

WHY YOU MAY BE A METHODIST CHRISTIAN

Joshua 24:15

This past week was our annual meeting of United Methodists in the Western North Carolina Conference. This gathering of clergy and lay delegates from every church in the conference (1160) takes place every year at Lake Junaluska, just west of Asheville. Pastor Barry and I represented you as well as Wendy Kinlaw and Vicki Moss. Peggy Woodruff is our District Lay Leader and was an at-large delegate to conference.

This was the first annual conference that our new bishop, Bishop Larry Goodpaster, presided over. We were inspired with great worship and singing and our Bishop not only preached, but also lead a couple of Bible studies. There were lots of reports and even some voting. Each annual conference throughout the United States (66) had to vote this year on 32 constitutional amendments. We will share more specific information on the business of annual conference in another form.

I thought it might be a good time to ask the question “What does it mean for us to be Methodist Christians?” Before we answer that question there are three disclaimers that I believe need to be stated. 1) You can be a Methodist and not be a Christian. Being a Methodist or a member of any church doesn’t automatically make you a Christian. 2) By the same token, you can be a Christian and not be a Methodist, or a member of any church. In other words Christian and church member are not the same thing. And 3) Being a Methodist doesn’t automatically get you into heaven. But I do believe that being a Methodist will give you plenty of opportunities to be a Christian and will hopefully show you the way!

We have chosen to be a part of the United Methodist branch of the Body of Christ. Let’s take a few minutes and consider why. Some of you were born a Methodist and you have always been a Methodist. That is my story. I am a third generation Methodist pastor. Some of you married into the Methodist church. That is my wife’s story. She was raised in the Baptist church. And some of you deliberately chose this denomination or this particular church. Some of you are probably thinking you don’t really care about any denomination. It’s just the particular church that’s important to you.

I love what Garrison Keilor from “Prairie Home Companion” once said about Methodists. “We make fun of Methodists for their blandness, their excessive calm, their fear of giving offense, their lack of speed and for their fondness for eating. But nobody sings like them. They love to sing and are bred from childhood to sing in four-part harmony...Methodists believe in prayer, but would practically die if asked to pray out loud. While Methodists like to sing they don’t like to sing new hymns or hymns that have more than four stanzas. Methodists believe their pastors will visit them in the hospital, even if they don’t notify them they are there. Methodists believe in miracles and even expect miracles especially during the stewardship campaign or when the offering plate is passed.”

Here are a few reasons why I believe I am still a United Methodist and not something else. The first one is **our theology**. (Read Joshua 24:15). It is not only important who you serve, but what you believe. What we believe determines who we are and what we do. People often say that what they like about our church is that they leave feeling better than when they arrived. “You all don’t focus on how bad we are,” people often say. “You don’t keep talking about hell and how we’re all going there if we don’t do the right things.”

The reason for this is the Methodist emphasis on grace. Grace is a very important part of our theology. Our theology believes in “justification by faith.” The Bible says, “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast,*” (Eph. 2:8-9). We believe that a person is saved from their sins and becomes a Christian simply by faith in Jesus Christ. And that is a gift. It is a work of grace. It cannot be earned.

But we also believe that works or good deeds are a sign of our faith. James wrote “*But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do,*” (James 2:18). Later on he says, “*As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead,*” (James 2:26). Methodists believe that our deeds and works of service are signs of our faith. They are the natural results of our faith. We are not saved by our works. But they are the natural result of our faith in Christ.

We believe in the “origin of sin.” That means we all came into the world as sinners. Sin is that which separates us from God. The word “sin”, *amartia*, literally means, “missing the mark.” The essence of sin is “pride.” A sinner is a person whose life is turned in on themselves. The Bible says, “*...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*” (Romans 3:23). We all come into the world as sinners. In Adam, as a descendant of Adam we are sinners.

But we Methodists also believe in universal atonement. This is different from universalism. Universalism believes that all persons are going to heaven. All persons will ultimately be saved. Universalists can’t conceive of a God of love allowing anyone to go to hell. But that is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible says that Christ died for everyone. If we read the rest of the verse from Romans we read, “*...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus,*” (Romans 3:23-24). Who is justified by his grace? All who understand they are sinners and who receive his forgiveness through faith in Christ. Christ’s atonement is universal in that its benefits are free and open to all human beings who accept God’s offer of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Methodists are big on love and grace and forgiveness. We understand that we are all forgiven when we accept His forgiveness and have no other option than to forgive others as Christ has forgiven us. We understand that God is love and those who know God, practice love. We love others with the love God has shown us. And we are big on grace. We understand that it is only by God’s grace that we are where we are and that it is

grace that will lead us home! We understand the importance of showing grace to others. We understand that people will be a whole lot more attracted to God if shown grace than if shown judgment or law or demands. We believe in the worth of individuals, that all are made in the image of God, even if that image has been tarnished. We believe that at the center of every person is an individual of sacred worth, a being that is deeply loved by God and that by getting to know the real person, who they are inside, we will love them too.

We as Methodists also believe in something called “sanctification.” Sanctification is a process of being made holy. We believe that holiness and righteousness is something that God works in us. God makes us holy and righteous. And it is a process that we engage in with God throughout our lives. We believe that we are not what we once were. And we are not what we shall ultimately be. Paul wrote, *“In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus,”* (Phil. 1:5-6). Do you know what the day of Christ Jesus is? It is the day of his return! We are all works in progress. We are on a path of growth and spiritual development, a process of being made holy, a process of sanctification. That is a work of God’s grace. And it is something that will continue until Christ returns or until we arrive in heaven.

Methodists are also big on **fellowship and community** and are generally pretty friendly people. Oh, at times we can get our feathers ruffled. Chuck Swindoll once used the image of a pack of porcupines on a cold winter night to describe Christians. “The cold drives us closer together in a tight huddle to keep warm,” he said. “As we begin to snuggle really close, our sharp quills cause us to jab and prick each other—a condition which forces us apart. But before long we start getting cold, so we move back to warm again, only to stab and puncture each other once more.” Swindoll said the answer to the “porcupine syndrome” is fellowship. And we Methodists are usually pretty good at fellowship.

Methodists also love to **worship**. Worship is at the heart of what we do. It is the center. It is our priority. And Methodist worship, though sometimes can be bland, is usually a mixture of two things: the head and the heart. John Wesley was a good example of this. His mother home schooled all 19 of her children. Education was strongly emphasized as well as Christianity. His father was a pastor. But Wesley had his own heart-warming experience as a young adult. He came to know God’s pardoning love and salvation and he understood the importance of the condition of the heart. He teamed up with his younger brother, Charles, who had gifts for writing and composing songs and hymns. From the beginning worship in the Methodist movement was a combination of head and heart. It contained both evangelical preaching and Holy Spirit filled worship.

Another thing that is somewhat unique about Methodists is our **polity and structure**. We are a very democratic church. We have lots of elected leaders and officers and committees. We rotate leaders and committee members frequently so no one stays in positions too long. We rotate pastors with a certain frequency so they don’t stay too long

either, though no one knows what “certain frequency” is anymore. But all of this serves to take the personality issues out of the equations somewhat. As opposed to “congregational systems” where the whole congregation has to vote on all the important decisions that are made, various committees focus on the different administrative and program aspects of the church and all that is governed by a board called a Church Council. We are a church that believes in the balance of power between the clergy and laity in the running of the church both locally and at-large. We are a church that believes in accountability and everyone, clergy and laity alike, have persons over us to hold us accountable. That is part of the work of Superintendents and Bishops.

And we are a church that believes in the **ministry of the laity**. We believe that God calls all of us. Each of us is called and gifted by God for ministry in his church. It is the ministry of the church to teach this, and proclaim it and help make it happen for all its members.

And finally we are a church that is a unique blend of **tradition and reason and experience**. Methodists believe that the beliefs and teachings and understandings of scripture and theology and doctrine of those who have gone before us have much to offer us today. We believe that tradition can be a good thing if it doesn't get in the way of the fresh movement and inspiration of the Holy Spirit today. When tradition can be held alongside of new movements of the Spirit and we remain open to change and new ways of doing things, we believe we stay on the same track with God. As United Methodists we celebrate the church year and the different seasons of the church year. We see them as welcome reminders of the whole gospel story and as offering us opportunities to experience the many aspects of God's amazing transformation. The church year serves as a constant guide to us of the journey God invites us to.

We are a church that can openly embrace and offer both traditional worship and contemporary worship and not get into arguments over one being better than another. We understand that all worship is ultimately focused on God and glorifying God and is a work of God's Holy Spirit enabling us to encounter God. And that because we are all different, God can be worshiped in different ways.

We also believe that reason and experience are also valid parts of who we are and who God made us. We understand that these are to be incorporated into our worship and our lives together in the body of Christ. Though there is always a certain mystery to faith, it never has to be reduced to something that we can't work together to try to understand and explain. And faith is ultimately something to be personally experienced by each of us. Our experiences of faith and Christ will ultimately guide us in our understanding of Christianity and our understanding of and interpretation of scripture.

There are many other things we could talk about. We could talk about our belief in prayer, our belief in the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and how we look to the Bible as the source of all our belief and doctrine and theology. We could talk about our belief in missions and serving others and Christian education. We could talk about our belief in social justice and the rights of all people. We could talk about some of our social

stances, our official stances on social issues. But then we really don't have time to do all of this. Many of our beliefs as United Methodists are shared by those from other denominations. Most of what we call our "essential beliefs" are also beliefs shared by just about every other mainline denomination. We could talk about our belief that in the essential beliefs we have unity, in the non-essential beliefs we have liberty, and that in all beliefs we show charity. We show love. And that may be the reason you are a Methodist!

Let's pray: O God, you are the God of all people. And Lord Jesus, you are the Lord of the Church; the church gathered all around the world and made up of all kinds of people. Thank you for the unity we have in you. We are all one in Christ. Thank you for the day that we look forward to when there will be no Methodists or Baptists or anything else. We look forward to that day when we shall all worship you continuously in heaven. But until that day, may we all be faithful in the work you have called us to. May we all find our part in the building up of the kingdom of God. And we pray that we might all find our place in serving you in this church and in the United Methodist Church that you have given us as another part of your grace and love. Amen.