disagree, or slightly disagree with each statement.

### **Research Question #1**

What is the level of orthodoxy, as measured by the Christian Orthodoxy Scale, among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church?

The level of orthodoxy was determined using only quantitative measurements and utilized the Christian Orthodoxy Scale with twenty-four statements designed to measure the orthodoxy of the participants (Fullerton and Hunsburger). The scale consisted of

twelve statements considered orthodox and twelve considered heterodox. Scoring of the respondents' level of agreement or disagreement was dependent on whether the statement was an orthodox or heterodox statement. Strong agreement with the orthodox statements in the scale was given the highest score of seven and strong agreement with the heterodox statements on the scale was given the lowest score of one. No response was given a score of four. The higher the score of the respondents the more orthodox their answers were considered to be with the highest possible score being 168 with a score of seven on all twenty-four statements. A lower than average score on the scale was indicative of a participant with a more heterodox theological position.

### **Research Question #2**

What factors seem to contribute to the level of orthodoxy among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church?

One of the primary tools the study used to answer this question was the final question following the seven theological questions posed during the interview. The participants were asked where they attended seminary or course of study and who and what has most inspired them in their theological journey. In addition, each of the seven interview questions left room for further exploration of the factors that may have contributed to their theological position. Question seven also probed the participants to explain how their personal theological journey has informed their understanding of the Great Commission.

### **Research Question #3**

What impact does this current climate of theological understanding have on the ability of the conference to fulfill the Great Commission to “[g]o and make disciples” (Matt 28:19)?

Although all of the interview questions were designed to explore the impact of the level of orthodoxy on the ability of the conference to fulfill the Great Commission, questions five and six speak directly to this issue. The participants were asked to describe their understanding of a disciple of Jesus Christ in question five and their understanding of the Great Commission in question six. In question number seven the participants were asked to explain how their personal theological journey has informed their understanding of the Great Commission.

Another interview question that revealed more details about the answer to this question was question one on their understanding of an afterlife for humans. Prompts were used as appropriate to explore their understanding of the existence of heaven and hell. Question two on salvation also left room for exploration of God’s purpose in the Great Commission. Using an interview method with open-ended qualitative questions and a semi-structured interview method, I was also able to follow up on the responses of the participants to gain more insight in answering this research question.

### **Population and Participants**

The population for the survey was one hundred clergy and lay participants (i.e., senior pastors and lay leader or other lay representative) from fifty selected churches in the South Georgia Conference. The survey addressing the theology of discipleship was directed to the senior pastor from fifty churches in the South Georgia Conference. The

senior pastors were asked to let me know if they were willing to participate in the research. If the senior pastors were willing to participate, they were asked to forward a copy of the survey and the letter of consent to the lay leaders of their congregations for their participation as well. In the event the lay leader was unwilling to participate, the pastor was asked to choose another person in lay leadership from within the congregation. The total number of possible participants in the survey was one hundred with two participants from each from the fifty congregations.

The first sample of fifty churches was chosen as a convenience sample without consideration for the theology of the pastor or the ethnic or economic background of the congregation. The only consideration in selecting the convenience sample was trying to pick those who would be willing to participate in the sample. Because of the sensitive nature of the research, a sample selection was chosen made up primarily of participants who were somewhat familiar with me and would trust my integrity in conducting the research that might result in a better response rate. The selection was made from an alphabetical listing of all pastors in the South Georgia conference from the conference website (South Georgia Conference). A convenience sample was chosen even though random samples are more often employed in most quantitative research (Creswell 419). Several survey selections had to be discarded and replaced because the membership of the church was under one hundred.

The survey was sent by e-mail, as an attachment to the senior pastor of the fifty churches. Replies to the survey were accepted by e-mail or U.S. mail. A fairly large sample size of fifty was selected in order to avoid having to replace those who indicated

that they did not want to participate in the survey or did not respond within the fourteen-day deadline.

### **Design of the Study**

The study used both a quantitative, standardized survey and a qualitative, researcher-designed interview questions. The survey was designed to determine the ratio of orthodox versus heterodox theology in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The interview portion of the research was used to determine the factors that have affected the level of orthodoxy of clergy and laity in the conference and the impact that their understanding of God's purpose in calling the church to make disciples for Christ through the Great Commission might have.

The following four phases comprised the project: (1) survey/information gathering, (2) interviews/ information gathering, (3) data analysis, and, (4) conclusions based on the data collected. Phase one was the e-mailing of the surveys and the gathering and scoring of the completed surveys. Phase 2 involved interviewing twelve somewhat randomly selected respondents from within the population of those who had completed the surveys. All twenty-six survey respondents were invited to participate in an interview. Twelve survey respondents who expressed, in a timely manner, their willingness to be interviewed were selected for an interview. One other person indicated willingness to participate in an interview after the stated deadline of 31 January 2018 and so was interviewed. The third phase involved reviewing notes from the interviews and the completed surveys to determine the factors that may have contributed to the current theological climate in the South Georgia Conference. The fourth phase involved making determinations regarding the current theological climate in the South Georgia Conference

and the impact that the current theological climate has on the ability of the conference to carry out the Great Commission and make disciples for Jesus Christ.

### **Instrumentation**

My research utilized two instruments. The first instrument was the Christian Orthodoxy Scale. This survey consisted of twenty-four quantitative questions in the form of statements that the participants were asked to agree or disagree with on a Likert scale of one to three or negative one to three. An answer of negative three indicated strong disagreement, negative two indicated moderate disagreement, negative one indicated slight disagreement, a zero indicated neither agreement nor disagreement, one indicated slight agreement, two indicated moderate agreement, and three indicated strong agreement.

The second instrument was a semi-structured interview conducted on twelve participants chosen from those who participated in the survey. Because of the sensitive nature of the research, a semi-structured interview format was chosen rather than more direct questions only. A semi-structured format allows the researcher greater flexibility to pursue matters as situations dictate (Sensing 107). The interview questions were designed to invite the participants to explain their theological journey that resulted in their current theological position on the issues being researched. Prompts were used in conjunction with the questions above when appropriate during the interview, rather than direct questions, on particularly controversial subjects such as the existence of hell. Due to the possibility of putting the respondents in a defensive position in which they might not want to share their opinions openly on such issues, these types of issues were addressed in a conversational mode in order to invite more honest participation. The interviews

were all recorded to ensure the accuracy of the results. Of course, the participants were made aware of the recording in the letter of consent and were also assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

The research used qualitative measurements to answer questions two and three consisting of interviews with twelve randomly selected participants from the population chosen from respondents to the Christian Orthodox Scale. The interview participants were chosen randomly from those who responded to the Christian Orthodoxy Scale and all survey participants were invited to be interviewed. The interviews sought to determine what factors influenced the participants in their theological journey in becoming orthodox in their theology or what factors caused the participants to become heterodox in their theology. The interviews also sought to determine how their current theological understanding might influence them and their churches desire and ability to carry our Christian evangelism. The research asked the following open-ended questions using a semi-structured interview method of the participants who were interviewed:

1. Describe your theological journey in arriving at your current understanding of life after death for human beings.
2. Describe how you developed your understanding of salvation from sin and death.
3. Describe the development of your understanding of the truth of other religions and the possibility of salvation through non-Christian faiths.
4. Describe the theological journey in your understanding of Satan and his presence in the world.



5. How would you define a disciple of Jesus Christ and has this definition changed for you over time?
6. What do you believe God is calling the church to accomplish in humanity by making disciples for Jesus Christ? Has your understanding of His purpose changed over time?
7. How has your personal theological journey informed your understanding of the great commission and disciple making?

In addition to the seven questions above the participants were asked where they attended seminary or course of study and who and what has influenced and inspired them the most in developing their current theological understanding. The answers given by the twelve participants interviewed were used to answer questions two and three.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The reliability of the research may have been affected by such factors as the understanding of the participants' understanding of the questions asked and the terminology used in the survey. The participants selected to receive the survey should have mitigated the possibility of any misunderstanding of the survey. Anyone who has been appointed as clergy in the South Georgia conference or elected as lay leadership by their congregation was assumed to have at least a basic understanding of the issues being addressed in the survey.

The Christian Orthodoxy Scale has been proven to have strong statistical reliance properties and validity coefficients. The use of an established survey instrument that has been shown to be reliable since its publication in 1982 increases the reliability and

validity of this research. The use of an established instrument also diminishes the possibility of bias on the part of the researcher in this study.

### **Data Collection**

The surveys were sent by e-mail to the participants with a request to return their answers within fourteen days after receipt. No incentives were offered to the participants for their participation. Responses were accepted either through e-mail or the U S Postal Service. Flexibility in receiving the responses in the study ensured that participants were able to respond in the method most convenient for them.

The surveys were distributed 2 January 2018. Responses were received during January 2018. Compilation and scoring of the survey results took place the last week of the same month and the first week of February 2018. The individual interviews began on 7 February 2018.

March and early April 2018 was devoted to documenting the results of the survey and completing Chapters 4 and 5 of the dissertation. The first draft of the complete five-chapter dissertation was submitted to the DMIN office on 16 April 2018.

### **Data Analysis**

The twenty-four quantitative questions on the Christian Orthodoxy Scale were scored based on the published recommended scoring scale. The items in the scale consisted of twelve statements considered orthodox and twelve that are considered heterodox. Scoring of the respondents' level of agreement or disagreement was dependent on whether the statement was an orthodox or heterodox statement. Strong agreement with the orthodox statements in the scale was given the highest score of seven and strong agreement with the heterodox statements on the scale was given the lowest

score of one. No response was given a score of four. Higher scores corresponded to participants' more orthodox theological understanding. Lower scores corresponded to participants' heterodox theological viewpoints. The maximum score possible was 168 or a score of seven in response to all twenty-four statements.

The answers to each individual statement were also analyzed based on the respondents' level of agreement and ranking of the statements. A number of tables and figures were prepared showing the answers given to each statement and the statements with the highest degree of strong agreement, moderate agreement, slight agreement, neutrality, slight disagreement, moderate disagreement and strong disagreement. A number of interesting findings were observed as detailed and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

The answers given by the interview participants and the survey respondents were also compared. I emphasized the theological position of the participants on how humans acquire the faith necessary for salvation from sin and death and on eternal judgment.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Because political repercussions could occur based on the respondents' answers to these sensitive questions if the results of the surveys or the interviews were made public, the churches in the initial population were numbered one through fifty. Those who responded to the survey from the initial population of fifty and possible population of one hundred were numbered one through twenty-six. The interview participants were numbered one through twelve with an additional number denoting whether they were lay or clergy and the original church number from the fifty church sample.

All participants were assured that their answers to the survey would remain completely confidential. Participant anonymity was conveyed in a cover letter and letter of consent that accompanied the survey and explained the reasons for conducting the research. Keeping the individual answers confidential helped mitigate the risk of a low response rate to the survey.

Printed copies of the instrument, recordings of the interviews, and the research data collected were kept in my office at the church parsonage. The parsonage is locked at all times when I am not home, and no one else has a key except the parsonage chairperson who must schedule any visits with me, except in the case of an emergency. All data collected will be shredded after my graduation from the DMin program. Electronic versions of the data were kept only on my computer and computer backup, which utilizes Norton software with encryption to avoid intrusion.

The respondents were asked to sign their surveys before returning them to ensure that they personally completed the surveys. If the participants responded by e-mail, they were asked to respond from the same e-mail address to which the survey was sent to ensure that they were the persons providing the responses.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Problem and Purpose**

Many evangelical Christians today seem to sense a loss of fervor for Christian evangelism in the church, particularly in the mainline denominations. Methodism, whose camp meetings, worship services, and congregations were once a center of evangelical fervor, particularly in the United States, has experienced a decline in professions of faith and baptisms evidenced by declining membership. Thoughtful evangelicals within the United Methodist Church and other mainline denominations have questioned whether some of the decline can be attributed to more than just societal trends and changes in worship styles. The possibility that a change in the underlying theology of grace, judgment, and salvation among the clergy and laity in mainline denominations may have occurred when compared to the stated doctrine of the churches needs further exploration.

This study examined the level of Christian orthodoxy among selected clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The study considered, based on the level of orthodoxy revealed in the research, whether the reemergence of heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism has affected the theological understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the primary mission of the church as given to Christians by Jesus in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. The United Methodist Church, which evolved from the founding of the Methodist Church in America in 1784, has historically been a bastion of evangelical Christianity. Although Wesleyan theology has not historically embraced a concept of immediate and complete regeneration upon justification, conversion is traditionally understood as a necessary

initial response of human beings to God's grace. Being *born again* is a phase which is understood as the beginning of a journey with entire sanctification or Christian perfection becoming a possibility at some point in that journey. Methodism has evolved and prospered, in part, because it does not embrace a dogmatic system of theology that claims to be the exclusive and only correct answer to the need of fallen humanity for redemption. However, God would not have blessed Methodism with the power of his Holy Spirit and the growth and evangelical fervor that have occurred over the years in the denomination if the truth of God's Word had not been proclaimed as honestly as Methodists could discern.

Conversion, as an initial response to God's grace, has always been a primary component of an orthodox Wesleyan understanding of evangelism. This research explored whether or not the historical disciplines of Methodism are continuing as a basis for Christian evangelism within the South Georgia Conference when making disciples for Jesus Christ.

Many encouraging signs of renewal and revival can be seen in twenty-first-century Christianity as churches, Christian theologians, and individual Christians assess the health of the body of Christ in its current context. Despite records of declining membership and attendance in many congregations, dynamic growth as well as renewed evangelistic fervor and enthusiasm for the gospel of Jesus Christ has occurred in others. However, this study was limited to measuring the theological understanding of the Great Commission in the South Georgia Conference of the UMC to determine whether the conference's historical and stated understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and his call to go and make disciples has been affected by heterodox theologies.

This research also explored the understanding of the mission of Christian evangelism by identifying and analyzing the theological understanding of God's purpose in sending his church to make disciples through the Great Commission using twenty-six clergy and lay respondents (senior pastor and lay leader) from a fifty-congregation sample within the South Georgia Conference. An underlying premise in this study is the orthodox belief that salvation from sin and death is based solely on faith in Jesus Christ. Associated with this premise was the task of determining whether the pastors and lay leaders researched believe that humankind needs salvation from eternal damnation or whether they subscribe to the universalist idea that all will be saved, which negates the need for salvation from sin and death.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to measure the level of orthodoxy among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church to determine what factors contribute to that level of orthodoxy and the impact this current climate of theological understanding has on the ability of the conference to fulfill the Great Commission to "[g]o and make disciples" (Matt. 28:19).

### **Participants**

The Christian Orthodoxy Scale (COS) was sent to the senior pastors of fifty churches selected as a convenience sample from within the South Georgia Conference. The senior pastor at each of the fifty churches was asked to forward the survey to a lay leadership representative, preferably the elected lay leader of the congregation. Although the initial sample size was fifty, the survey had the possibility of reaching a sample size of one hundred, consisting of fifty clergy and fifty lay representatives, assuming the

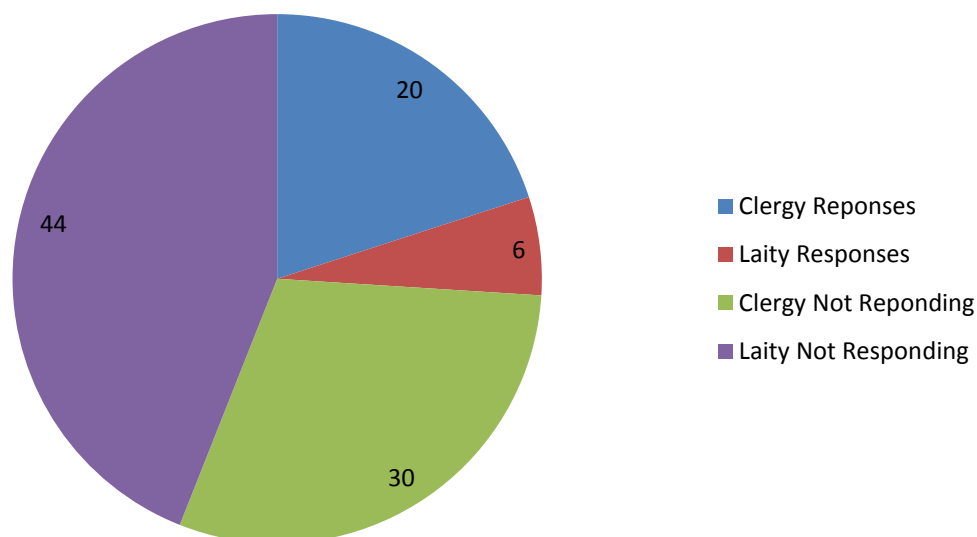
senior pastor of each church forwarded the survey to a lay representative from each church.

An earlier saved version of the survey which included six additional researcher designed statements, was mistakenly attached during the distribution of surveys by e-mail on 2 January 2018. I had created this version of the survey before the decision was made to use interviews to assess the responses to the six extra statements. The primary reason for the error of distributing the wrong survey was due to the creation of a new folder for the latest versions of the dissertation work. I mistakenly opened the old folder and distributed the last version of the COS contained in that folder. I did not recognize this error until some of the recipients of the e-mail had already responded to the survey. After noticing that the wrong survey had been distributed, I contacted my dissertation mentor and asked how to proceed. Because of the confusion that could have been created by sending the correct survey in a follow-up e-mail, I decided to use the results of the incorrect survey while disregarding the additional six questions. The survey, which was mistakenly distributed, is included in Appendix C.

Twenty-six completed surveys were returned from the fifty churches sampled with seventeen surveys being returned by e-mail and nine returned by the United States Postal Service. Of the twenty-six completed surveys received, six were from lay representatives and twenty were from clergy with the overall response rate being 26 percent based on a sample size of one hundred. The clergy response rate was 40 percent with the laity response rate being only 12 percent, assuming the maximum of all fifty laity from each church having received a survey from their senior pastors (see Figure



4.1). However, the actual laity response rate cannot be determined because the number of laity who actually received a survey is not determinable.



**Figure 4.1. Total COS survey population.**

Each of the twenty-six respondents who completed a survey was also invited by e-mail on 7 February 2018 to participate in an interview estimated to last approximately twenty minutes. Thirteen of the twenty-six survey respondents indicated a willingness to participate in an interview. One of the thirteen willing interviewees agreed to be on standby in the event that an interview with one of the other twelve persons failed to occur for some reason. Twelve interviews were scheduled during the month of February 2018. Table 4.1 shows the date range and times of the actual interviews conducted.

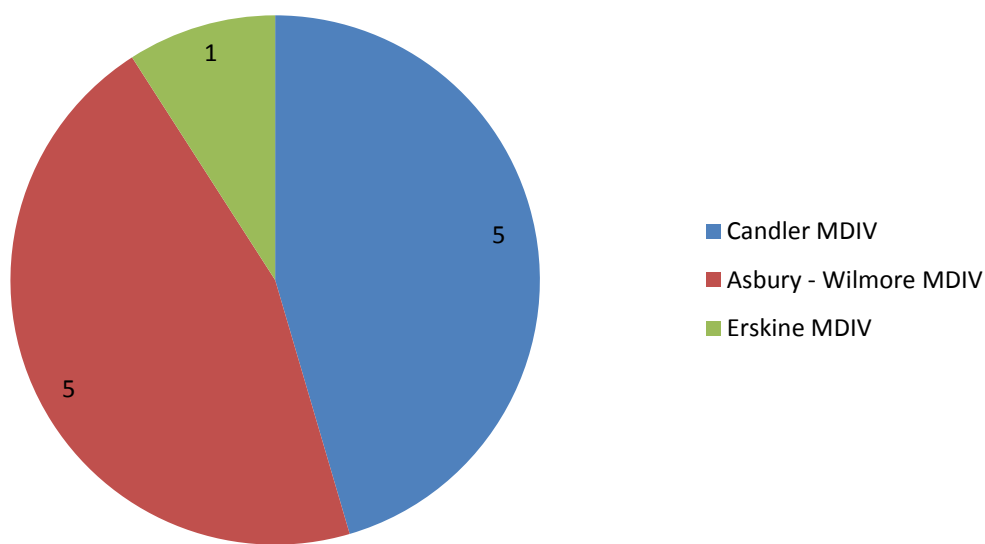
**Table 4.1. Interview Schedule**

Interview Number			Interview Date	Interview Time
1	3	C	02-13-18	10:00 am
2	9	C	02-21-28	11:00 am
3	9	L	02-08-18	10:00 am
4	10	C	02-15-18	2:15 pm
5	17	C	02-19-18	8:30 pm
6	17	L	02-12-18	6:00 pm
7	29	C	02-13-18	2:00 pm
8	33	C	02-13-18	1:15 pm
9	37	C	02-15-18	10:00 am
10	38	C	02-12-18	3:30 pm
11	38	L	02-08-12	11:45 am
12	50	C	02-13-18	3:00 pm

The length of the interviews ranged from twenty minutes to fifty-eight minutes depending on the interviewees' responsiveness to the questions. I made every effort to lead focused, productive, and revealing interviews while leaving the length of the interviews to each participant's discretion. Ten interviews were scheduled and conducted during late morning and early afternoon hours with two interviews conducted in the evening at those two participants' request.

Because all survey respondents were invited to participate in an interview, interviewees were randomly selected, based on their willingness, from within the population of those who completed a survey. The participants interviewed were from across the geographic area of the South Georgia Conference with no particular concentration of interviewees from any district or area. Although no effort was made to

include clergy with a particular conference standing, all nine of the clergy persons interviewed were elders in full connection in the South Georgia Conference. Three lay representatives voluntarily requested an interview. Interviews were conducted with these three lay representatives as well. All of the clergy persons interviewed had attended seminary and completed a Master of Divinity degree. Two of the interviewees had obtained Doctor of Ministry degrees with one other interviewee having finished all of the coursework required for a DMin degree without completing the DMin program at the seminary she attended. Figure 4.2 illustrates the seminaries from which the nine clergy interview participants received their Master of Divinity degrees. All of the interviews conducted were very informative and engaging, and I was very impressed with the thought given to the questions by those interviewed and the discernment revealed in their answers.



**Figure 4.2. Interview participants' degrees.**

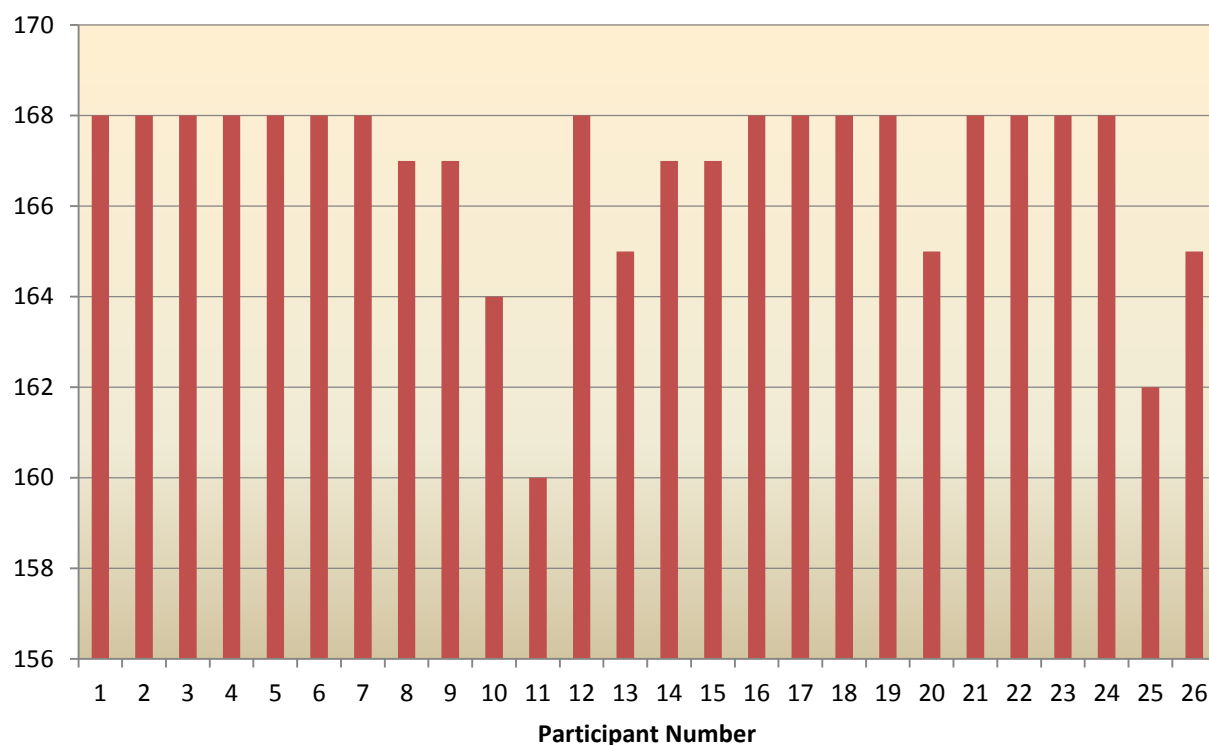
### **Research Question #1**

What is the level of orthodoxy, as measured by the Christian Orthodoxy Scale, among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church?

The results of the COS used in this study indicated a high level of orthodoxy within the South Georgia conference. However, limitations, such as the number of survey responses received and other factors, may have also contributed to the high level of orthodoxy revealed through the survey results.

The COS was scored based upon the survey participants' level of agreement with twelve orthodox statements and twelve non-orthodox statements. The maximum score of 168 indicates strong agreement with the twelve orthodox statements and strong disagreement with the twelve non-orthodox statements contained in the survey. Surprisingly sixteen of the twenty-six respondents scored 168 on their survey responses.

The scores of the other ten respondents ranged from 152 to 167, indicating a fairly high level of orthodoxy among all the respondents. Figure 4.3 illustrates the total scores of all the participants.



**Figure 4.3. Total score—Christian Orthodoxy Scale survey.**

Although the authors of the COS did not establish a definitive range of scores considered to reveal whether participants are predominantly orthodox or unorthodox, even the lowest score revealed in this study of 150 would seem to indicate a comparatively high level of orthodoxy.

The answers regarding the level of agreement with each of the twenty-four statements were also consistent with the level of orthodoxy revealed in the total scores of

the respondents. Strong agreement with an orthodox statement or strong disagreement with an unorthodox statement resulted in the highest orthodoxy score on each individual question of seven. If a survey participant were to have indicated strong disagreement with an orthodox statement or strong agreement with an unorthodox statement, the resulting score would have been one. Therefore, a firmly orthodox level of agreement or disagreement with each statement resulted in a score of seven depending on whether the statement was considered orthodox or unorthodox. A firmly unorthodox level of agreement or disagreement with each statement yielded a score of one depending on whether the statement was considered orthodox or unorthodox. The maximum score of 168, indicating the highest level of orthodoxy, resulted from a score of seven on all twenty-four questions. The lowest score on the COS, indicating the highest level of unorthodoxy (or lowest orthodoxy level), would have resulted from a score of one on all twenty-four questions. Figure 4.4 lists the scores of each participant on each question with individual COS total score on the right. The numbers at the bottom are the total scores of all respondents on each of the twenty-four statements or questions. Numeric scores other than a firmly orthodox score of seven are listed in red.

Partic #	Statement or Question # (Non-orthodox Statements Indicated by an *)																							Response	
	*				*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		Totals
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
1	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
2	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
3	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
4	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
5	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
8	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	167
9	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	167
10	7	7	7	3	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	164
11	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	7	7	6	7	7	7	4	7	7	7	6	7	7	160
12	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
13	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	165
14	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	167
15	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	167
16	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
17	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
18	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
19	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
20	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	5	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	165
21	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
22	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
23	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
24	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	168
25	7	7	7	7	2	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	162
26	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	165
Totals	182	181	181	178	177	181	181	182	182	181	178	181	182	178	182	182	182	178	182	182	182	181	180	181	

**Figure 4.4. COS scores by question.**

The twenty-six returned surveys were surprisingly consistent in the answers given. Most of the respondents indicated with a response of three that they strongly agreed with each orthodox statement and their strong disagreement with the nonorthodox statements with an answer of minus three. Figure 4.5 illustrates the scores in graphic form.

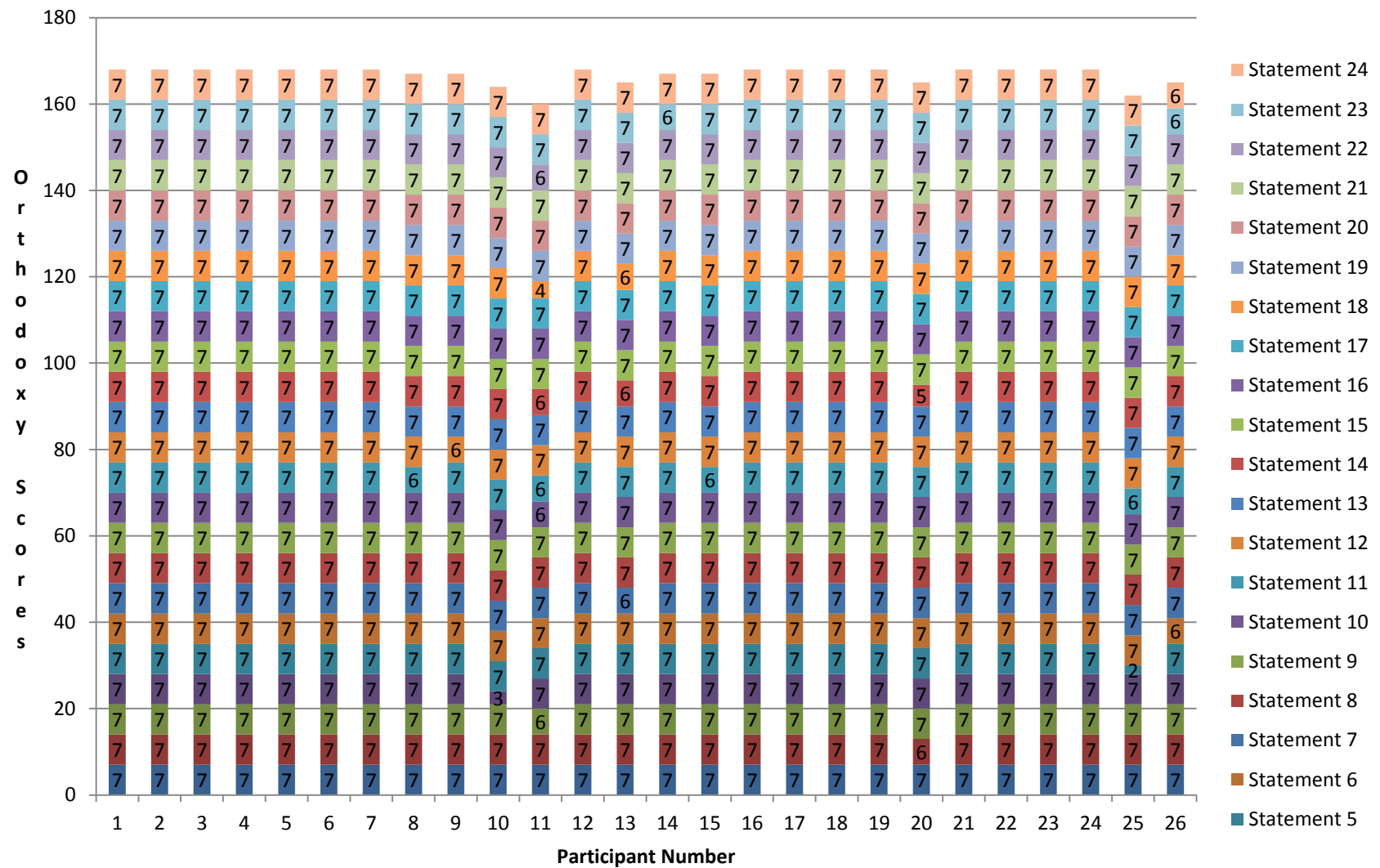


Figure 4.5. Participant scores—Christian Orthodoxy Scale.



As is evident in Figures 4.4 and 4.5 the vast majority of the scores on the individual questions were seven, which reflects the highest level of orthodoxy in the participants' level of agreement or disagreement with each of the twenty-four statements. Of the 624 responses given to the statements on the COS, 603 resulted in an orthodoxy score of seven with only twenty-one scores of less than seven. The overall percentage of strongly orthodox responses, resulting in a score of seven, was 96.6 percent. The percentage of responses that indicated anything less than strong or firm orthodoxy was 3.4 percent. The results of the survey indicated a very high level of orthodoxy within the South Georgia Conference.

### **Research Question #2**

What factors seem to contribute to the level of orthodoxy among clergy and laity in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church?

The South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, since its founding in 1939 (South Georgia Conference), has been part of a region that is historically theologically conservative. The influence of other conservative evangelical denominations during the conference's seventy-nine year history is hard to ignore as a contributing factor in the overall orthodoxy level of the conference. This study did not attempt to measure the effect of regional differences or other denominations on the orthodoxy level of the South Georgia Conference.

This study did attempt to measure, during the interview process, the effect of the interviewees' theological education and personal theological and spiritual journey on their level of orthodoxy. Question number seven used during interviews asked the participants, "How has your personal theological journey informed your understanding of

the Great Commission and disciple making?” The responses to this question were very interesting with most interview participants describing their personal faith journeys rather than their theological education. Several of the interviewees described events from their childhood, adolescent, and young adult years that contributed to their understanding of discipleship. In the third interview, the participant described growing up as a child of United Methodist missionaries and how that had affected his theology of making disciples. Participant five shared how participation in mission trips with United Methodist Volunteers in Mission had shaped and informed her understanding of the many facets of discipleship and making disciples beyond just the goal of Christian conversion. In the tenth interview, the participant passionately said, “Christ has saved me,” and went on to describe how he still feels the love that saved him and the ongoing transformation of God’s grace, both of which call him to continue to tell his story. Participant number eight described his growth in understanding of the need to deny self, take up the cross, and follow Christ as very important in informing his understanding of the Great Commission.

Table 4.2 details the interview process; lists when the interviews occurred, the length of each interview, the conference affiliation and education of the interviewees; and, provides a checklist of the questions asked during each interview. I decided not to include the membership of the churches from which the interviewees were selected due to confidentiality issues as church affiliation is published by the conference and available online to anyone.

**Table 4.2. Interview Process**

Interview #			Interview Date/Time	Interview Length (mins)	Conf Affil	MDiv Seminary (if any)	Interview Questions Answered						
1	3	C	13-2-18/10:00 am	20	FE	Candler	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2	9	C	21-2-18/11:00 am	32	FE	Candler	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
3	9	L	8-2-18/10:00 am	22	N/A	N/A—Laity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
4	10	C	15-2-18/2:15 pm	37	FE	Candler	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
5	17	C	19-2-18/8:30 pm	31	FE	Erskine	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
6	17	L	12-2-18/6:00 pm	46	N/A	N/A—Laity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
7	29	C	13-2-18/2:00 pm	37	FE	Candler	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
8	33	C	13-2-18/1:15 pm	No audio	FE	Asbury	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
9	37	C	15-2-18/10:00 am	57	FE	Asbury	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
10	38	C	12-2-18/3:30 pm	40	FE	Asbury	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
11	38	L	8-2-18/11:45 am	21	N/A	N/A—Laity	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
12	50	C	13-2-18/3:00 pm	57	FE	Candler	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Conference Relationship</b>													
9 Elder													
3 Lay leader of local congregation													
12 Total participants													

Participant nine gave one of the best definitions of God’s purpose in the Great Commission and God’s calling on Christians in carrying it out as “to share the word of God and to inspire people to act as Jesus acted.” This participant also stated that he believed that heaven and hell were the only two permanent eternal possibilities for humanity. It is either “one or the other,” he explained. In fact, most of the interview participants affirmed their belief in both heaven and hell, although three did not completely affirm the eternity of hell.

Participant number three, a layperson, described opening his heart to Jesus Christ in the eleventh grade after reading a Living Bible given to him by a high school English teacher. This person even described how he reacted with belligerence to the teacher when given the Bible. Somehow, he said, God’s Holy Spirit penetrated his belligerence and

resistance and he eventually began to read that Bible. He also described how he thanked the teacher later for having given him God's Word and planting a seed in his heart. He described his fascination with a Satanic Bible written by Anton LaVey and the effect it was having on his life prior to the planting of this seed. This participant described how lost, alone, and afraid he had felt before opening his heart to Jesus Christ. He explained how the freedom from being lost they now felt, the resulting fear and isolation brought on by living in separation from God, and the gratitude that he had given him for this freedom compelled him to carry out the Great Commission passionately and allow God to use him to bring others into the freedom of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Question number one in the twelve interviews asked participants to "describe your theological journey in arriving at your current understanding of life after death for human beings." This question, when followed up with an interviewer prompt regarding the existence of an eternal heaven and hell, produced the most revealing departures from orthodoxy. One interview participant stated that he was not sure that hell was a permanent place. Several other interviewees seemed to avoid giving a clear answer to the question of heaven and hell by asserting reluctance to place themselves in the position of playing God. While this concept of judgment and eternity is somewhat understandable, due to the inability of humans to comprehend God fully, I was surprised at the reluctance of a number of the interviewees to explain their personal theological viewpoint without putting themselves in a position of being the judge of any human individual. Some reluctance was present on the part of several interviewees to explain the development of and their theological understanding of salvation from sin and death in response to question two. The responses to question three, which dealt with the possibility of

salvation through non-Christian faiths, were predominately orthodox in affirming Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life. However, two interviewees left open the possibility of Christ bringing salvation to humans who might call him by another name or see him as being revealed through a text other than the Holy Bible.

Although the interview portion of the research revealed a moderately high level of orthodoxy in response to most of the questions, the factors affecting this level of orthodoxy were not evident from the interviews. Geographic factors, such as the traditionally evangelical bias of the population of South Georgia and the Southeast jurisdiction could be contributing factors. Another factor that may have contributed to the level of orthodoxy revealed in the interviews but cannot be proven is that those in the population surveyed whose theology was predominately liberal may have chosen to ignore the survey, thereby preventing them from being a part of the population available to invite to participate in the interviews.

### **Research Question #3**

What impact does this current climate of theological understanding have on the ability of the conference to fulfill the Great Commission to “[g]o and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19)?

Although both the surveys and interviews revealed, based on the responses received, a current climate with a relatively high level of orthodoxy in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church, the effect of the current theological climate on the conference’s ability to be used by God in carrying out the Great Commission was not clearly shown in the results of the research. However, the research results were very

informative, if not very definitive, in determining the level of orthodoxy in the areas of salvation, mercy, and judgment.

The responses of several of the participants in the interview portion of the research regarding judgment and the existence of an eternal hell as an alternative to heaven revealed some hesitancy or a lack of clarity on these issues that, if widespread, can affect the conference's urgency in making disciples of Jesus Christ. The clergy response rate to the COS of only 40 percent of the churches surveyed (twenty of the fifty churches' clergy responded) might also indicate a lack of fervor in carrying out the Great Commission. Even though the research used a convenience sample of clergy whom I believed would be willing to complete a survey, with the goal of eliciting a higher response rate than a random sample might, less than 50 percent of the clergy responded to the survey.

I received two e-mails from potential respondents who declined to participate in the survey. One clergy person explained that she simply did not have time to participate in any research and had declined similar requests from congregants and fellow clergy in the past. Another clergy person pointed to his own questions regarding the validity of the methodology and the purpose of the research as his reason to decline participation. Although a firm substantiated conclusion is impossible regarding the motivation of those clergy persons who chose not to participate in the research, the possibility exists that some of those surveyed may have been hesitant to discuss their personal theological understanding in response to a survey on orthodoxy. Another possibility is that the majority of those who declined participation have a heterodox or unorthodox understanding of the theological issues addressed in the survey.

The high level of orthodoxy revealed by the COS survey respondents points to a theological orthodoxy within the conference regarding God's purpose in using the church to make disciples for Jesus Christ. A general overall agreement was revealed in both the surveys and the interviews that salvation from sin and death is only possible through Jesus Christ.

However, one of the purposes of this research was to measure the theological pulse of the South Georgia Conference on the issue of whether Christian conversion through God's grace and the resulting gift of faith in Jesus Christ are necessary components of becoming a disciple. The overall results of the research indicate a fairly high level of orthodoxy and a relatively low level of acceptance of heterodox or unorthodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism. Therefore, I concluded from the research sample that the South Georgia Conference remains predominantly orthodox in its understanding of God's goals and purposes in which the church is called to participate through the Great Commission.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

The research, although very informative regarding the theological orthodoxy of the conference, was less revealing on the theological pulse of the conference concerning the urgency and necessity of Christian conversion as a component of making disciples for Jesus Christ. I made the following conclusions based on the research:

1. High level of Christian orthodoxy—The survey responses indicated a high level of theological orthodoxy, as measured by the COS, on the part of the survey respondents.
2. Influence of unorthodox theologies—Based on both the interviews and the surveys, there is not a significant departure within the conference due to the influence of

heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism from an orthodox understanding of salvation and the purposes of God in his command to his church to go and make disciples.

3. Beliefs about eternity—Some departure orthodoxy was revealed in the interviews with hesitancy on the part of some of the interview participants to affirm clearly the eternity of heaven and hell as the only possible destinations for human souls.

4. Salvation through non-Christian faiths—Several interview participants were hesitant to affirm an exclusivist theological understanding of salvation from sin and death by failing to deny the possibility of salvation through non-Christian faiths.

The research was very informative despite the major findings not being as conclusive and revealing as anticipated. The following is an overview of the three research questions and how the research findings were determined based on these questions.

### **Findings Based on Research Question #1**

Research question number 1 was—What is the level of orthodoxy, as measured by the Christian Orthodoxy Scale, among clergy and laity in South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church? Research question #1 was answered using the results of the COS survey as described above in chapter four. As described and detailed in the survey results a very high level of orthodoxy within the South Georgia Conference was revealed through the COS survey. Research finding number one, which is listed above, resulted from the COS survey responses.

### **Findings Based on Research Question #2**

Research question number two was—What factors seem to contribute to the level of orthodoxy among clergy and laity in South Georgia Conference of the United



Methodist Church? The first four interview questions (see Appendix D) were intended to answer research question #2. A summary of the interview responses to these four questions follows:

1. Describe your theological journey in arriving at your current understanding of life after death for human beings. All of the interview participants affirmed the existence of an eternal heaven, but several participants failed to affirm the existence of an eternal hell.

2. Describe how you developed your understanding of salvation from sin and death. All of the interview participants affirmed Luther's doctrine of *solo fide*, which is also a stated belief of the UMC. However, some lack of clarity was present on the part of several interview participants as to the definition of saving faith. The heterodox theology of religious pluralism may have influenced this lack of clarity.

3. Describe the development of your understanding of the truth of other religions and the possibility of salvation through non-Christian faiths. Four interview participants left open the possibility of salvation through non-Christian faiths. Although leaving this possibility open may have been due to questions about salvation for those who have not had a chance to hear the gospel, it also may have been due to the influence of religious pluralism on these participants. The question of whether these participants were affirming salvation through other faiths or simply leaving open the possibility of a *salvation pass* to those who have not had a chance to reject Christ was not clearly answered in the research.

4. Describe the theological journey in your understanding of Satan and his presence in the world. All of the interview participants affirmed the existence of evil in

the world. However, about one-third of them did not mention Satan as the author of evil or as part of the explanation for the fall of human nature. They seemed to be reluctant to affirm Satan as active in the world today.

Research findings two, three, and four resulted primarily from the interview responses to the first four questions. These findings were also influenced by the responses to interview questions five, six, and seven.

### **Findings Based on Research Question #3**

Research question 3 was—What impact does this current climate of theological understanding have on the ability of the conference to fulfill the great commission to “go and make disciples” (Matt. 28-19)? Interview questions five, six, and seven were intended to answer research question #3. The following is summary of the responses to these questions. An answer to research question #3 was not readily apparent or determinable from the interviews and did not result in a major finding. The following is summary of the responses to these three questions:

5. How would you define a disciple of Jesus Christ and has this definition changed for you over time? Over half of the interview participants described a disciple as a follower of Christ or one who viewed Jesus as Lord and not just as savior. Five of them mentioned the word witness, which has an evangelical context, when describing a disciple. Several participants talked about “denying self” as a desirable characteristic of a disciple. One interviewee said that a disciple would “share the Word of God and inspire others to act as Jesus acted.”

6. What do you believe God is calling the church to accomplish in humanity by making disciples for Jesus Christ? Has your understanding of his purpose changed over

time? The majority of the participants simply followed up on their answers to question five when answering this question. Although this question was designed to find out if the interviewees viewed Christian conversion as a component of making disciples, only three participants mentioned saving the lost or conversion in answering this question. The lack of focus on conversion may have been due to some misunderstanding about the question itself.

7. How has your personal theological journey informed your understanding of the Great Commission and disciple making? Almost all of the participants described their personal faith journey in answering this question rather than their seminary training or theological readings or education.

Overall the interview portion of the research supported the first finding, based on the COS survey results of a high level of orthodoxy within the South Georgia conference. However, the interview responses were not as overwhelmingly orthodox as the survey results and did reveal some degree of departure from an orthodox understanding of salvation and God's purpose in sending the church out to be used by him in making disciples for Jesus Christ. Although research findings two, three, and four resulted primarily from the interview responses to the first four interview questions, these findings were also influenced by the responses to interview questions five, six, and seven.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Major Findings**

Chapter 5 discusses and analyzes the research process and the five major findings of the research. This chapter also details any unexpected observations during the research, the possible reasons for and implications of the findings, recommendations based on the findings, and a post research prospective on the issues addressed in the research.

#### **High Level of Christian Orthodoxy**

As revealed both through the survey and the interviews, a fairly high level of orthodoxy exists in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The survey results were clearly indicative of a high level of orthodoxy within the conference. Although the interview results were not as overwhelmingly conclusive in support of a high level of orthodoxy as the surveys were, they also revealed a relatively high level of orthodoxy.

Other than the historically conservative makeup of the geographic area of the South Georgia Conference, other factors that contributed to the high level of orthodoxy revealed in the survey are not entirely evident from the survey or the interview portion of the research. Prior to the interviews, I noticed two possible issues with the survey. The use of a survey instrument such as the Christian Orthodoxy Scale may have been a deterrent to liberal clergy and laity in responding to the survey. The blank surveys distributed also included asterisks beside the twelve statements considered unorthodox, which may have led those who did respond to disagree more strongly with those

statements. The asterisks may have also encouraged those who responded to the survey to agree strongly with the orthodox statements, which had no asterisks beside them. Despite my assurances that the results of the survey were confidential, some conscious, or unconscious, predisposal may have existed on the part of the survey participants to respond in an orthodox manner in a historically orthodox United Methodist Conference. The possibility also exists that those who received surveys and held predominantly unorthodox or heterodox theological views simply chose not to respond.

After the interview portion of the research was completed, I concluded that even though the interview participants' responses appeared to be predominately orthodox, the influence of political correctness and/or universalist or pluralist theologies seemed apparent with some interviewees. Some hesitancy was present on the part of a number of the interview participants to affirm the existence of an eternal hell. Although the hesitancy may be attributed to reluctance to play God on the part of the participants by taking his Son, Jesus', place as the judge and jury for humankind, orthodox theology has historically embraced God's judgment as well as his mercy. One of the interview participants stated that he was not too sure that hell was an eternal outcome for any human being. Several other interview participants were reluctant to state their understanding of God's eternal judgment while still embracing God's eternal mercy and the concept of an eternal heaven. A hesitancy to affirm the existence of an eternal hell may indicate that universalist theologies have influenced the understanding of some of the interview participants. It might also simply indicate a preference for focusing on God's grace rather than his judgment.

Evidence of the reemergence of universalism and pluralism was explored in Chapter 2. Wesleyan theologians such as Will Willimon, whom many view as orthodox, have obviously been influenced by universalist theology. Although Willimon publicized his universalist tendencies, the clergy and laity interview participants within the South Georgia Conference may not have been as comfortable in affirming any unorthodox theological beliefs that they might hold in a traditionally orthodox conference. Therefore, the possibility exists that the research results indicated a higher level of orthodoxy than actually exists within the conference.

Based on the results of the research, the impact of unorthodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism is less significant in the conference than was revealed in the literature review. However, the literature review included published theological opinions held by Wesleyan theologians and church leaders that may tend to be more liberal or progressive than most clergy and laity within Methodism, particularly in this conference. The research analyzed whether or not the published heterodox theologies, such as universalism and pluralism, were widely held among clergy and laity in the conference. Based on the research results, less departure exists from orthodoxy within the conference than was found in the literature review.

As stated in the theological foundation section of Chapter 1, United Methodism gained a reputation as a nondoctrinal denomination during the latter half of the twentieth century. Despite this reputation, many conservative evangelical Christians within United Methodism upheld the authority of Scripture as God's written Word. Although thankful that United Methodism has not been a dogmatic denomination historically with strict and exclusive doctrinal rules, conservative evangelicals within the denomination have

maintained that denominational diversity and inclusiveness does not require departure from the essential beliefs of Wesleyan and orthodox theology. Four basic tenets of a traditional, Scripture-based Wesleyan evangelical theology are listed as (1) fallen and lost humanity, (2) repentance, (3) prevenient grace, (4) justifying grace, (5) regeneration and sanctifying grace, and (6) Christian perfection. Chapter 2 listed in the introduction ten orthodox essentials of the faith traditionally held by Wesley and most Methodists. The overall results of the research revealed that the majority of clergy and laity within the conference affirmed these tenets of conservative, evangelical Wesleyan theology. An almost unanimous affirmation resulted from both the survey and interview results of the biblical truth that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life as he himself told Thomas in the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel. However, some departure was noted from orthodoxy on the part of a number of survey participants in explaining how they understood this statement by Jesus in John 14:6. Several participants described a more liberal understanding of this Scripture by leaving open the possibility that the way, the truth, and the life that Jesus describes could be found in non-Christian religions.

If this more liberal understanding of John 14:6 is actually more widespread in the conference than definitively revealed in the research, for the reasons already described, the practice of ministry within the conference could become less evangelical in its focus than it would be with a more conservative understanding of this Scripture. Further loss of evangelical fervor could also result from any hesitancy on the part of clergy and laity to affirm the existence of an eternal hell. As described earlier, only one interview participant actually expressed serious doubt about the eternity of hell. However, several interview participants were reluctant to describe their understanding of heaven and hell as the only

possible eternal outcomes for humans. If a more politically correct liberal understanding of John 14:6, and of heaven and hell, are widespread within the conference, evangelical fervor would almost surely be dampened.

### **Influence of Unorthodox Theologies**

Based on both the interviews and the surveys, a significant departure was not apparent within the conference from an orthodox understanding of salvation and the purposes of God in his command to his church to go and make disciples. As described under the first finding, some departure from orthodoxy was revealed in the research, particularly in the interview responses. However, based strictly on the research results, unorthodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism do not seem to have had a significant influence on the theology of the clergy and laity within the conference. The conference remains predominantly orthodox in its understanding of salvation and God's purpose in the Great Commission according to the responses given in the research.

An example of the possible influence of the heterodox theology of religious pluralism is from an interviewee that seemed to leave open the possibility that Jesus might also be working to bring salvation to humanity through non-Christian faiths.

Interviewee number 3 stated his belief as follows:

If Jesus should choose, through some way, to bring salvation to a Muslim who is truly seeking after God, but he is just stuck in this religion, but that's all he knows and he's just trying to do the best he can, and if he is saved it is still by Jesus. So I'm not taking the place of Jesus in judgment. Should Jesus show mercy to that person who am I to rescind that because he showed mercy to me? I didn't deserve it.

This statement was after the same interviewee also said, "The only reason God would allow his son to die for our sins was if there was no other way."



Although these statements appear to contradict each other, interviewee number three may have used the example of the Muslim as an illustration of the eternal fate of those who have not had a chance to reject God's grace through Jesus Christ. This subject was discussed in Chapter 2, but an in-depth theological discussion on this issue is beyond the scope of this research. In fact, I am still seeking God's guidance for a better understanding of this issue. Most orthodox Christians would agree that God says clearly through Paul, in Romans 4, that the faith of those such as Abraham, who lived by faith in God prior to the coming of Jesus Christ, can be saved from sin and death through such faith. The question of the eternal fate of those who have lived after the coming of the Messiah but have not heard the good news of Jesus Christ is a question which this research does not seek to address completely.

However, the same understanding expressed by this participant was implied by several other interviewees, although less clearly. Interviewee number seven also stated that he "was not going to say that Jesus Christ is not working in Islam." The literature review described a similar thought from Karl Rahner, an early pluralist, who coined the phrase "anonymous Christians" (Pg3) to describe persons of other faiths who did not know Jesus by name but believed that God exists. The concept of pluralism expressed by Rahner and the interviewee is particularly deceptive because it allows the belief that almost any deity can be substituted for God's saving grace given to humanity through Jesus Christ alone, while maintaining the belief that salvation is possible only through Christ. Both interviewees did not identify themselves as advocates of Christian pluralism; however, some influence of this type of heterodox theology is clearly evident in their

statements. Several other interviewees gave less explicit hints that they also may have been influenced by heterodox theologies such as religious pluralism or universalism.

An orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation from sin and death has historically meant understanding him and knowing him as the only Son of God. Wesleyan theology has also included a relationship with Christ as one of the fruits of God's grace and a component of God-given faith. If those who live and have lived in this world after Christ's coming believe that salvation is possible through belief in any name other than his, then Jesus' death on the cross was in vain. No thoughtful Wesleyan theologians would deny that God's prevenient grace might be working to draw humanity to Jesus Christ through some other religions. However, Satan is trying to deceive humans through some of the same non-Christian faiths. Jesus also says in John 14:6 that no one comes to the Father except through him. Although some truth may be present in other faiths, Jesus is the ultimate truth and the only way to true and eternal life.

A practice of religion that fails to embrace the exclusivity of Jesus Christ in a world where it is much easier to fall victim to political correctness and what many consider inclusiveness is a practice of religion without power. Although the survey portion of the research showed a very high level of orthodoxy within the conference, the interview portion of the research revealed some influence by unorthodox theologies such as religious pluralism and possibly even universalism.

### **Beliefs about Eternity**

Some departure from orthodoxy was revealed in the interviews with hesitancy on the part of some of the interview participants to affirm clearly the eternity of heaven and

hell as the only possible destinations for human souls. Belief in the two possible eternal outcomes for humans is paramount in developing a fervor for Christian evangelism.

The influence of the heterodox theologies found in Chapter 2 were marginally apparent in the research findings. At least four interview participants failed to embrace completely an exclusivist understanding of salvation from sin and death. The majority of the participants were not entirely forthcoming in explaining any understanding of a requirement for salvation that departed from *solo fide*, or personal faith in Jesus Christ alone. Both the survey and interview results affirmed an understanding of faith in Jesus Christ as the only requirement for personal salvation. However, several participants did not elaborate on their understanding of what God-given faith actually is. Several interview participants left open the possibility, as does pluralist theology, that God-given faith in Jesus Christ might be available to those in non-Christian religions. None of the interview participants professed the universalist belief that all humans will eventually be saved. However, failure to affirm the existence of an eternal hell on the part of several interview participants left me questioning whether universalism had influenced the theology of those participants. While not professing a strict universalist belief that salvation from death is God's eternal plan for all of humanity, several interview participants left open that possibility.

As described in Chapter 4, one interviewee stated that they were not sure that hell was an eternal place. A number of authors, in Chapter two's literature review including Willimon, Bell, and Borg expressed the possibility that hell is only a temporary place of correction. Several other interview participants also hinted that they believed that hell might not be one of the two possible eternal outcomes for humanity.

A very interesting aspect of the interview portion of the research was that all three of the laypersons interviewed were very clear and forthcoming while explaining their understanding of eternity for humans. They all explicitly expressed the belief that only two possible eternal outcomes exist for human beings, either heaven or hell. They were not ambiguous in their expressed understanding that humans will spend eternity with God in heaven or will be separated from God in an eternal hell. Most of the clergy persons interviewed were much less explicit and direct in their understanding of eternity for human souls. Of the nine clergy interview participants, over half were somewhat hesitant to describe their understanding of the eternal outcomes possible for humans. Almost all of them did not even mention an eternal hell or affirm its existence unless prompted to do so. When asked to describe their theological journey in arriving at their current understanding of life after death for human beings, the lay interview participants did not need any prompting to mention hell and discuss their understanding of it. Why the laity was more forthcoming in discussing hell than the clergy was not clearly evident in the research.

The reluctance of the clergy to discuss their understanding of hell without prompting might be simply an issue related to the personal ministry experiences of the clergy, which have led them to be more diplomatic in answering direct questions than the laity. However, there could be underlying theological difference in the understanding of the clergy when compared to the laity due to influences such as the theological education of the clergy. The possibility also exists that universalism, pluralism, pantheism, and other unorthodox theologies may have influenced the understanding of some of the clergy participants regarding eternity. Because of the limited size of the population interviewed,

and the many other factors that might have influenced both the clergy and laity on this issue, arriving at any solid research conclusions regarding this phenomenon was impossible.

The Wesleyan understanding that humans can, through God's grace, begin living eternally in this life as God also prepares humans for the next life was affirmed by most of the participants. Interviewee number three explained God's ultimate goal as forming humans into the image of Christ. In other words, God's eternal plan for humanity, which humans cannot fully understand, involves much more than just his desire to welcome as many humans as possible into an eternal heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. Restoring fallen human beings to the perfection in which he created them is God's ultimate goal. Most of the research participants seemed to embrace and understand God's ultimate goal as a journey with Christ. I believe that Wesley would have been proud of most of the participants' responses in this regard.

The practice of ministry becomes much more than just a desire to be used by God to bring fellow humans to heaven, alongside other believers in Christ, when eternity becomes more than just a future prospect. A Wesleyan understanding of humanity's journey towards perfection through Christ lends itself to a much more holistic approach to being used by God in Christian ministry. As Jesus Christ said in John 10:10, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Overall, most of the interview participants seemed to view eternity through the lens of an abundant life both now and eternally. They also seemed to view eternal life as beginning upon Christian conversion and justification rather than at the death of a person's body for those who continue to have faith in Christ.

### **Salvation through Non-Christian Faiths**

Several of the interview participants were hesitant to affirm an exclusivist theological understanding of salvation from sin and death by failing to deny the possibility of salvation through non-Christian faiths. In fact, two persons interviewed essentially maintained that salvation is possible through non-Christian faiths by saying that they could not deny this possibility or by giving an illustration that included this possibility. Details of the interviews with these two participants (numbers three and number seven) were discussed under finding two.

Another interviewee (number ten) described their personal theological struggle with the idea that believers in other monotheistic religions were not going to heaven. This interview participant indicated, due to his own uncertainty on this issue, that salvation from sin and death may be possible through non-Christian faiths. Although this interviewee did not expressly state that salvation is possible through faith in a deity other than Jesus Christ, his uncertainty appeared to make this possibility a part of his personal beliefs. Interviewee number ten affirmed the existence of an eternal hell emphatically and described it as eternal separation from God. The theology he described seemed to be influenced by religious pluralism and not universalism. While affirming eternal separation from God as the outcome for those who reject God's grace, he seemed to be open to the possibility that God's saving grace is available to those who worship and believe in a single deity other than Jesus Christ. However, this person was very emphatic when discussing his personal salvation by saying Jesus has saved him.

Chapter 2 revealed that many theologians and Christians today profess personal faith in Jesus Christ but do not profess an exclusivist understanding of salvation. Today's

growing acceptance of heterodox theologies such as universalism, pluralism, and pantheism appears to have affected the theology of a number of the clergy interviewed in this research. While none of the research results indicated complete acceptance of strict universalism by any of the participants, the research did appear to indicate some acceptance of religious pluralism on the part of the population. The influence of this popular theology cannot be denied in the research results. However, as previously stated, the overall results of the research indicated a high level of orthodoxy on most theological issues examined. The survey results revealed no departure from the orthodox belief that salvation from sin and death is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ. However, the interviews revealed some departure from orthodoxy on the part of about one-third of the interview participants.

As discussed in the theological framework, Christian conversion is the point at which justification begins. Wesley, Oden, and many other orthodox Christians have argued that faith in Christ, though God-given, is necessary for conversion, justification, salvation, and sanctification in human beings. Jesus himself describes this faith requirement in Matthew 10:32: He will confess before God the Father all those who confess him before men. Paul stresses in a number of Scriptures that the name of Jesus is an essential element of saving faith, most notably in Philippians when he says that one day every knee shall bow before his name and every tongue shall confess his name to the glory of God the Father.

The politically correct gospel of religious pluralism that seems to have influenced so many well-intentioned Christians today, including possibly some of the clergy within the conference, would have Christians believe that somehow Jesus can work in disguise.

This concept is very similar to the idea of anonymous Christians described by pluralist Rahner. More and more Christians today, sometimes unknowingly, are being seduced by a pluralist doctrine of salvation that does not require faith in Jesus as God's only Son but in which God's grace through Christ can save humans without the name of Jesus being spoken or without those being saved realizing who has saved them. This lack of faith requirement is a very cunning, dangerous, and deceptive theology that can draw Christ's church away from seeking more of him. If Christians do not really need Jesus, or if Jesus can disguise himself as any other so-called deity, no need exists for Christians to continue as the church of Jesus Christ other than as a social agency ministering only to the physical needs of humanity and working alongside many others faiths and groups. Humanity is crying out for more than just bread and water. This world needs both manna and the Holy Spirit from heaven. Christ's church is called to proclaim only one name and that name is Jesus Christ. Discussion of the fifth finding addresses how such unorthodox theology affects the practice of ministry by making the Great Commission much less of a priority.

If findings number three and four are indicative of the theological understanding of the entire conference as a whole, it could affect the ability of the conference to be used by God in carrying out the Great Commission and the urgency with which it is carried out. Carrying out the Great Commission and Christian evangelism could become nothing more than adding numbers to the church's membership rolls. Jesus does not call the church in the Great Commission to increase church numbers while ministering to the physical and emotional needs of humans only. Jesus calls his church to abandon



themselves to him and allow him to minister to the spiritual needs of humans while serving the physical needs of humanity as well.

Overall, this study did not find an overwhelming departure from an orthodox understanding of God's purpose in calling the church of Jesus Christ to go into the world through the Great Commission and make disciples of him. However, as previously explained, particularly in findings three and four, enough departure from an orthodox understanding of the Great Commission seems evident due to the influence of unorthodox theologies, to be of concern to the leadership of the conference and orthodox evangelical Methodists. I believe that the United Methodist Church can be most effective as an instrument for God in carrying out the Great Commission when it is unified in its understanding of making disciples. Christ's church must truly believe that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life in order for the Holy Spirit to unite us in being used by him in Christian evangelism. No greater purpose exists in God's plan for his church.

As stated in the literature review, the primary focus of this research was determining the acceptance of heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism and their effect on the ability of the conference to carry out the Great Commission. The number one overriding concern that prompted me to do this research was determining whether the evangelistic fervor of the conference might have been diminished by heterodox theologies such as universalism and pluralism. In retrospect, the results of the research may have been more conclusive had the research utilized a more concise focus on God's purpose in sending his church out into the world to assist him in the Great Commission. As discussed in the literature review, whether the church truly believes that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and that no one comes to the Father but through

him is paramount. Also paramount is the church's belief in both God's mercy and judgment and both heaven and hell as the only eternal outcomes for humanity. The results of the research were not as definitive as I had hoped on these issues. Although room exists for some diversity in theology as to what constitutes orthodoxy, I believe that God will bless the church with a greater fervor in carrying out the Great Commission when his church is firmly united in proclaiming that only Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord.

Wesleyan theology has embraced an orthodox understanding of Christian evangelism. Despite differences in theology with other evangelical denominations on some theological issues, such as justification, sanctification, and Christian perfection, Methodism has passionately proclaimed the need for Christian conversion as a necessary step in a human's journey with Christ. If religious pluralism or universalism has gained increasing acceptance within the conference and within the United Methodist Church as a whole, it impedes God's ability to use the conference and the denomination to make disciples for Jesus Christ. Evangelical Methodists who love the UMC denomination and who believe strongly in the theology that John Wesley taught and lived are crying out for a return to the evangelical fervor that once filled Methodist camp meetings and churches. Methodists everywhere are longing for a fresh anointing of God's Holy Spirit to lead and empower this great denomination.

### **Implications of the Findings**

Although the research results as a whole revealed a high level of orthodoxy within the conference, some departure from orthodoxy was revealed in the interview process. Some of the clergy interviewees seem to have been influenced by unorthodox theologies, particularly religious pluralism. If the influence of religious pluralism is widespread

within the conference, it will definitely affect the practice of ministry in making disciples of Jesus Christ. Religious pluralism, universalism, and other unorthodox theologies lend themselves to a practice of ministry that is purely social in nature. A disciple of Jesus Christ is then understood as someone whom God uses to minister only to the needs of humans for food, clothing, and social justice without the need for spiritual deliverance from sin and death. Unorthodox theologies, such as pluralism and universalism, also encourage a practice of ministry that sees no absolute truth. The authority of Scripture is diminished under such theologies and the truth of God's word is understood as being relative to worldly situations. Scripture is not viewed under such theologies as authoritative but only as a historical guide that the church should understand through a rational, logical, and relative lens. Such a viewpoint is at odds with Wesleyan heritage. Outler's concept of the Wesleyan quadrilateral included reason, tradition, and Christian experience while maintaining the primacy and authority of God's Holy Word contained in the Scriptures.

I hope and pray that this research will help the conference and the UMC denomination to realize their need for continuing the Wesleyan emphasis on the authority of Scripture. I believe that God will bless his church with continuing Spirit-led growth, renewal, and revival when United Methodists continue proclaiming and living God's Word through the lens of the church's Wesleyan roots and heritage.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Because of the limitations in the scope of this study and the difficulty of measurement on these topics, drawing hard and fast conclusions about the overall theological pulse of the South Georgia Conference, or the United Methodist Church as a

whole, from this research would not be prudent. I realized beforehand that the subject matter of this study was very difficult to measure. However, because I felt that God was leading me to allow him to use me in researching this very important topic, I chose to do this research regardless of the difficulty and controversial nature of the subject.

In hindsight, the research might have been more revealing and conclusive if the purpose statement had been narrowed somewhat to focus only on the conference's understanding of God's purpose in sending his church out to make disciples under the Great Commission. However, such an approach to the research may also have led to more hesitancy and less candidness on the part of the research participants.

I believe that despite the difficulty in measurement and other limitations in addressing such a controversial subject in this research, the research findings were still significant. However, I would caution against drawing unwarranted generalized conclusions from this study.

### **Unexpected Observations**

Several unexpected observations were encountered during the research. One unexpected observation was that the lay participants in the interviews were more forthcoming, and seemed more certain, in describing their theological understanding in response to the interview questions than the clergy participants. Although this observation probably might have been expected due to the responsibilities of the clergy in church and pastoral leadership and the need for diplomacy at times in their calling, it was still surprising.

Another observation, which was somewhat of a surprise, was the low level of response to the COS survey instrument. Despite using a convenience sample of clergy

persons I knew in an effort to solicit a higher response rate, only twenty-one of the fifty clergy persons in the population responded to the survey. It was also somewhat surprising that only five laypersons in the congregations of the twenty-one clergy respondents returned a completed survey. The lower-than-expected response rate could be due to the controversial or sensitive nature of the survey. Some clergy may not have wanted to respond to a survey that sought to measure their level of orthodoxy, regardless of their theological stance.

I was also very surprised by the high level of orthodoxy revealed in the survey results. Factors that could have contributed to the high level of orthodoxy shown in the survey results were discussed in Chapter 4. Another somewhat surprising observation is that all of the survey respondents who agreed to participate in an interview were ordained elders within the conference, despite invitations to all of the survey respondents to participate in an interview. I was expecting more response from local pastors within the conference both to the survey and the interview requests. Seven of the fifty clergy surveyed were local pastors, but only one of those seven returned a completed survey.

### **Recommendations**

Several recommendations might result from, or be considered in relation to, this research project. First and foremost would be a recommendation that the practice of ministry within the conference includes more focus on Christian evangelism and making disciples of Jesus Christ. Christian conversion, as the first step on a lifelong faith journey with Jesus Christ, should be the top priority for the conference, United Methodist congregations, and the clergy.

Despite the Methodist understanding of salvation as a journey and conversion and justification as a result of God's prevenient grace, the conference needs a renewed focus on Christian conversion as the first step in a person's journey of faith. I truly believe that many United Methodist churches have allowed the belief that conversion is not a decision but a response to keep them from including altar calls and invitations in their worship services. United Methodism must not miss any opportunity to allow God's grace and the Holy Spirit to draw a person in responding to Jesus Christ. Despite the Methodist belief that baptism should not be repeated, pastors should always be prepared to baptize immediately in a worship service a person who says that he or she has not been baptized or to reaffirm his or her baptism. God's grace is available to all persons at any stage in their walk with Christ. Of course, any immediate baptisms or baptismal reaffirmations should always be followed up with training for new members and accountability within each local church. The church must work with the Holy Spirit in not leaving people at the altar where God found them.

I believe that sometimes this great denomination (the UMC) is guilty of planning the Holy Spirit and a person's response to the Spirit out of the worship services. Despite the desire for an orderly and well-planned worship service, which is normally a good ministry practice, Methodists must allow for spontaneity and the movement of God's Holy Spirit on individuals and congregations during our worship.

Churches should also encourage more times of prayer for the churches and those who will attend the worship services before each service and during each week. These times of prayer should be centered in seeking more of God and the direction of his Holy Spirit while coming before him in humble emptiness, powerlessness, and repentance.

God's Holy Spirit will lead the church to many other recommendations, practices, and solutions to undertake if congregations will humbly and obediently submit and abandon themselves to him. Pride is the greatest enemy of the Holy Spirit's presence, and of fruitful growth in all churches, not just in the UMC. No formula or program exists to combat pride other than the death of self and the resurrection of Jesus Christ within individual Christians and churches.

### **Postscript**

Almost six years have passed since I embarked on this long journey in the Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. Although the road has been very difficult, compounded by my wife, Pam's, breast cancer and her Lyme disease during my doctoral work, the journey has been very satisfying and rewarding. I truly believe that God wanted me to complete this project although I am not sure why. I trust him and know that he has a plan. Therefore, he has given me the persistence to endure to the finish, despite a change in both my dissertation mentor and my ministry appointment during the journey. I am very grateful for the patience and support of all of those who have helped me through this process. I feel very strongly that the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church and many other churches within the body of Christ are suffering from a lack of clarity in understanding God's call on his church in the Great Commission. No greater call exists on individual Christians and on the church of Jesus Christ than sharing the good news and making Christian disciples. The importance of understanding and responding to that call was the primary motivation that God used to allow me to complete this project.

The church's understanding of the purpose of God's call to go and make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is critical in allowing God to use the church to assist him in carrying out the Great Commission. As discussed in the literature review, most Methodists understand discipleship as much more than simply conversion, justification, and immediate and permanent delivery from sin and death. Methodism has traditionally viewed God's grace as always being resistible at any stage in the journey of faith through Jesus Christ. Methodists have historically viewed conversion as the beginning of a journey of regeneration and sanctification through God's Holy Spirit. However, one of the purposes of this research was measuring the theological pulse of the South Georgia Conference on the issue of whether Christian conversion through God's grace and the resulting gift of faith in Jesus Christ is a necessary component of becoming a disciple.

Overall, I was impressed with the genuine, heartfelt passion of most of the interview participants about sharing the good news and connecting people to Jesus so that they might become disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Therefore, I am praying for a renewed focus and a Holy Spirit-driven revival in the South Georgia Conference, throughout Methodism, and everywhere in the body of Christ with making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world the primary emphasis. My prayer is also that God will give the conference a renewed passion and energy filled with his power as he uses churches as vessels in carrying out the Great Commission.

Due to the importance of this topic to the body of Christ, I sincerely hope and pray that this research will shed more of his light on what may be viewed by some as



controversial and potentially divisive theological issues within the South Georgia Conference of the UMC. My prayer is that God might use this research, in some small way, through his desire to bring his church together as one, unified voice to help the conference and the UMC proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the world led by his Holy Spirit as he uses the church as his vessels in making disciples for Jesus Christ. I pray fervently that the Spirit-led truth that Jesus describes in John 14:6 would prevail in the hearts and minds of both the clergy and laity within the conference. This truth will compel the conference in its goal of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, while understanding the Great Commission as more than just a command to advance a social gospel.

## APPENDIX A

### LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Fellow Pastor and UMC layperson,

Your participation in an important study, which will be used as research in my dissertation in the Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, would be very much appreciated. The purpose of my research is to measure the orthodoxy of our theological understanding as leaders in the United Methodist Church. Both our conference and our denomination have placed significant emphasis on discipleship in recent years. The official mission statement of the UMC, based on the scriptural mandate of Christ to his church in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:9-20, is to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” This study will try to determine the level of orthodoxy in our theological understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and how the current climate of theological understanding might impact the ability of our conference to fulfill the Great Commission to “go and make disciples.”

Your response to the survey will be kept completely confidential and no respondent or church will be identified by name in my research findings. This survey is a standardized instrument first published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* in 1982. Individual interviews will also be conducted with twelve persons randomly selected from the participants. The interviews will be recorded for accuracy, but the recordings will be kept confidential and will be destroyed after the research is completed. The pastors and laity who respond will be identified in my dissertation only by number as one of one hundred respondents to the survey. I will not discuss any respondent's

individual answers with anyone other than my Dissertation Committee. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. The responses to this survey will not be used for any other purpose than as a part of my dissertation research. Therefore, I do not believe that there is any risk to anyone who participates in the survey. However, please let me know within fourteen days if you do not want to participate in the survey.

All participants were chosen from churches in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. The surveys were then e-mailed and mailed through the US postal service to the appointed clergy at each of these twenty churches. As part of your participation in the survey, please ask the lay leader of your church (or one of the churches if yours is a charge) also to participate in the survey. Please forward the survey to your lay leader or another layperson in your church such as the Church Council Chairperson, delegate to annual conference, or PPRC Chair in the event that the lay leader does not want to participate. The layperson in your church should send his or her survey response directly to me to ensure the confidentiality of their responses.

If you or your lay participant would like to have a copy of the final research findings, I will provide a copy by e-mail. Please indicate your request with an x in the space provided beside your signature at the bottom of this letter. Please sign this letter of informed consent and return it with your completed survey within fourteen days by e-mail, US mail. If you respond by e-mail, please respond from the same e-mail address that you received this request through. Thank you very much for your participation.

Sincerely, Lee E. Pettis

Pastor, Millen United Methodist Church, South Georgia Conference UMC

Candidate in the DMin program at Asbury Theological Seminary

I have read the above letter and agree to participate in the research on the attached  
“Christian Orthodoxy Scale, Attitude Survey” and any follow-up interviews that could  
take place on our church’s property.

Participant’s Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Church \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Copy of final research requested \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY SCALE

#### Attitude Survey

This survey includes a number of statements related to specific religious beliefs. You will probably find that you agree with some of the statements and disagree with others, to varying extents. Please mark your opinion on the line to the left of each statement, according to the amount of your agreement or disagreement, by using the following scale:

Place a – 3 in the space if you *strongly disagree* with the statement.

– 2 in the space if you *moderately disagree* with the statement.

– 1 in the space if you *slightly disagree* with the statement.

Place a + 1 in the space provided if you *slightly agree* with the statement.

+ 2 in the space provided if you *moderately agree* with the statement.

+ 3 in the space provided if you *strongly agree* with the statement.

If you feel exactly and precisely *neutral* about a statement, place a “0” in the space provided.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. \* \_\_\_\_\_ Humans are not special creatures made in the image of God; they are simply a recent development in the process of animal evolution.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Jesus Christ was the divine son of God.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The Bible is the word of God given to guide humanity to grace and salvation.
5. \* \_\_\_\_\_ Those who feel that God answers prayers are just deceiving themselves.
6. \* \_\_\_\_\_ It is ridiculous to believe that Jesus Christ could be both human and divine.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Jesus was born of a virgin.
8. \* \_\_\_\_\_ The Bible may be an important book of moral teachings, but it was no more inspired by God than were many other such books in the history of Man.
9. \* \_\_\_\_\_ The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in the modern era.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Christ will return to earth someday.

- 11.\* \_\_\_\_ Most of the religions of the world have miracle stories in their traditions: but there is no reason to believe any of them are true, including those in the Bible.
12. \_\_\_\_ God hears all of our prayers.
13. \* \_\_\_\_ Jesus Christ may have been a great ethical teacher, as other humans have been in history. But he was not the divine son of God.
14. \_\_\_\_ God made humans out of dust in his own image and breathed life into them.
15. \_\_\_\_ Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of humanity's sins.
16. \* \_\_\_\_ Despite what many people believe, there is no such thing as a God who is aware of people's actions.
17. \_\_\_\_ Jesus was crucified, died and was buried but on the third day He arose from the dead.
18. \* \_\_\_\_ In all likelihood there is no such thing as a God-given immortal soul which in humans which lives on after death.
19. \* \_\_\_\_ If there ever was such a person as Jesus of Nazareth, he is dead now and will never walk on this earth again.
20. \_\_\_\_ Jesus miraculously changed real water into real wine.
21. \_\_\_\_ There is a God who is concerned about everyone's actions.
22. \* \_\_\_\_ Jesus' death on the cross, if it actually occurred, did nothing in and of itself to save humankind.
23. \* \_\_\_\_ There is really no reason to hold to the idea that Jesus was born of a virgin. Jesus' life showed better anyone else that he was exceptional, so why rely on old myths that don't make sense.
24. \_\_\_\_ The resurrection proves beyond a doubt that Jesus was the Christ or Messiah of God.

Note: No response is scored "0" on the (-3 to +3) response scale. It is suggested that a participant's data be discarded if he or she does not answer 10 or more items. Data can easily be prepared for analysis rescaling responses such that -3 = 1, -2 = 2, -1 = 3, 0 (or no response) = 4, +1 = 5, +2 = 6 or +3 = 7. The keying of all negatively worded items – indicated above by an (\*) – is reversed so that for all items a low score indicates an unorthodox belief. The CO score is then computed for each subject by summing over the 24 items.

## APPENDIX C

### CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY SCALE SENT IN ERROR

#### Attitude Survey

This survey includes a number of statements related to specific religious beliefs. You will probably find that you agree with some of the statements and disagree with others, to varying extents. Please mark your opinion on the line to the left of each statement, according to the amount of your agreement or disagreement, by using the following scale:

Place a – 3 in the space if you *strongly disagree* with the statement.

– 2 in the space if you *moderately disagree* with the statement.

– 1 in the space if you *slightly disagree* with the statement.

Place a + 1 in the space provided if you *slightly agree* with the statement.

+ 2 in the space provided if you *moderately agree* with the statement.

+ 3 in the space provided if you *strongly agree* with the statement.

If you feel exactly and precisely *neutral* about a statement, place a “0” in the space provided.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. \* \_\_\_\_\_ Man is not a special creature made in the image of God; he is simply a recent development in the process of animal evolution.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Jesus Christ was the divine son of God.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The Bible is the word of God given to guide man to grace and salvation.
5. \* \_\_\_\_\_ Those who feel that God answers prayers are just deceiving themselves.
6. \* \_\_\_\_\_ It is ridiculous to believe that Jesus Christ could be both human and divine.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Jesus was born of a virgin.
8. \* \_\_\_\_\_ The Bible may be an important book of moral teachings, but it was no more inspired by God than were many other such books in the history of Man.
9. \* \_\_\_\_\_ The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in the modern era.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Christ will return to earth someday.

- 11.\* \_\_\_\_ Most of the religions of the world have miracle stories in their traditions: but there is no reason to believe any of them are true, including those in the Bible.
12. \_\_\_\_ God hears all of our prayers.
- 13.\* \_\_\_\_ Jesus Christ may have been a great ethical teacher, as other men have been in history. But he was not the divine son of God.
14. \_\_\_\_ God made man out of dust in his own image and breathed life into him.
15. \_\_\_\_ Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of man's sins.
- 16.\* \_\_\_\_ Despite what many people believe, there is no such thing as a God who is aware of man's actions.
17. \_\_\_\_ Jesus was crucified, died and was buried but on the third day He arose from the dead.
- 18.\* \_\_\_\_ In all likelihood there is no such thing as a God-given immortal soul which in Man which lives on after death.
- 19.\* \_\_\_\_ If there ever was such a person as Jesus of Nazareth, he is dead now and will never walk on this earth again.
20. \_\_\_\_ Jesus miraculously changed real water into real wine.
21. \_\_\_\_ There is a God who is concerned about everyone's actions.
- 22.\* \_\_\_\_ Jesus' death on the cross, if it actually occurred, did nothing in and of itself to save Mankind.
- 23.\* \_\_\_\_ There is really no reason to hold to the idea that Jesus was born of a virgin. Jesus' life showed better anyone else that he was exceptional, so why rely on old myths that don't make sense.
24. \_\_\_\_ The resurrection proves beyond a doubt that Jesus was the Chris or Messiah of God.
25. \_\_\_\_ Heaven and hell are real places and all humans will spend eternity in one or the other of them.
- 26.\* \_\_\_\_ Jesus Christ is one of the pathways to God and salvation.
27. \_\_\_\_ Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation from sin and death.
- 28.\* \_\_\_\_ Jesus Christ died for all and all will eventually be saved.
- 29.\* \_\_\_\_ For God so loved the world that He would not allow any human to spend eternity in hell.
30. \_\_\_\_ Satan is active in the world and Christians are in a constant battle with the forces of evil.

Note: No response is scored "0" on the (-3 to +3) response scale. It is suggested that a participant's data be discarded if he or she does not answer 10 or more items. Data can easily be prepared for analysis rescaling responses such that -3 = 1, -2 = 2, -1 = 3, 0 (or no response) = 4, +1 = 5, +2 = 6 or +3 = 7. The keying of all negatively worded items – indicated above by an (\*) – is reversed so that for all items a low score indicates an unorthodox belief. The CO score is then computed for each subject by summing over the 24 items.



Note 1: The scale authors also use a -4 (very strongly disagree) to +4 (very strongly agree) response format. Procedures for using that format are similar to those for the -3 to +3 format noted above.

Note 2: Those items printed in bold face are the six items for the short form of the scale.

**APPENDIX D**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS UTILIZED**  
**IN THE TWELVE RESEARCH INTERVIEWS**

1. Describe your theological journey in arriving at your current understanding of life after death for human beings.
2. Describe how you developed your understanding of salvation from sin and death.
3. Describe the development of your understanding of the truth of other religions and the possibility of salvation through non-Christian faiths.
4. Describe the theological journey in your understanding of Satan and his presence in the world.
5. How would you define a disciple of Jesus Christ and has this definition changed for you over time?
6. What do you believe God is calling the church to accomplish in humanity by making disciples for Jesus Christ? Has your understanding of his purpose changed over time?
7. How has your personal theological journey informed your understanding of the Great Commission and disciple making?

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