

213<sup>th</sup> Commencement  
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary  
May 28, 2009

The Rev. Dr. Russell Richey, Professor of Church History, Chandler School of Theology,  
Emory University

Matthew 14:22-36 NRSV

Are you graduates saying, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water”?

Have you led interviewing committees to believe that you walk on water?

Are you heading into a church position where they clearly expect you to walk on water?

Do you, do they hope—deep down—that you can indeed accomplish the miraculous?

### *Prefatory Remarks*

When President Carl called with this lovely opportunity and to invite me to preach for Pittsburgh’s commencement, I expressed surprise that he would be contacting a lifelong Methodist. And a student of Methodist history! He explained that while PTS would be graduating Presbyterians, others would receive degrees as well, including a number of Methodists, the second largest of the school’s populations. He then noted two other factors that I might want to take into consideration. 2009, he reminded me, celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Calvin’s birth. So I discovered! What a year this Calvin Jubilee has been! The official website itemizes page after page of events across the globe. And those of you here for this wonderful ceremony have just missed or have only returned from a four day English language conference in Geneva on “Calvin and His Influence, 1509-2009.” President Carl noted as well that we would be worshipping in this grand sanctuary and that it would remind me of Riverside Church, Duke Chapel, and Christ Church, Oxford. The latter was, of course, John Wesley’s college. He graduated in 1724. Methodists like anniversaries as much as any communion. 2009 is not one of our big celebratory years but we could note that it is the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wesley’s dramatic second-story rescue from his father’s burning rectory. And Calvinists, I am sure, would want to know that 250 ago that Wesley blessed the world with his *Thoughts on Christian Perfection*.

Our Theme: We’re In This Boat Together

I will return in a moment to reflect with you directly about the text—and the expectations that you may have and certainly any congregations to which you go will have—that you will be able to walk on water. I will suggest instead that among the text’s counsel is the reminder that we are in the boat together. Indeed, it seems fitting to start, ecumenically, with tonight, and with what Methodists what call an exhortation: As you finish this time together as

students—Presbyterians, Methodists and others—do take measure of what it has meant for you to suffer exams, panic over paper deadlines, labor over with exegesis and struggle in systematics in an **ecumenical** context!

### *An Historical Excursus*

Your ecumenical theological experience and the growing fellowship between our two communions (I want to focus especially upon Presbyterian and Methodist relations and with apologies to all those here from other communions) have been a long time in developing. The early relations between Methodists and Presbyterians were by no means constructive. Indeed, they tended to be wonderfully derogatory. Wesleyanism made absolutely scurrilous judgments about Calvinism and Presbyterianism. And the latter returned the favor. And for good reason.

Methodism emerged as a movement in revolutionary America in the 1760s and 1770s during the height of the “Calvinist Controversy” that pitted John and Charles Wesley, their chief apologist John Fletcher, and the Methodist Conference against prominent Anglican Calvinist critics, including Augustus M. Toplady (author of “Rock of Ages”) and the followers of George Whitefield who constituted the Calvinist Methodist “Connection” around Selina Lady Huntingdon.<sup>1</sup> In response to Calvinists generally and to the Whitefield wing of the Methodist movement particularly, the Wesleyans embraced and boasted their identity as Arminians.

So they defined themselves within a Reformed theological framework. So did their central doctrines of universal atonement, free grace, regeneration, holiness and free will. So Methodism oriented itself theologically and contextually within the theological discourse and controversies that went back through Westminster to Calvin and occurred frequently over the Calvinist shibboleths of Dort.

Methodism transmitted itself to the colonies with an anti-Calvinist message given expression in John Wesley’s writings,<sup>2</sup> in Fletcher’s *Checks to Antinomianism*, in “The Large Minutes,” that provided quasi-constitution, in Charles’ hymns, and from 1777 onward in the *Arminian Magazine*. American Methodists needed such resources. They penetrated areas where Dutch Reformed or Presbyterian or Congregationalist or Calvinist Baptist sentiments prevailed, enjoying initial successes in the middle states and upper south. American Wesleyan preachers were—even more than John whose sentiments they preached and Charles whose hymns they sung—missionaries and evangelists not systematic theologians. However, they could indeed preach and sing their convictions whether on the stump, under a spreading oak, in a small cabin,

---

<sup>1</sup>. See Kenneth J. Collins, [John Wesley: A Theological Journey](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), esp. 216-29; Richard P. Heitzenrater, [Wesley and the People Called Methodists](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 199-270.

<sup>2</sup>. Wesley's writing and collections thereof guided the preaching of his American followers. His [Sermons](#) and [Notes on the New Testament](#) were and would remain definitive. His [Works](#) went through multiple editions in Britain and in America. The latest, a critical edition is [The Works of John Wesley](#); begun as [The Oxford Edition of The Works of John Wesley](#) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975-1983); continued as [The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley](#) (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984- ); 15 of 35 vols. published to date.

on the square, or in some denomination's church building. In such public settings they routinely faced and addressed convinced and "consistent" Calvinists.

Here are early Methodist ecumenical sentiments from their journals or from letters between preachers:

O! that devilish Doctrine of Calvinism is so rooted in the heart of many here, that I am afraid it will be the means of their eternal overthrow: I am determined to expose the unreasonableness of it as much as possible. The Baptists keep very still as yet, the water is too cold for them to do much now.<sup>3</sup>

Go on Brother and be strong in the Lord: fear not man, nor all the powers of darkness. I believe we have the Lord and his truth on our side. The Calvinists and Quakers, may talk as they will. Yet, if they don't repent, they will all go to hell.<sup>4</sup>

An itinerant William Colbert made these charitable notes in his journal:

Saturday 4 rode . . . fell in conversation with a Calvinist in principle who said that it was the will of God, that David should commit murder and adultery. Calvinism, must certainly be the most damnable doctrine upon the face of the globe.<sup>5</sup>

We are making inroads among the Presbyterians, and raising Societies, and many get Converted, and shout the praises of GOD's pardoning Love; that once thought (perhaps 3 or 4 months past) it was a sin to go and hear the Methodists—the Devils and the Presbyterian Ministers, rage at an awful rate. They preach so pointedly against—and represent the Methodist-principles in such colours, that many are excited to come and hear, get undeceived—distressed—come again—find GOD—and are bold in declaring to their old mess-mates, what GOD has done for their souls.<sup>6</sup>

Presbyterians and the Reformed generally had equally lovely things to say about Methodists:

William Hill, a journal excerpt from August 1790, describing a Methodist quarterly meeting that he attended: Sab. 29. In the morning the sacrament was administered by the Methodists. I partook of it with them, but had very little satisfaction therein—they do it in such a slight and hurried manner, that I am sure, that sacred ordinance can be

---

<sup>3</sup>. "The Letters Written to Daniel Hitt, Methodist Preacher, 1788 to 1806." Given by the Stevenson Family to Ohio Wesleyan University. Transcript made by Miss Annie Winstead, Upper Room. Footnotes and Intro by Raymond Martin Bell, 1967. Copy in the Drew University Library. From The Rev. B. Brown on Gloucester Circuit, 1/6/1791.

<sup>4</sup>. "The Letters Written to Daniel Hitt," from the Rev. George Wells, 12/22/1791, 74.

<sup>5</sup>. A Journal of the Travels of William Colbert, Methodist Preacher: thro' parts of Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, Delaware and Virginia in 1790 to 1833, 10 vols. typescript. TMs, 1790-1822 (microfilm); AMS, 1822-1833, Colbert Collection, The United Library of Garrett-Evangelical and Seabury-Western Theological Seminaries, Evanston, IL., July 4, 1792 on the Northumberland Circuit, I, 75.

<sup>6</sup>. "The Letters Written to Daniel Hitt," from I. Robbins, 12/1802 or 1/1803, 297.

but of little benefit to them; at least this was the case with me. [He was more favorable on Methodist preaching]<sup>7</sup>

A correspondent to the Presbyterian Home Missionary Society, a C. Washburn, writing in 1846 from Arkansas, characterized the competition (Cumberland Presbyterians, Campbellites, Hard shell Baptists, Episcopalians, Romanists and Methodists).<sup>8</sup> Speaking of the latter, he remarked:

They are the next numerous sect [to Cumberlands]. . . . They are now in Arkansas what they were 40 years ago in the northern and middle states. Most of the preachers are deplorably ignorant, bitterly sectarian, and wildly fanatical. Their tone of piety is very low, except when the fit is on them. They have all the defects of the [Cumberlands—sectarian; Arminian; promoters of camp meetings, noise and confusion; hasty with conversion, offering a religion consisting almost entirely of strong excitement and feeling; incompetent ministers]. The promulgation in some portions of our country of “Oberlin perfectionism” seems to have greatly revived the “Methodist doctrine of Christian perfection.” This is the most frequent theme of their declamation and ranting. Among their preachers are some very intelligent and pious men and in their church are some most lovely Christians. As a denomination they are more faithful to maintain true gospel discipline than those above named [Cumberlands]. The whole denomination are staunch friends and advocates of Temperance.

John W. Nevin, professor of theology at the German Reformed Seminary in Mercersburg and earlier a member of this faculty, writing in the 1840s,<sup>9</sup> worried over the “foreign spirit” being imported into Reformed and Lutheran churches, a Wesleyan or Methodist or Finneyite spirit epitomized in promoted revivalism of the camp meeting variety. Nevin labeled this religiosity the “new measures” and characterized it with one of its prominent features, the anxious bench.

The system of New Measures has no affinity whatever with the life of the Reformation, as embodied in the *Augsburgh Confession* and the *Heidelbergh Catechism*. It could not have found any favor in the eyes of Zwingli or Calvin. Luther would have denounced it in the most unmerciful terms. His soul was too large, too deep, too free, to hold communion with a style of religion so mechanical and shallow. . . . The system in question is in its principle and soul neither Calvinism nor Lutheranism, but Wesleyan *Methodism*.

This Methodist system he termed **heretical, fanatical, quackery, bad, a nuisance, lacking in real spiritual power, manipulative, disorderly, vulgar, irreverent, noisy, irregular, coarse, feeling-driven, subjective**—in short, **Pelagian**. Nevin also deplored Methodists for allowing women to speak in religious assemblies. He contrasted Methodism with the system of true

---

<sup>7</sup>. William Warren Sweet, ed., *Religion on the American Frontier: The Presbyterians* (New York: Cooper Square [1964]; reprint of 1946 edition), 761.

<sup>8</sup>. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Presbyterians*, 696

<sup>9</sup>. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Bricker, eds., *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, “The Anxious Bench,” 1844: 12, 42, 45, 89, 99, 96.

Godliness—nurtured through catechism, the sacraments and a “deep, thorough and intelligent piety”

His to-be Mercersberg colleague, Philip Schaff, wrote of Methodists in his important treatise *America: A Sketch of the Political, Social and Religious Character of the United States of North America*<sup>10</sup>:

In worship, Methodism is not satisfied with the usual divinely ordained means of grace. It really little under stands the use of the Sacraments, . . .

It has far more confidence in **subjective means** and **exciting impressions**, than in the more quiet and unobserved but surer work of the old church system of educational religion. The main point with it is always effect on the sinner by **special efforts** of the preacher; and with this view it has invented and perfected, especially in America, a machinery for the purpose, altogether foreign to Pietism—the system of what is called new measures. This includes not only prayer-meetings . . .

but also and especially camp-meetings, . . .

protracted meetings, . . .

class-meetings, anxious or inquiry meetings on appointed week days for the interchange of religious experience, . . .

and, finally, the anxious-bench, a genuine modern American invention, i.e., a seat before the pulpit, to which after sermon the penitent hearers are invited, and where they are pressed with special exhortations, and wrought up to the most intense nervous excitement, till the new life “breaks through,” and then the sense of forgiving grace often vents itself in a jubilee of ecstasy, as boisterous as the violent lamentations, groans, and not rarely convulsions, in which the sense of sin had just before found utterance. . . .

Nor have I a moment’s doubt, that in those exciting Methodist meetings, and even on the anxious-bench, many thorough conversions, and still more superficial but real awakenings, needing further care, have taken place. But unfortunately in reality very much that is human and impure, mingles itself in, and these **new measures** have led to the most **injurious outbreaks of religious fanaticism**; above all they have nourished a most **dangerous distrust** of the **ordinary means of grace, the calm preaching of the Word, the sacraments, and catechetical instruction**. . . .

---

<sup>10</sup>. Philip Schaff, *America: A Sketch of the Political, Social and Religious Character of the United States of North America*, 1854, 173-75.

The Methodists reject not only confirmation, as a useless or hypocritical form, but also the idea of objective baptismal grace; and they often dreadfully neglect all religious training of children, in the vain, presumptuous expectation that some exciting revival-sermon in a camp-meeting or a few hours on the anxious-bench, will answer the purpose of the tedious **process of parental discipline and care, and regular pastoral instruction**. No wonder that, under such influences, the young generation grows up rude and immoral, and that in many districts where the quick straw fire of Methodistic revivals has burned brightly, it has left a complete desolation, with frivolous mockery of all religion. The new measures have passed from Methodism into other churches, the German among the rest, and are there very frequently still more wantonly abused.

I would conclude by recalling that the New School/Old School division, reflected concerns about what constituted faithfulness and the degree to which Reformed commitments could be sustained under revivalism of the Methodist/Finney variety.

### *Getting Into the Boat Together*

“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

From the point at which Nevin and Schaff wrote, Presbyterians and Methodists have discovered themselves to be in the boat together. An itemization of our explorations of unity should include the following:

- The trans-Atlantic Evangelical Alliance, 1846
- The YMCA, the “businessmen’s revival” of 1857-58, Civil War ministries and relief
- The Student Volunteer Movement, 1888;
- The World Student Christian Federation, 1895
- The world missionary conferences, 1900--
- And the consequent Faith and Order/Life and World initiatives [leading to *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*]
- The Federal Council of Churches
- Formal explorations of unity between the two churches, as for instance the 1928-32 talks
- Co-operative parishes and other expressions of local unity
- The National Council of Churches/World Council of Churches and state and local councils
- Churches Uniting in Christ/Consultation on Church Union—a response to a sermon by
- Eugene Carson Blake, challenging the churches to unity
- The 1980s joint participation in the Methodist Reformed Dialogue—sponsored by the World
- Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council
- Christian Churches Together in the United States

- Beyond the U.S.—Reformed and Methodist churches in united/uniting churches in Canada, South India, Zambia, Belgium, North India, Zaire, Australia and Italy
- The targeting both by the IRD (Institute on Religion and Democracy)
- And in this 500<sup>th</sup> Calvin anniversary, we United Methodists can and need to embrace our own Calvinist roots. For post 1968, United Methodists can celebrate Calvin’s 500<sup>th</sup> because our Evangelical United Brethren/EUB our United Brethren root is Reformed. (William Otterbein)

### *A Personal Journey*

My own career as a theological educator has been influenced by the converging denominational trends.

Raised as a Methodist preacher’s kid, I opted to attend the still discernibly “Reformed” Union Theological Seminary (NYC) in the mid 60s. Challenged by Union’s witness to the city, I interned at the East Harlem Protestant Parish and in the Presbyterian portion thereof, then headed by Letty Russell. The following summer I accepted a Student Interracial Ministry (SIM) assignment in Rocky Mount in my home state of NC in the church pastored by the late James Costen (moderator, seminary president). The following year I headed SIM, a Union-student-led effort, overseen by Presbyterians at 475 Riverside Drive. That same year I studied Calvin with Wilhelm Pauck. After seminary came doctoral work at Princeton University, constant use of the seminary library, regular attendance at Nassau Presbyterian or the university chapel, wife’s membership in the former, my assisting dean of the chapel, and a dissertation on English Presbyterianism in its evolution towards Unitarianism. My first course as a green seminary faculty member was on Jonathan Edwards and his Reformed successors. That and a course on Puritanism remained my favorites. Later as a theological administrator at United Methodist schools, I fostered the work of Presbyterian (and also Baptist and Episcopal) studies committees.

When two colleagues and I launched a multi-year, Lilly-supported, large-scale study of United Methodism, we did so guided by the leaders of and template for the similar Presbyterian Louisville-based effort. And throughout my life as a theological educator, I have participated in ecumenical endeavors that frequently found Presbyterian and Methodist together prominently at table. Fuller table fellowship is a personal as well as denominational aspiration.

### *Application*

“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

**One conventional reading—if there had been more faith on Peter’s part—he would have taken a successful walk. But—in Scripture—only the divine walks on water!!!!**

What then is the message for ministry? For graduates into ministry?

After leaving the disciples in the boat and going to pray, Jesus walks to them across the water.

Terrifying them. Jesus speaks, calming them. As one commentator noted, the church is our boat, the boat is the church, buffeted by gale force winds, battered by high waves.

The sea—the chaos of the times, the dwelling of the demonic, the threat of death.  
Night a time of evil.

Triple threat (night/sea/storm)—our churches today—adversities without, controversies within. At times insecure in its faith. Unsure of where the Lord is, where he is speaking most clearly, where he is leading us. Are we adrift and is He elsewhere praying. We feel, at times, beleaguered, wondering where to look for him and peering across the waters for his figure. Faith and doubt interplay.

Then a Matthean insertion into the Marcan narrative. Peter endeavors to emulate, follow, duplicate his Lord's feat. Seemingly overcoming his fear, knowing it to be Jesus, wanting to display his faith—he intrepidly bids: "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Peter, surely our model for ministry, here indeed portrayed as a courageous disciple, here a disciple for all ages,

Peter speaking for the disciples (and us?) says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Jesus responds, "Come." Peter steps out. A brave act. An testimony, on one level, of his faith in Jesus.

On another, he obliges Jesus to demonstrate that he is who he says he is. He demands proof. He tests Jesus. He requests a miracle. He walks on water.

Peter's request, on one level an expression of faith, on another an indication of a lack thereof. It is indeed tempting to want, to ask, to expect, to demand—a MIRACLE.

Calvin says:

The condition which he lays down shows that his faith was not yet fully settled. *If it is thou, says he, bid me come to thee on the water.* But he had heard Christ speak. Why then does he still argue with himself under doubt and perplexity? While his faith is so small and weak, a wish not well considered bursts into a flame. He ought rather to have judged of himself according to his capacity, and to have supplicated from Christ an increase of faith, that by its guidance and direction he might walk over seas and mountains. But now, without the wings of faith, he desires to fly at will; and though the voice of Christ has not its due weight in his heart, he desires that the waters should be



firm under his feet. And yet there is no room to doubt that this longing sprung from a good principle; but as it degenerates into a faulty excess, it cannot be applauded as good.

The little word “*if*” when posed to Jesus signals temptation. Seldom used but consistently, I think, employed to tempt Jesus to do something alien to his divine/human nature. Recall the account of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry (Matthew 4), in the wilderness, fasting, for forty days and nights, tempted by the devil—“**if you are the Son of God, command ...**”

Think how we bargain and tempt God. If I pass, if you heal her, if you get me through this ....

The Lord **commands**, Peter obeys. Stepping out, he obeys. The Lord commands, Peter’s responds as disciples must. He steps out into the water.

Peter sees tempest, loses sight of Jesus Water threat chaos—death, disbelief, adversity, illness, insecurity

Recognizes what he has done, Peter sees the perilous wind and waters, begins to sink and cries, “Lord, save me.” Jesus does and the disciples make the affirmation “Son of God.” A calming word from Jesus. Does it suffice? Only the divine can walk on the water

To ask Jesus to so empower us, to demand that he equip us, is to challenge, doubt, betray our lack of faith.

Seek proof.

Look at the perils around us, at the stormy sea, rather than at Jesus.

Demand that God prove Godself.

Demand that our insecurities, problems, suffering, illness be overcome.

Demand that we be given a divine deliverance, ability, solution.

The reproof to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Does it chastise him for doubting that with Christ’s command he could walk on water? **Does Jesus not reprove Peter for doubting** it was Jesus whom they saw, doubting it was his Lord, doubting that he was Who he Was. Only thereafter do they all, Peter included, confess, “Truly you are the Son of God.” “It is I” an echo of Yahweh’s self-identification? At any rate a theophany and the disciples’ testimony, confession at the end.

We, like Peter: Leave the other disciples, the church Launch out on the strength of our own faith.

“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Are you saying, do you say, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water”? Have you led interviewing committees to believe that you walk on water? Are you heading into a church position where they clearly expect you to walk on water?

Do you hope—deep down—that you can indeed accomplish the miraculous?

Will you engineer situations in which Jesus can only say “Come”?

**A Calvinist word for us all—trust God not our abilities!**

Walking on water possible for God

Jesus’s embrace of us. **Await his embrace!**

Our keeping Him in view. **Keep our eyes on him!**

So we can be assured that Jesus will rescue, will stay the storm, will pull us through.

**Stay with the boat, the church!**

Stay in the ship of the church and stay with brother and sister disciples—of all denominations.

“When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”

Stay with the boat. In the boat we can—in the Lord’s embrace, in the embrace of our fellow/sister disciples, in the safety of the boat, in the Lord’s promised presence to be with us when one or two gather in this name—in the boat we can truly confess; confess as the body of Christ; confess as his disciples “Truly you are the Son of God.”

For us/you in the boat, the Lord will calm the wind and the sea.

And the boat, the boat of the church, the boat that is Christ—includes us all. We need to claim the one boat, occupy ourselves in ministry in the one boat, each pull our oar, depend on our sisters and brothers to pull theirs or to hoist a sail, embrace other Christians as we embrace and are embraced by Christ.

**Keep your sights fixed on Jesus! Expect him and wait for him to come to you! Stay with the boat, the church!**

Blessings on all you graduates, blessings on all those who have supported you through this long ordeal. blessings on your ministry, blessings on the bonds that you have formed here, blessings on your ministry.