

# Chapter 4: Unique Methodist Beliefs

**W**hen John Wesley lived and while his influence was still strongly felt among his followers, a statement of Methodist doctrine could have been taken from his writings, sermons, letters, and extensive personal journals. This would have been a complicated task because he published over 440 works but there was at least an authoritative body of literature to which one could turn. Methodists, as a whole, were united in their doctrinal positions.

Today, a survey of the beliefs of ten million United Methodists would undoubtedly produce ten million different sets of beliefs. This is both one of the major strengths and one of the primary weaknesses of United Methodism. While fluid doctrines can stimulate creative theology, it can also perplex the person who honestly wants a statement of the beliefs of the denomination.

A group of United Methodist scholars spent the quadrennium between 1968 and 1972 examining the situation of United Methodist formal doctrine and concluded that “the theological spectrum in The

United Methodist Church ranges over all the current mainstream options and a variety of special interest theologies as well.” In the light of this, this theological study commission focused on four definitive doctrinal guidelines by which United Methodists establish and reflect on beliefs. These four guidelines—or poles of authority—are scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

John Wesley stressed that scripture, religious experience, church tradition, and human reason are the primary sources of authority for Christians. Each of these must be balanced by the others so that, for example, something experienced must fall within the boundaries of human reason, church tradition, and most of all, scripture. Wesley maintained scripture as the ultimate authority.

We can, today, go several different directions to ascertain the beliefs of United Methodists. First, we still have the “official” literature of the church but this is too vast a body of material for the average (or even super-average) United Methodist to absorb. Furthermore, it overlooks the prolific theological works which have been written since Wesley. We could attempt a summary of the writings of contemporary United Methodist theologians but this would frequently mean mixing wholly incompatible ideas. Another way would be to subjectively offer brief summaries of Wesley’s positions on major doctrines and reflect upon them as a Twentieth Century United Methodist somewhat under the influence of the multiple fads currently popular in the church. And this admittedly insufficient method is all that our admittedly insufficient space will allow.

Those basic doctrines which United Methodists share with virtually every other denomination are covered in the first booklet in this program. Here, we will look briefly at the unique Wesleyan concepts of sanctification, at our sense of balance with regard to doctrine and methodology, and at our understanding of ministry.

## Universal Redemption

Although the Methodist understanding of how salvation happens has never varied much from that of other Protestants, we have historically been staunch defenders of the doctrine that salvation is available

to every human being. Especially in its early years, Methodism was in conflict with the predominant Protestant concept that Christ died only for a select group of persons who had been preordained for salvation by God. This doctrine of Universal Redemption, once touted only by a Methodist minority, is now accepted by virtually all Christians.

## Assurance

One of the more controversial doctrines of United Methodism is the idea that God makes God's love, forgiveness, and salvation known to us through an inner experience of the Holy Spirit. John Wesley wrote, "By the testimony of the Spirit I mean an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given Himself for me; that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God."

Although most United Methodists will admit that the doctrine of assurance is easily abused and frequently misunderstood, it remains a prominent concept. Through the Holy Spirit, God causes an inner experience to take place through which we can know for certain that we have been saved and can say with Wesley, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

## Sanctification and Christian Perfection

Probably the best known doctrine of United Methodism is our emphasis on the pursuit of "holiness" and the possibility of achieving final Christlike "perfection" in this life. This doctrine is so important to us that it is worth repeating the actual wording of the eleventh article of our Confession of Faith:

We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace and through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been

born again are cleansed from sin in their thoughts, words, and acts, and are enabled to live in accordance with God's will, and to strive for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ, this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God.

We believe this experience does not deliver us from the infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes common to humans nor from the possibilities of further sin. The Christian must continue on guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin. They must respond wholly to the will of God so that sin will lose its power over them; and the world, the flesh, and the devil are put under God's feet. Thus the Christian rules over these enemies with watchfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sanctification is the process of becoming holy, taking on the character of God, growing to be Christlike. We move toward Christian perfection or "entire sanctification" through intensification of our personal holiness, through our involvement in Christ's mission in the world, and through regular participation in worship and the sacrament of Holy Communion. Even though the accomplishment of Christian perfection is extremely rare, the belief that it is possible is of critical importance.

## Balance

In the beginning, John Wesley consistently lifted up a balanced life as the key to Christian living and this same balance continues to characterize United Methodism today. Wesley lifted up prayer, devotional living, and piety on the one hand and militant social confrontation on the other. His emphasis on evangelism led his ministers to preach on street corners and in the fields and yet he constantly lifted up the

power of the sacraments and the beauty of the high church liturgy. He emphasized the trustworthiness of subjective Christian experience and lifted up the importance of objective scholarly endeavor.

And, United Methodism is still characterized by this same balance. We simultaneously emphasize many elements of the Christian faith which tend to divide many Christians. We are both evangelical and social action oriented. We are both informal and liturgical in our worship. We emphasize both experience and reason. We focus on both preaching and the sacraments. We believe Methodist doctrine and structure is better than any other but we affirm all other forms as equally Christian. And, we emphasize both lay and clergy as valid styles of ministry. United Methodists play an important role in ecumenical dialogue because most of the beliefs which tend to divide many Christians exist in harmony within United Methodism.

## Episcopal Structure

United Methodism is an “episcopal” denomination which means that we adhere to the historic understanding of ministry shared by a majority of the world’s Christians including Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and smaller Protestant bodies. We affirm that God calls every Christian to be a minister and that the active ministry of Christ’s body in the world is in the hands of all His people.

However, historically some in the church have been set aside for specialized tasks of teaching, preaching, administration, and serving the sacraments. In United Methodism, we have three primary areas of professional or “full-time Christian ministry”—the diaconal ministry, the ordained ministry, and the superintendency.

**Diaconal Ministry.** Methodism began as a predominately lay movement in England. Most of the preachers in the early movement were laymen who had no authority to serve the sacraments. And, even during Methodism’s most intensive years of growth in America, laymen served critical roles as pastors, social workers, and teachers.

However, throughout our 200 year history, the official status of persons involved in full time lay ministries has continued to change.

Currently, we have an official process by which lay persons are “certified” by the Annual Conference and “commissioned” by a bishop for employment in The United Methodist Church.

**Ordained Ministry.** Although we affirm the principle that “all members are in ministry,” when we talk about our “ministers” we usually mean our ordained clergypersons. These are persons who have been called of God and set apart by the church for the specialized ministry of teaching and preaching the Word, administration of the Sacraments, and providing the motivation, leadership, pastoral oversight, and administration necessary to church order.

United Methodists recognize a two-order ordained ministry of deacons and elders.

**Deacon** is the first ordination which ordinarily takes place when the person is received into an annual conference as a probationary or associate member. Most deacons are ordained as **elders** after three or four years, but some remain deacons throughout their ministerial careers. A deacon is more limited than an elder only in the degree to which he or she can administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Most ordained elders have completed a minimum of seven years of formal higher education and full annual conference membership.

**Local pastors** are laypersons (and some deacons) who have been set aside by special election of the annual conference and appointed by the bishop to be local church pastors. Even though most local pastors are lay ministers, they are included here because they are set aside to perform the ordained ministries of word, sacrament, and order in one local church.

**Superintendency.** An important extension of the ordained ministry is the function of superintendency which is carried out by the bishops and their extensions, the district superintendents.

A **bishop** is an elder who has been elected for life to the episcopacy by a jurisdictional conference and assigned the oversight of one episcopal area. The bishop presides over the annual conferences in the episcopal area, appoints all ministers and district superintendents, decides matters of law, and ordains all ministers.

A **district superintendent** is an elder who has been appointed by the bishop for a six-year term to oversee the spiritual and temporal

affairs of the church in a district. The district superintendent is a pastor to pastors and their families, presides over all Charge Conferences, advises the bishop on ministerial appointments, and issues licenses to preach to potential local pastors.

## Social Consciousness

Methodists have always been leaders in the struggles against social problems. Historically, Wesleyan denominations have opposed slavery, liquor traffic, gambling, industrial exploitation, and war.

The United Methodist Church has a long history of concern for social justice. Its members have often taken forthright positions on controversial issues involving Christian principles. Early Methodists expressed their opposition to the slave trade, to smuggling, and to the cruel treatment of prisoners.

A social creed was adopted by The Methodist Episcopal Church (North) in 1908. Within the next decade, similar statements were adopted by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and by The Methodist Protestant Church. The Evangelical United Brethren Church adopted a statement of social principles in 1946 at the time of the uniting of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Church. In 1972, four years after the uniting in 1968 of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church adopted a new "Statement of Social Principles."

This statement of social principles is printed in its entirety in *The Book of Discipline*. The Social Principles take definite stances on issues regarding the natural world (water, air, soil, minerals, plants, food, energy, animal life, and space), the nurturing community (family life, marriage, human sexuality, birth, and death), the social community (rights of ethnic communities, religious minorities, children, youth, the aging, and women plus stances on retarded and handicapped persons, drug and alcohol use, population control, medical experimentation, and rural, urban, and suburban lifestyles), the economic community (property, collective bargaining, work, leisure, consumption, poverty, migrant workers, and gambling), the political community (freedom, civil obedience and disobedience, crime, rehabilitation and military service), and the world community (nations, cultures, national power and responsibility, war and peace, justice and law).

In addition to the lengthy *Statement of Social Principles*, United Methodists have a *Social Creed* for affirmation and celebration of our active and aggressive social consciousness:

- We believe in God, Creator of the world; and in Jesus Christ the Redeemer of creation. We believe in the Holy Spirit, through whom we acknowledge God's gifts, and we repent of our sins in misusing these gifts to idolatrous ends.
- We affirm the natural world as God's handiwork and dedicate ourselves to the preservation, enhancement, and faithful use by humankind.
- We joyfully receive, for ourselves and others, the blessings of community, sexuality, marriage, and the family.
- We commit ourselves to the rights of men, women, children, youth, young adults, the aging and handicapped of all ages; to improvement of the quality of life; and to the rights and dignity of ethnic and religious minorities.
- We believe in the right and duty of persons to work for the good of themselves and others, and in the protection of their welfare in so doing; in the rights to property as a trust from God, collective bargaining, and responsible consumption; and in the elimination of economic and social distress.
- We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world and to the rule of justice and law among nations.
- We believe in the present and final triumph of God's Word in human affairs, and gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the gospel in the world. **Amen.**

## Reflection Questions

**United Methodists are sometimes accused of having considerable written doctrine to which they pay little attention. Is belief in doctrine essential? Which beliefs are more important and which are less important? Do you agree with any primary beliefs or social principles of United Methodism?**