

Denominationalism, Religious Cults and World Religions

Lesson 9

The Methodist Church

Introduction:

The Methodist Church traces its roots to John Wesley's attempts to bring about doctrinal and structural change within the Church of England. Wesley, who was a fellow and a lecturer at Lincoln College, attempted to reach out to students and fellow faculty members by founding what he called "Holy Club" at Oxford University, along with his brother Charles. The "Holy Club" met once a week where the members were encouraged to follow a very strict systematic method of daily activities meant to encourage holy living. Ridiculed by other students at Oxford as "Methodists," Wesley took the attempted mockery and turned it into a title of honor. In time the word "Methodist" became the accepted term by which the movement was known.

Initially, John and Charles Wesley, along with a friend George Whitefield, were simply interested in bringing about reform within the Church of England. The Wesley brothers were both ordained Anglican clergymen, and were the sons and grandsons of noted clergymen. However, despite their efforts, they failed to bring about any significant or lasting change within Anglicanism. By the mid-1700's England was experiencing a great religious revival and many were turning from the Church of England and flocking to the many other religious denominations that were forming through the influence of Luther, Calvin and others. It was also during this time that a significant number of Anglican clergy turned to the teachings of John Wesley and became known as Methodists. Methodist preachers were notorious for their enthusiastic, almost charismatic, style of preaching and were often accused of fanaticism and emotionalism. In those days, many members of England's established church feared that the new doctrines being taught by the Methodists, such as the necessity of a new birth for salvation, of justification by faith, and of the constant and sustained action of the Holy Spirit upon the believer's soul, would confuse those not well-grounded in Anglican teaching. One early critic of the movement even wrote that "the natural tendency of their behavior, in voice and gesture and horrid expressions, makes people mad." Another critic described Methodists as "enthusiasts" full of "credulity, superstition and fanaticism." As a result, the Methodist movement provided the seeds for the "Holiness", "Pentecostal" and "Charismatic" movements in North America and elsewhere.

While John and Charles worked together to bring about reform, they differed significantly over whether to break from the Church of England. On October 14th 1735 the Wesley brothers sailed from England for Savannah in British Colony of Georgia at the request of the governor, James Oglethorpe. While John remained preaching in Savannah, Charles was appointed Secretary of Indian Affairs and went as chaplain to

the garrison and colony at nearby Fort Frederica on St. Simon's Island. However, according to his journal entry, he was rejected by the settlers there. Meanwhile John became the target of a frivolous lawsuit by a woman who claimed Wesley had promised to marry her, and after bringing her to America, abruptly broke off their relationship, thus breaking his oath. Although the proceedings ended in a mistrial, John was devastated by the ordeal and by the manner in which it had damaged his reputation. A year later, both John and Charles returned to England, and never returned to the Colonies again.

From 1739 onward, Wesley and the Methodists were persecuted throughout England by clergymen and magistrates for several reasons. Although Wesley had been ordained an Anglican clergyman, many other Methodist ministers had not received any formal ordination and were considered unfit and unqualified to preach. Wesley was also criticized for ignoring many of the regulations of the Church of England concerning parish boundaries and who had authority to preach. This led to Wesley and his followers to be labeled as "a social threat that disregarded sacred and divine institutions." Anglican ministers attacked them in sermons and in print, and at times Wesley and his fellow ministers had to flee from potential mob violence. They were denounced as advocating strange doctrines that led to religious disturbances; as blind fanatics who were leading people astray, claiming miraculous gifts; and of attacking the clergy of the Church of England; and falsely accused of trying to re-establish Catholicism.

John Wesley was openly critical of the Church of England because he felt it had failed to call sinners to repentance, leaving the lost to perish in their sins, and because the Church of England was widely known for moral and ethical corruption among the clergy and church leaders. Wesley believed he had been commissioned by God to bring about revival in the church, and no opposition, persecution, or obstacles could prevail against the divine authority of that commission. Unwilling to allow people to perish in their sins and unable to reach them from church pulpits, Wesley and his followers turned their attention to the neglected and needy in England. Following the example set by George Whitefield, Wesley began preaching anywhere he could gather an audience. For the remainder of his life, Wesley devoted himself to being an itinerate preacher traveling from place to place on horseback, preaching two or three times each day. One biographer wrote that Wesley, "rode 250,000 miles, gave away untold amounts of money... and preached more than 40,000 sermons."

Although John Wesley and the majority of his followers did not consider themselves Calvinists in the traditional sense, his friend George Whitefield and others were widely recognized as "Calvinistic Methodists." Through vigorous missionary activity Methodism spread throughout the British Empire and, mostly through Whitefield's itinerate style of preaching during what historians call the "First Great Awakening," Methodism also reached colonial America at the same time. After Whitefield's death in 1770, however, American Methodism returned to its Wesleyan roots.

Just before his death in 1788, Charles Wesley told the local rector, "Sir, whatever the world may say of me, I have lived, and I die, a member of the Church of England. I pray

you to bury me in your churchyard." His dying wish was granted. Charles, an accomplished musician, is best known for the many hymns he wrote during his life, including: *And Can It Be That I Should Gain, Christ the Lord Is Risen Today, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Jesus, Lover of My Soul, Love Divine All Loves Excelling, Soldiers of Christ Arise*, and many others.

The Methodist movement did not form a separate denomination in England or elsewhere until after John Wesley's death in 1791.

The Methodist Church in America grew rapidly as the western frontier opened to settlers from the east. The preaching was done largely by "circuit riding preachers" who followed the itinerant style of preaching of Whitefield and Wesley. However, the Methodist Church in America divided in 1845 over the issue of slavery. It would not be until 1939 before the Northern and Southern branches of the Methodist Church reunited to form the United Methodist Church (UMC).

Today, the Methodist Church consists of some 23 separate bodies in the United States, with the United Methodist Church being the largest with over 9 million members and some 37,700 congregations. Total Methodist membership in the U.S. is said to be approximately 13 million, with more than 18 million Methodists worldwide. Despite the fact that the Methodist Church is heavily involved in the Ecumenical Movement, and is described as old, staid, respectable, and prestigious denomination, recent reports indicate that the Methodist Church is losing approximately 75,000 members annually worldwide. Most of this is due to the church's increasingly liberal theology and its emphasis on a "social gospel".

There are four major issues that threaten the unity of Methodists and pose a significant threat to the future of the United Methodist Church. These issues separate the more "traditional" Methodists from those who are more "liberal" in their theology.¹

- **The Nature of Moral Truth:** The debate over the nature of moral truth concerns whether moral truth is absolute and determined by the unchanging character of God, or whether moral truth is relative and determined by the culture in which one lives? In other words, does God determine right and wrong, or is right and wrong determined by a given culture? While more "conservative" Methodists claim truth is absolute, there is a growing trend within the Methodist Church, especially among those who are defined as more "liberal" theologians, who contend that moral truth is relative and should be defined by the culture in which one lives. Although the official position of the United Methodist Church is to stand in opposition to such practices as homosexuality, the belief by some "liberal" theologians that moral truth is relative and may be defined by one's culture has led some Methodist pastors to take a more tolerant and compromising view toward homosexuality.
- **The Authority of the Scriptures:** This issue concerns the question of whether the Scriptures speak truth to all people in all cultures at all times, or are they out

¹ <http://goodnewsmag.org/2012/05/16/deeper-issues-facing-united-methodism/>

of date? One Methodist pastor at the General Conference in 1988 was quoted as saying, "We don't go back to the Bible for the last word on anything." In 1995, the Rev. Tom Griffith, wrote an article in which he said, "Although the creeds of our denomination pay lip service to the idea that scripture is 'authoritative' and 'sufficient for faith and practice,' many of us have moved far beyond that notion in our own theological thinking." He added, "We are only deceiving ourselves – and lying to our evangelical brothers and sisters – when we deny the shift we have made. . . . We have moved far beyond the idea that the Bible is exclusively normative and literally authoritative for our faith. To my thinking, that is good! What is bad is that we have tried to con ourselves and others by saying, 'we haven't changed our position.'"

- **The Revelatory Work of the Holy Spirit:** Virtually all Methodists believe that the Holy Spirit "illuminates" an individual's understanding of the Scriptures, and reveals divine truth and the correct meaning of divine truth apart from the Scriptures. Therefore, the debate over the revelatory work of the Holy Spirit is whether the Holy Spirit reveals things to individuals that are always in accordance with the Scriptures, or whether it amends and even contradicts the Scriptures? Rob Renfro, a noted Methodist author and theologian recently wrote, "The most conservative Christians believe that it is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to illumine the Scriptures, reveal more of their meaning, and show us how to apply the eternal Word of God to the issues of our contemporary time and culture. But liberals, at least the more radical liberals, go much further than that. They believe that the living Christ [meaning the body of Christ today as represented by the Methodist Church] not only offers new insights into the Scriptures but that it also corrects, amends, and even contradicts the Scriptures. And it is the church's right and responsibility to recognize and codify these new revelations. As one retired minister in my annual conference said to me, 'The church created the Scriptures so we can re-create them.'"
- **The Uniqueness of Christ:** The issue concerning the uniqueness of Jesus Christ being debated among Methodist theologians today concerns whether Jesus should be confessed as the only-begotten Son of God, the unique Savior of the world, and the supreme Lord of the universe? Or should Christ be defined by one's own experiences, and made relative by one's own culture? Some of the more "liberal" Methodist theologians argue that Jesus is just one of many guides, one of many lights, one of many teachers to be considered when determining the truth about God, the nature of reality, and morality?

II. Truths They Hold:

- A. There are several beliefs held by Methodists that are in harmony with the teachings of the Scriptures:
 1. Methodists typically do not hold some of the basic teachings of Calvinism. Contrary to the traditional Calvinist, Methodists generally believe:

- a. Christ died for all men.
 - b. Man has free will, although they also teach that man "cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God. . ." ²
 - c. A saved person can fall from grace.
2. Methodists also stress the need to live a holy life in which one is personally responsible to God.
 3. The majority of Methodists still believe the Bible is divinely inspired by God and is relevant to all mankind today. However, there is a growing trend within the Methodist church that questions the absolute authority of the Scriptures.
 4. Generally, most Methodists recognize the Jesus of the New Testament as being the one and only true Son of God. However, there is also a trend within the Methodist church that is beginning to question whether the Jesus of the Bible is the actual Jesus of history.

III. Methodist Doctrine vs. Bible Doctrine

- A. While Methodists, for the most part, accept the authority of the Scriptures, they also accept the *Methodist Book of Discipline*, church conferences, and the sermons and commentaries of John Wesley as authoritative.
 1. Concerning the pioneers of the UMC and their belief about authority, the *Methodist Book of Discipline* says: ". . .they were equally confident that there is a 'marrow' of Christian truth that can be identified and that must be conserved. This living core, as they believed, stands revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. They were very much aware, of course, that God's eternal Word never has been, nor can be, exhaustively expressed in any single form of words. They were also prepared, as a matter of course, to reaffirm the ancient creeds and confessions as valid summaries of

² *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, Article VIII, p. 57, United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, TN.

Christian truth. But they were careful not to invest them with final authority or to set them apart as absolute standards for doctrinal truth and error."³

2. The *Methodist Book of Discipline* contains the official "rules and regulations" of the church, along with the church's articles of faith.
 3. However, the Bible claims that the Scriptures are our only guide for rules, regulations, and beliefs (Jude 3, 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:3; Gal 1:6-9; Acts 2:42; Rev 22:18-19).
 - a. If the *Methodist Book of Discipline* contains more than the Bible, it contains too much.
 - b. If it contains less than the Bible, it contains too little.
 - c. If it contains only the Bible, it is not necessary.
- B. Methodists teach "that we are justified by faith only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort."⁴
1. Essentially, Methodists accept the teachings of Luther and Calvin that justification is solely by faith and not by works of obedience.
 - a. Therefore, Methodists do not believe that baptism is essential to salvation.
 - b. On the other hand they teach "baptism is a gift of God's grace to be received as part of the journey of salvation. To refuse to accept baptism is to reject one of the means of grace that God offers us."⁵
 2. However, the Bible teaches there are works that are essential to salvation for they are required of God (Acts 10:34-35).
 - a. We must obey (Matt 7:21-23; Luke 6:46; Heb 5:8-9; Rom 6:16-18).
 - b. Saving faith is a working, obedient faith (Jas 2:14-26; Gal 5:6).
 - c. Faith itself is called a work (John 6:29; cf. John 3:36).
 3. The Bible also teaches there are works that have nothing to do with our salvation.
 - a. Works of the Law of Moses (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; 3:9-11)

³ Ibid, p. 67.

⁴ Ibid, Article IX, 1976, p. 57

⁵ UMC Website: <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=1326>

- b. Works originated by man (Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-5).
4. The Bible also clearly teaches that baptism is essential for salvation (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21; Acts 22:16; John 3:5).
- C. Methodists practice infant baptism, but make a distinction between "infant baptism" and what they call "believer's baptism." They also teach that sprinkling, pouring or immersion are all acceptable forms of baptism.
 1. Concerning the difference between "infant" and "believer's" baptism, the Methodist Church teaches:
 - a. "In infant baptism, God claims the child with divine grace. Clearly the child can do nothing to save himself or herself, but is totally dependent on God's grace, as we all are – whatever our age. In believer's baptism, the person being baptized is publicly professing her or his own decision to accept Christ. Believer's baptism is an ordinance, not a sacrament. United Methodists baptize people of all ages who have not previously received the sacrament."⁶
 - b. "The United Methodist Church strongly advocates the baptism of infants within the faith community: 'Because the redeeming love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, extends to all persons and because Jesus explicitly included the children in his kingdom, the pastor of each charge shall earnestly exhort all Christian parents or guardians to present their children to the Lord in Baptism at an early age.'"⁷
 2. When asked if it is better to wait until children can decide for themselves whether or not to be baptized, the official reply of the United Methodist Church is:
 - a. "No. We no more wait for our children to decide about being in the family of God than we wait for them to decide if they would like to be a part of our human family. As parents, we make many decisions – in matters of health, safety, education, for example – for

⁶ UMC Website: <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=1266>

⁷ 1992 *Book of Discipline*, par. 221 (para. 226 in the 2004 *Book of Discipline*)

our children. Of course, they may later reject what we have done for them. But, this possibility does not relieve us of the responsibility to do all that we can for them spiritually, as we do in other aspects of their lives."⁸

3. Methodists also teach "our church has always offered to people being baptized and to the parents of infants the choice of sprinkling, pouring, or immersion."⁹
4. However, there are absolutely no Biblical commands, examples or even inferences pointing to infant baptism, or the baptism of children too young to be fully and completely responsible for their own actions.
5. When taken together, all New Testament examples of baptism include those who:
 - a. Heard the Word of God preached (Acts 2:14-47; 8:5-13, 26-29; 9:1-18; 10:34-48; 16:14-15, 25-34; also see Rom 10:11-17).
 - b. Believed and demonstrated a conviction concerning the things they heard (Acts 2:37; 8:12, 36-37; 9:3-12; 10:43-44; 16:14, 31; also see Heb 11:6).
 - c. Were willing to repent of their sins or demonstrated repentance (Acts 2:37-38; 9:9-11; also see Luke 13:3).
 - d. Confessed their faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 8:37; also see Matt 10:32; Rom 10:10).
 - e. And were then baptized for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38-41; 8:12-13, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; also see Acts 22:16; Rom 6:4; 1 Pet 3:21).
6. Furthermore, New Testament baptism (Greek, *baptidzo*) was always performed by immersion only (John 3:23; Mark 1:9-10; Acts 8:37-42; Rom 6:1-4).

⁸ UMC Website: <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=1268>

⁹ UMC Website: <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=1262>

- D. Methodists also teach: "The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God. . ." ¹⁰
1. In many ways this is similar to the Calvinistic position advocated by Presbyterians, which says:
 - a. "This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it." ¹¹
 2. However, the Bible teaches that man can and must call on God by his own will (Jos 24:15; Acts 10:34; 1 Tim 2:3-6).
- E. Concerning the church, Methodists believe that "the Christian Church is the community of all believers under the Lordship of Christ."
1. Therefore, Methodists believe that there is nothing in a name and that Christians can wear any name they wish, since there are "Christians" in all churches.
 2. However, the Bible teaches that Jesus built only *one church* (Matt 16:18; Eph 1:22-23; 1 Cor 1:10-13; 12:13-14).
 3. The Bible teaches that we must do only that which is authorized (1 Cor 4:6; Col 3:17; Micah 4:5).
 4. Therefore, we to wear only *one name* because it's the only name authorized (Isa 62:2; Acts 4:10-12; 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16).
- F. The Methodist Church has an unscriptural organization.
1. There are 73 annual conferences with law-making rights, and over these are 5 jurisdictional conferences which meet every four years.

¹⁰ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, Article VIII, p. 57, United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, TN.

¹¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Article 10.2

- a. There is also a Council of Bishops (59 Bishops in number) which meets at least once a year "for the general oversight and promotion of the temporal and spiritual affairs of the entire church."
2. The *Methodist Manual* says women can preach, teach, and be pastors or bishops.
 - a. "On May 4, 1956, in Minneapolis, the General Conference of the Methodist Church approved full clergy rights for women. Half a century later, the fruits of that action are the nearly 12,000 United Methodist clergywomen who serve the church at every level, from bishops to local pastors."¹²
3. However, the Bible is clear concerning the organization of the New Testament church.
 - a. It is composed of elders (bishops or pastors), deacons and "saints" or members (Phil 1:1)
 - b. Elders, when qualified, are appointed in every church (Acts 14:23), and their authority is not to extend beyond the local congregation over which they have been appointed to serve (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1-2)
 - c. Elders (also known as bishops or pastors) and deacons were all men and were required to meet very strict qualifications (1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9)
4. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that women are to be in a place of submission in the presence of other men, and are not to preach publicly in a mixed audience (1 Tim 2:8-12; 1 Cor 11:3; 14:34-35).
- G. The Methodist church uses instrumental music in its assemblies.
 1. Interestingly, even John Wesley condemned such practices when he wrote: "I have no objection to instruments of music, in our chapels, provided they are neither heard nor seen."¹³

¹² UMC Website: <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=1021>

¹³ Cited by Methodist commentator Adam Clarke; Clarke's Commentary, Vol. 4, p.684

2. Furthermore, the practice of instrumental music in the worship of the New Testament church has been opposed by other religious reformers, including:
 - a. Thomas Aquinas, Catholic Theologian; 13th century: "Our church does not use musical instruments, as harps and psalteries, to praise God withal, that she may not seem to Judaize." Bingham's Antiquities, Vol. 2, p.483, London
 - b. Martin Luther, Reformation Leader: "The organ in the worship service is a sign of Baal." Realencyklopadie Fur Protestantische Theologie und Kirche, Bd, 14, s.433 cited in Instrumental Music and New Testament Worship, James D. Bales, p. 130.
 - c. John Calvin, Reformation Leader, Founder of Reformed & Presbyterian denominations: "Musical Instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. " Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 33, see also commentary on 1 Samuel 18:1-9
 - d. Charles Spurgeon, Baptist Author/Pastor: "We might as well pray by machinery as sing by it" and "Israel was at school, and used childish things to help her learn; but in these days when Jesus gives us spiritual food, one can make melody without strings and pipes... we do not need them. That would hinder rather than help our praise. Sing unto Him. This is the sweetest and best music. No instrument like the human voice." Charles Spurgeon, Commentary on Psalm 42
3. The New Testament authorizes only vocal music in worship (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16-17).
 - a. Adding any other form or kind of music to the worship of the New Testament church would be similar to the sin of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2).

- b. Trying to justify instrumental music in the New Testament church simply because it was authorized under the Old Covenant is trying to justify a practice by a Law that has been done away (Heb 8:13).
 - c. Even the Catholic Encyclopedia says: "Although Josephus tells of the wonderful effects produced in the Temple by the use of instruments, the first Christians were of too spiritual a fiber to substitute lifeless instruments for or to use them to accompany the human voice. Clement of Alexandria severely condemns the use of instruments even at Christian banquets." Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 10, p. 652
- H. Concerning the Lord's Supper (Communion) many Methodist congregations partake of the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of each month and on Christmas and Easter.
- 1. However, New Testament Christians partook of the Lord's Supper on the first day of every week (Acts 20:7; compare Exo 20:8; 1Cor 16:1-2).
- I. The Methodist Church has also adopted a controversial stand on such issues as abortion and social drinking.
- 1. The United Methodist Church "officially" approves of abortion in some cases.
 - a. Their official statement about abortion says: "In continuity with past Christian teaching, we recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures."¹⁴
 - b. However, the Bible does not authorize the taking of an unborn child's life (Exo 21:22-25; Jer 1:5; Amos 1:13).
 - 2. The Methodist Church also offers contradictory positions regarding the use of alcohol.
 - a. In one place it is stated: "We affirm our long-standing support of abstinence from alcohol as a faithful witness to God's liberating and redeeming love for persons."

¹⁴ UMC Website: <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=1732>

3. Why is the Methodist Church dying today?
4. Why did the Methodist Church grow so rapidly on the North American frontier?
5. What is the Methodist creed book called, and what is wrong with having a human creed book?
6. According to the *Methodist Discipline*, how are people saved?
7. Show passages you would use to refute:
 - a. The doctrine of salvation by faith only.
 - b. The Methodist practice of baptism, including infant baptism.
8. Why are women not qualified to be "pastors" or "bishops"?