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"OUR CONNECTIONAL CHURCH"

Old Testament - Genesis 9/ 8-17
New Testament - Hebrews 9/ 11-22

Our Old Testament lesson this morning tells of God's "Rainbow Covenant" ^{HIS PROMISE TO} ~~with~~ His people that He would never again send another flood to destroy the earth. In our New Testament Lesson Paul talks to the Hebrews about Jesus. He tells ~~THEM~~ that Jesus came as a mediator of a New Covenant in order that He who died on the cross would promise us that we would receive an eternal inheritance of everlasting life. ~~For~~ ^{AS} ~~therefore~~ a person ^{MAKES} ~~with~~ a will, a promise to committ his worldly goods to another after his death, ~~in a similar fashion as we do today.~~ ^{SO DID} Jesus will ~~give~~ us eternal life after His death.

The Statement of Doctrine adopted by the 1972 General Conference of the United Methodist Church affirms that all valid Christian doctrine is born from our response in faith to the wonderous ~~and~~ mystery of God's love in Jesus Christ as recorded in the Scriptures. We acknowledge belief in the Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Statement also reminds us that the theological substance of our Methodist heritage begins with the biblical ~~witness~~ witness to God's reality as our Creator and to His gracious self-involvement in our daily lives. What does this mean to us ^{AS UNITED METHODISTS?}

We Methodists ^(HERE AND) around the world ^{OWE OUR} (2)

theology, structure and enthusiasm to our founder, John Wesley who was a priest in the Church of England.

^{EARLY ON} Throughout his boyhood, student years and ^{IV} priesthood, John Wesley focused his life ^{ON} religiously trying to satisfy the demands of religion as he understood them. But, his efforts led ultimately to a sense of despair, failure and anxiety about his relationship to God. Then, in a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1783, he discovered what Paul and Luther before him had learned... that a new relationship with God comes through faith in Jesus Christ rather than through our own efforts. He experienced absolute assurance that God had taken away his sins and saved him from the ^{LAW} of sin and death.

"THE STABLE AND RESPECTABLE" CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

After this event, John Wesley and his brother Charles, began spreading their newfound Gospel of God's love. They preached to the poor to the miners, to the factory workers of ~~and others who generally found themselves outside of~~ Industrial England. And, although John and Charles Wesley remained Anglican priests and encouraged participation in the sacraments of the Church of England, ~~their~~ preaching, teaching, writing, organizational skills and inspirational leadership founded a movement which was to have world-wide implications.

The primary themes of this movement - the unique emphasis of ^{OUR} Methodist doctrine and belief are these:

1. The Bible is our ultimate authority.
2. God's universal love for all people.
3. Justification-entering into a right relationship with God -by faith in Jesus Christ, and not by any so-called "good works".
4. Sanctification - a continuous growth toward perfect love and Scriptural holiness.
5. The assurance of salvation which comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
6. Christian perfection achieved through personal holiness and social justice.

① Authority of Scripture...

From the beginning of the Methodist movement in England and America, Methodists

HAVE consistently lifted up the Bible as the ultimate authority. John Wesley often said, "Let me be a man of one book", and this has permeated the theological, liturgical and moral lifestyle of Methodism for over two centuries. With Wesley, we affirm that all Scripture is inspired of God, and contains everything essential for salvation. "The Spirit of God, not only inspired those who wrote the Bible, but continually inspires ~~and~~ ~~supernaturally assist~~ those who read it with earnest prayer."

Even though ^{WESLEY} Methodists have always held inspired Scripture to be ~~their~~ ^{OUR} ultimate ^{Authority}, **OUR HERITAGE HAS PROTECTED US FROM BOTH NARROW LIBERALISM AND RADICAL**

interpretation of the Bible. In addition to this emphasis on the supreme authority of Scripture, ~~early Methodism~~ ^{WE METHODISTS} focus ~~on~~ on the importance of human reason, Church tradition, and the experience of the Holy Spirit as additional revelations of truth. Whenever the Bible and other means of recognizing truth are in conflict, ~~Methodists~~ ^{WE} seek to follow the Scriptures. However, we guard against erratic interpretation of Scripture through the balanced emphases of reason, tradition and experience. John Wesley wrote that ~~that~~ "reason is a fundamental principle with us, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion."

^{ALSO} Fearful that the evidence of reason and tradition might produce a cold formalism, he wrote that "the experience of the Holy Spirit in each of our lives is holiness and happiness, the image of God impressed on a created Spirit, a fountain of peace and love springing up into everlasting life."

② God's Love For All People...

The affirmation that God loves all persons, even when they are totally underserving of that love, is at the heart of our Methodist belief. God not only loves every person, because they are His creation, but He is actively reaching out with His love and forgiving us for turning away from Him. This activity of love and forgiveness which God extends to every human being is His "grace" and it is active to

some degree in every one of us at every stage in our lives.

③ Justification by Faith: Available To All...

Along with nearly all Protestants, Methodists affirm that the way in which a person enters into a right relationship with God...is justified... by his or her faith and not by any good works that he or she might have done. However, in contrast with some Protestants, Methodists have historically emphasized that this justified relationship with God is available every person and not just a selected few. The act of faith which brings about a justified relationship with God is an affirmation of the truth that God entered into the world as Jesus of Nazareth and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus made it possible for every person to be forgiven and put into A

RIGHT

~~relationship with God. Further, this act of faith is substantially more than mere belief or intellectual assent. It is the kind of total trust in God's love and forgiveness which results in the complete redirection of all human endeavor toward the love and glorification of both God and humankind.~~

THIS resulting right relationship with God is the beginning point in a new life in Christ, the point at which we accept the freely-offered gift of God's forgiveness of our turning away from Him and the point at which we redirect our lives toward Him.

The point in time at which we are justified by faith in Christ is the beginning ~~of~~ ^I a new life in Christ ~~for us~~. We enter into a new relationship with God, and begin a lifelong pursuit of holiness, a personal quest for the loving qualities of Jesus Christ under the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Sanctification is a continuous growth toward perfect love and Scriptural holiness. It is achieved through prayer, Bible study, worship, the sacraments, personal morality, social outreach and confrontation of ~~all that is~~ evil, and oppression. But, most of all, it is achieved through faith. Just as faith is the only requirement for justification, ~~and~~ faith is also the only requirement for sanctification even though good works are its usual byproducts. With Wesley, modern Methodists ^I affirm that from the moment we are justified by faith, there is sanctification...a growing in grace, a daily advance in the knowledge and love of God. ~~Exactly as we are justified by faith, so~~ ~~we are sanctified by faith.~~

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The Assurance of Salvation...

One of the most important emphases which has always been at the heart of the Methodist movement ^I is our belief that we can have

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absolute assurance that we have entered into a new relationship with God through our faith in Jesus Christ. Through the activity of the Holy Spirit in us, we can know for certain that we are both justified and sanctified, that we have accepted God's forgiveness, that we have entered into a new life in Christ, and that I are growing toward a perfect state of holiness. This mystical experience of the Holy Spirit was first articulated by John Wesley after his moving "Altersgate Experience" when he wrote of the event and said, "As the speaker was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust ~~CHRIST~~... ~~CHRIST~~ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, and saved me from the law of sin and death. " ~~Although this positive assurance is a primary emphasis of Methodism, it is not a measurement of personal faith or of salvation. Assurance can be expected and sought, but it is not an essential element of salvation in Methodist belief.~~ (EXPECTED)

6 - Christian Perfection Through Personal Holiness...

One of Methodism's most important contributions to the rest of the Christian world is OUR doctrine of Christian perfection. After a person has has begun the process of

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sanctification under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, his or her goal is "You must be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect." One of John Wesley's favorite phrases was, "We love Him because He first loved us." Wesley regularly affirmed that Christian perfection was arriving at the state of perfect love toward both God and other persons. He understood perfection to be the quality of perfect Christlike love which can keep persons from knowingly violating God's will and from consciously separating themselves from God's love. Even though this perfect love is achievable in this life, it does not make a ~~person~~^{US/} infallible. It does not keep ~~them~~^{US/} from involuntary sin. It still allows ~~for~~^I growth toward holiness ~~but~~^I it can be lost. "This much is certain," wrote Wesley, "they that love God with all their heart and all men as themselves are scripturally perfect. And surely such there are; otherwise the promise of God would be a mere mockery of human weakness."

From its beginnings, Methodism has shown a balance between an emphasis on holy habits of personal morality and an emphasis on social confrontation of evil and oppression in the world. Methodists see these twin emphases of Christian perfection in the lives and teachings of Jesus and ~~of Paul as well as in the~~^I

as well as in the lives and teachings of ⁹
early Methodist leaders ... John and Charles
Wesley, Francis Asbury, Philip Otterbien,
Jacob Albright, Richard Allen, James Varick,
William Miles and Benjamin Roberts. The goal
of Christlike love has ~~been~~ ^{DIRECTED} Methodists for
over two centuries to take courageous
actions against war, violence, political,
economic and social oppression, slavery,
racism, sexism, and other violations of
human rights. This also includes our stance
on abuses of alcohol, tobacco, drugs and
gambling. Methodists, down through the
years, have been driven by the cry of the
sick, the hungry, the homeless, the poor
the imprisoned, the lonely, and the ^{PHYSICALLY}
~~AND~~ spiritually-starved multitudes of the world.
We have responded in both personal and
corporate ministry. With John Wesley, we
affirm that true Christianity cannot exist
without both the inward experience and the
outward practice of justice, mercy and truth
~~This is the~~ genuine morality.

Well, where are we today? John Wesley
might have ^{SOME} ~~had~~ the trouble recognizing
the modern day United Methodist Church.
However, with his ^{ZEAL} ~~zeal~~ for organization,
methodical procedure and ministry he
would quickly understand it. Our growth
since his time has been both our strength
and sometimes our ^{WEAKNESS} ~~weakness~~.

The thing that distinguishes Methodism from other denominations is our organization for ministry at several levels that maintain "connections1 links" with one another. Both clergy and laity are elected or appointed to serve on various governing bodies of the church. ^{IN THAT LIGHT} Methodism is similar to the American democratic form of government with ~~an~~ executive, legislative and judicial ^{bodies/} branch. ● Our Bishops (the executive branch) are elected for life from the ranks of the clergy. (Judicial Conference in July) ^{BISHOP BOULTON} They function as both spiritual and administrative leaders for their respective areas. ^{THEY!} ~~and~~ participate in governing the whole church organization.

● Conferences are the legislative bodies and are composed of both clergy and laity.

1. The General Conference which meets every four years is the primary lawmaking body.
2. There are five Jurisdictional Conferences which elect our Bishops and direct church programs.
3. The Annual Conference is technically the basic unit of the church. We are in the East Ohio Conference (Ed and I).
4. The District Conference is organized within the Annual Conference. We are in the Youngstown District. There are twelve districts in the East Ohio Conference.

5. It is the Charge Conference that is the governing body of the local church, or a local pastoral unit or charge. It is sometimes called a church conference.

SUPREME COURT

Finally, there is the Judicial Council with nine clergy and lay members. It is the court of ultimate appeal in the church. The authority of this unit of church government and the basis for all of its decisions comes from the Bible and the Methodist Book of Discipline.

The Local Church is considered by Methodists to be the visible extension of Jesus Christ in the world today. Both ordained and lay ministers lead local congregations... ~~although~~ ^{however} every United Methodist is called to minister to others. The local church Council on Ministries recommends church programs to the Administrative Board. After approval by the Board, the Council sets up the necessary committees to impliment them.

Areas of local Methodist church work include: Christian unity, Christian education, Evangelism, Church and Society, Stewardship. Worship, Higher Education, Missions and Religion and Race *and other Christian ministry.*

Being a United Methodist means involvement in prayer, worship and the two sacraments... **Baptism AND Holy Communion.**

We are a pluralistic group, we Methodists. We are diverse in our expression of our religious convictions, ~~our~~ beliefs, emphases and direction. Within this diversity, which comes from numerous ethnic backgrounds...from ~~metropolitan~~ metropolitan churches, innercity churches, suburban churches, small town churches and tiny country charges, there is the common core of truth which we affirm. It is the ¹total sovereignty of God, ²the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, ³the continuing activity of God in our lives as the Holy Spirit, ⁴The uniqueness of scripture, ⁵the reality of the redeemed life, ⁶the call to servanthood - to serve and minister to others are Christian essentials which we gladly proclaim. There is among us Methodists a willingness to think and let think as long as beliefs are tested by experience, scripture, reason and tradition.

Apostle Paul in 1st Corinthians states it well when he says: " Men have different gifts, but it is the same spirit that gives them. There are many ways of serving God, but it is the same Lord who is served. God works through different men in different ways, but it is the same God who achieves His purpose through them all. Each of us is given our gifts by the Holy Spirit to use for the common good."

This then is our church...a connectional church in mission ...the United Methodist Church **SHARING IN THE WORK OF THE LOCAL CHURCH, FOLLOWING THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS, KNOWING OUR PURPOSE IN GOD'S WORLD AND GOD'S CONCERN IN OUR LIVES. AMEN.**

Prayer