



READY RESOURCES

A Publication of the Memphis Conference Connectional Ministries Office

Wesleyan Distinctiveness

RETRIEVING SPIRITUAL CLARITY AND VITALITY

At a historic gathering in November 2007 of Bishops and Extended Cabinet representatives from all over the world, a renewed emphasis on Wesleyan and “Methodist” distinctiveness was discussed. The time is ripe for the United Methodist Church to do some soul searching. It is the same type of soul searching John Wesley himself did as part of a renewal movement in the eighteenth century Anglican Church. As a document that was shared at the convocation titled *The United Methodist Way: Living the Christian Life in Covenant with Christ and One Another* highlights...

“Methodism began as a movement of spiritual renewal within a national church marked by much nominal commitment and spiritual lethargy. Early Methodists adopted a Way of living in covenant with Christ and one another that yielded rich spiritual fruit in their lives and in their engagement with the world.... But, over the course of (its) growth, the family of denominations (that emerged from Wesley) gradually abandoned central aspects of the original “Methodist Way.”

Today, there is wide-spread consensus that we are in need of a contemporary “movement of renewal.” Ours is a time when the retrieval of Wesleyan and Methodist “distinctiveness” is essential. Our distinctiveness or uniqueness within the overall Christian family is not for the sake of being “over-against” other denominations in a battle for institutional influence or even survival. Instead, claiming Methodist distinctiveness is really a matter of seeking spiritual clarity, vitality and fruitfulness as Christian disciples and communities of faith. It is a return to the fundamental focus on what Wesley termed “holiness of heart and life.” As the *Methodist Way* document states: “For early Methodists the goal of their “Way” of life was to become faithful and mature disciples of Christ. This meant far more than just affirming Christ as their Lord, or having an assurance of his pardoning love. They longed for what they saw promised in scripture—the transformation of their sin-distorted attitudes and disposition into ever greater conformity with Christ’s abiding love for God, neighbor and the whole creation.” In a word, the Methodist “Way” is about transformation! “As we experience the love of God transforming our lives we are more inclined to engage the world around us in compassionate and transforming ways.”

(Quotes here are taken from the document *The United Methodist Way*, presented at the Extended Cabinet Convocation, November 2007 at Lake Junaluska Assembly, U.S.A.)

In her work chronicling the character of the Wesleyan Class Meeting, Denise L. Stringer writes, “From the beginning, the Methodist movement has sought to lead people beyond nominal Christianity into a vital relationship with God. (See Rom 3:22)

John and Charles Wesley believed that personal conversion, when properly nurtured within the Class Meeting, would lead to lifelong Christian discipleship and the spread of scriptural holiness across the land.

There was no room in Wesley’s movement for “almost Christians.” All around him he saw parishes where the bulk of the members called themselves Christians but did not demonstrate the character of a truly converted life. He sought to help lay persons “watch over each other’s souls.”

REFLECTION/ACTION:

***What do the phrases “nominal” or “almost” Christian mean?**

***Discuss within a small group in your local congregation the following question: “How does a person become more than a ‘Christian in name only?’”**

WESLEYAN DISTINCTIVENESS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

HOW IS OUR DISTINCTIVENESS DEFINED?

John Wesley's efforts at spreading "scriptural holiness" across the land were centered in both defining and then sustaining a distinctive approach to life itself. The "Methodist Way" was essentially a scripturally-based way of both *acceptance of divine grace as well as ordering one's life in communion with Christ and the church.*

Perhaps the most crucial Christian understanding is centered in knowing the gift of God's unfailing grace in your life. As Ephesians 2:8 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." The gospel of Jesus Christ is the gospel of grace.

As the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* states so eloquently, "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and by *exemplifying Jesus' command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world....God's grace is active everywhere, at all times, carrying out (the purposes and reign of God) as revealed in the Bible.*" The United Methodist "way" is centered in the redeeming knowledge of and response to God's grace embodied by Jesus Christ.

What was distinctive about Wesley's approach to Christian discipleship was his blending of the proclamation of a deep theology of grace, available to all, and his call to accountable or "obedient" discipleship. Wesley believed persons needed to be "awakened" to their need of God. Wesley's preaching sought to awaken people to awareness, acceptance and acknowledgement of both their sin-distorted lives and their response to divine grace. For Wesley, it was not enough to be saved from penalty for sin. Authentic disciples displayed evidence of salvation and transformation by Christ through their love of God and neighbor. The "Class Meeting" offered ongoing nurture, guidance and "discipling" for those who were growing in grace. A disciple's life always displays an ongoing pattern of *grace and response. It is Wesley's message of divine grace available to all and then application of practical means of response to grace that became distinctive.*

Basic Definitions of Grace

So, how can we describe God's grace? Very simply stated, grace is God's "unmerited favor" and love. Prevenient grace draws us into God's loving and forgiving embrace. Justifying grace is Christ's atoning, forgiving action on the cross to free human beings from the penalty of sin. Sanctifying grace is the ongoing, transforming work of the Holy Spirit to renew us in the image of Christ and perfect our will to love both God and neighbor. Wesley's emphasis on transformation by grace is the *Methodist way!*

"There is no point in Wesley's theology of salvation where divine grace is not the leading motif..."

-Kenneth Collins
The Scripture Way of Salvation

WESLEY'S SIMPLICITY!

Three rules to follow in Class Meetings:

1. Do no harm.
2. Do good.
3. Observe the instructions of God.

What are the "marks" of a Christian disciple? Evidence of your discipleship for all to see?

1. Faith- as trust in Christ.
2. Hope- as assurance of your forgiveness of sins.
3. Love-of God & neighbor.

REFLECTION/ACTION:

*Is a clear message of "salvation by grace through faith" being preached and taught in your congregation?

*Discuss how your church can become "saturated" with an awareness and responsiveness to God's grace?

*Discuss how grace and obedience are related in a disciple's life.

*How does your church nurture Christian obedience, as an ongoing response to divine grace and a means of displaying holiness of heart and life?

*What "Accountable Discipleship" groups does your church offer? Could it offer?

How is our distinctiveness achieved and sustained?

John Wesley summarized his expectations of how the Methodist “Way” of Christian living is achieved in his sermon titled “Thoughts upon Methodism.” He challenged Methodists to “hold fast the *doctrine, spirit and discipline* with which they first set out.” It is important to have a clear understanding of these three aspects of the Christian life.

Clarity of *theological doctrine* is very important. Wesley lived in a time of intense theological debate about the true nature of Christian salvation and discipleship. Wesley’s genius was his ability to make theology understandable for ordinary people. While some Christian reformers emphasized a “predestined” view of God’s grace being limited to a chosen group of “elect” persons, Wesley declared that divine grace was available to all. While the “Ana-baptists” were calling for “rebaptism” or “believer’s baptism” only, Wesley remained solidly in the tradition of offering baptism at any age, with an emphasis on the action of baptism being God’s and not the “believer’s.” While many argued that true holiness or “sanctification” could not be achieved on this side of the grave, Wesley emphasized “going on to perfection” in this life as the primary goal of the Christian life, characterized as moving forward in Christian maturation toward the point of one’s will being centered completely on love of God and neighbor. Wesley’s emphasis on grace and holiness of heart and life was an ingenious blending of both the Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. (*Collins, The Scripture Way of Salvation, p. 20*) Wesley challenged his followers of the “Methodist Way” to continue to practice authentic Christian discipleship with these marks of theological clarity.

A renewed focus on *the Spirit’s work* of transformation must be a core emphasis. It is precisely the Holy Spirit that prompts us to greater and greater responsiveness to God. As the Christian disciple repents and then continually relinquishes sin, the Holy Spirit is the one who is continually prompting, guiding and empowering our journey of being transformed by the grace of God in Christ. As Robert Mulholland has written, Spiritual formation is the “ongoing process of being formed in the likeness of Christ for the sake of others.” Only openness and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit makes true spiritual formation possible. We need to put the “spirit-ual” back into our shared life.

Finally, *discipline* marked those who participated in early Methodism. Wesley provided “tickets” to participants of the Methodist Class meetings. Weekly accountings of spiritual disciplines and an assessment of “How is it with your soul?” were required. Time-honored spiritual disciplines were defined by Wesley as the “means of grace” that kept the Christian disciple growing in grace and moving toward authentic maturity. Without the blending of a deep theology of grace with very stringent requirements of accountability, the Methodist movement would have never emerged.

Today, it is the retrieval of our doctrinal clarity, a renewed emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s work of transformation and insistence on accountability for Christian disciples being built into congregational life—these three components—that will lead to the renewal of the Methodist “Way” as Wesley intended.

Wesleyan “Spiritual” Disciplines/Practices (Means of Grace)

The Public Worship of God
Searching the Scriptures
The Lord’s Supper
Family and Private Prayer
Christian “Conferencing”
Fasting or Abstinence

Feeding the Hungry
Welcoming the Stranger
Clothing the Naked
Care for the Sick
Visiting the Imprisoned
Sheltering the Homeless

WESLEYAN MORNING PRAYER

Loving Teacher, come and make your home in our hearts this day. Dwell within us all day long and save us from error or foolish ways. Teach us today to do no harm, to do good, and assist us so that we may stay in loving relationship with you and our neighbor. Help us today to be an answer to another’s prayer so that we may be one of your signs of hope in the world you love. Amen

REFLECTION/ACTION:

*Explore in a small group how United Methodist core beliefs are distinctive?

Discuss the following items:

- Baptism
- Conversion
- Holy Communion
- Social Action

*Discuss the meaning of spiritual disciplines as “means of grace.” How do they draw you to the heart of Christ?

*Using a concordance, do a word study of the word “spirit” in both the Old and New Testaments. List verbs describing the Holy Spirit’s activity.

Bringing Wesleyan and Methodist distinctiveness to life in your congregation...

Web Sites:

www.upperroom.org

www.cokesbury.com

www.discipleshipresources.org

Local Training:

Fall 2008 Convocation: Accountable Discipleship

Leader: Dr. Steve Manskar

General Board of Discipleship

Pamphlets:

Questions & Answers about the UMC

Thomas S. McAnally—Abingdon Press

Your Child Is Baptized

Discipleship Resources—(Bishop) Will Willimon

Books:

Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living

Bishop Reuben Job—Abingdon Press, Publisher

How Is It With Your Soul?

Denise L. Stringer—Upper Room, Publisher

Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition (Workbook)

Steve Harper—Upper Room, Publisher

Sermons On United Methodist Beliefs

Bishop Kenneth L. Carder—Abingdon Press

Recapturing The Wesley's Vision

Paul Wesley Chilcote—InterVarsity Press

Wrestling with Grace: A Spirituality for the Rough Edges of Daily Life

Robert Colin Morris—Upper Room Books

The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of Wesley's Theology

Kenneth J. Collins—Abingdon Press

A Way of Life in the World: Spiritual Practices for United Methodists

Kenneth H. Carter, Jr.—Abingdon Press

How Great a Flame: Contemporary Lessons from the Wesleyan Revival

James Logan—Discipleship Resources

Being Methodist in the Bible Belt

F. Belton Joyner, Jr.—Westminster John Knox Press

Restoring Methodism

James and Molly Davis Scott—Provident Publishing

(Also see the Ready Resource for EVANGELISM)

Featured Resource

Opening Ourselves to Grace

A new DVD is a comprehensive United Methodist Resource for finding understanding and joy in Wesleyan distinctiveness...

Available now at Cokesbury!

Ideas for your church...

Covenant Discipleship Groups

This resource is a contemporary adaptation of Wesley's Class Meetings. For more information, see the Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups by Gayle Turner Watson.

www.discipleshipresources.org

Wesley Class Meetings Today

To read about how a Wesley Class meeting model for today can transform a congregation, many individual lives, and even a broader community, read (Bishop) Dick Will's Waking to God's Dream.

See how Rowan Rogers from South Africa became a "missionary" to Christ (UMC) Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida—teaching the recovery of Wesley's means of reaching and forming people into authentic Christian disciples rather than just "cultural Christians." The five essential ingredients of "Wesley Fellowship Groups" are: Fellowship, Study, Accountability, Worship and Prayer, and Missional Outreach. (Wills, p. 42-43)



**MAKING DISCIPLES
of JESUS CHRIST**

who will transform our Church and the World
.....
BOLD DECISIONS • FAITHFUL SACRIFICES • COURAGEOUS ACTIONS