



The Methodists

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Introduction: There are over fourteen million Methodists in the United States today, and several million more are scattered throughout the world (Mead, 1980). Although their growth rate has been declining in recent years, United Methodist Churches make up one of the largest and most influential Protestant denominations in the United States. Methodism played an important historical role in shaping American values. The circuit riding preacher of the western frontier was typically a Methodist minister. Camp meetings, originated by Presbyterians, were popularized by the Methodists. Methodist churches have set the standard among denominations for church involvement in social reform. And, more than any other major denominational group, Methodists have been responsible for encouraging toleration of differing beliefs and doctrines among those who call themselves Christians. When the history of the Methodist movement is considered, it becomes easier to see why a Methodist might not be too concerned about specific points of doctrine. Hopefully, when we come to understand the Methodist position, we will be better equipped to show him that what a person believes does make a difference.

< Point of Origin >

John and Charles Wesley were brothers born in the early 1700's at Epworth, England -- just two of the nineteen children born to Susanna and Samuel Wesley. Samuel Wesley was a priest in the Church of England, and John and Charles both followed suit before reaching their thirtieth birthdays. About 1729 at Oxford University, the Wesley brothers led a small group of students totally devoted to study, holy living, charity, and spiritual improvement. Fellow students dubbed them "The Holy Bigots," "The Godly Club" and "Methodists". John Wesley wrote that the name "Methodist" was first given to the group "by way of reproach" perhaps "from observing a more regular

method of study and behavior than was usual with those of their age and station" (Tees, 1940, p. 15).

In those early years, the Wesleys appeared to be trying to earn their salvation by holy living. Ten years later, they were influenced by the teachings of the Moravians (especially Peter Bohler) and Martin Luther's writings to fully accept "salvation by faith only". May 24, 1738 found John Wesley in the meeting of a small religious society in London. As someone read the preface to Luther's commentary on Romans, Wesley had his "conversion experience." He says, "While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed . . . assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart" (Luccock, et al, 1926, pp. 66–67).

Soon Charles Wesley and others in the society had similar experiences. The pattern established by the Wesleys of a warm–hearted conversion experience coupled with a holy life is still the ideal of Methodism.

The Wesleys were banned from preaching in the Church of England because of their "enthusiasm". John and fellow Methodist George Whitefield began preaching throughout England in the open to whoever would listen. John Wesley always considered the many "societies" he planted in England to be a movement within the Church of England. The Wesleys drew up rules for the guidance of the United Societies. By 1746, they had Society Officers, yearly Conferences, and a Circuit System connecting the various societies. In 1784, John Wesley ordained Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke as bishops; that year, these two men were responsible for planting the Methodist Episcopal Church on American soil at a Conference of about 60 Methodist preachers in Baltimore. The Conference adopted Wesley's General Rules and his simplified and shortened revision of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England. These documents are still a part of The Book of Discipline which was first created by the early Methodist Church as its "book of law" (Patterson, et al, pp. v & 10).

< Distinctive Points of Methodist Belief and Practice >

1. Toleration of Varying Doctrines and Beliefs. Among Methodists, "There is wide freedom in the interpretation and practice of all doctrines; liberals and conservatives work in close harmony" (Mead, 1980, p. 177). Methodists come by their religious

tolerance honestly -- their attitude matches that of the founder of their church. John Wesley said, "You cannot be admitted into the church, or society, of the Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Quakers, or any others, unless you hold the same opinions with them, and adhere to the same mode of worship. The Methodists alone do not insist on your holding this or that opinion; but they think, and let think! Neither do they impose any particular mode of worship..." (Luccock, et al, 1926, p. 191).

2. Church Government and Organization. Although Methodist church government is called episcopal, much of the real power resides in conferences composed of elected delegates. These conferences begin at the church level and progress to District Conferences, Annual Conferences, the General Conference and the Jurisdictional Conference. The regional Annual Conferences ordain ministers, supervise pensions, and elect delegates to the General Conference. Pastors of local churches are appointed by a Bishop for a renewable one year term each year at the Annual Conference. Powerful District Superintendents within each Annual Conference assist the Conference Bishop in making these assignments. The General Conference meets every four years as the law making body of the church with the Bishops presiding. Bishops are elected, re--assigned, or retired in the Jurisdictional Conference, which is composed of many of the same delegates as the General Conference.

3. The Methodist Church is a branch of the universal church. Methodism is denominational to its core. Their position has been that "all other evangelical churches were to be acknowledged and respected as true churches of Jesus Christ" (Short, 1974, p. 35) John Wesley not only continued in fellowship with the Church of England, but accepted Catholics, Moravians and members of similar groups as true Christians.

4. The grace of God freely available for all. On this point John Wesley, and many Methodists, disagree with Calvin. They hold that the power of the blood of Christ has not been limited by God's previous choices. On the other hand, man's will is not viewed as being totally free -- he must receive help from God before he can do right.

5. Salvation by faith alone and the experience of conversion and new life in Christ. Wesley's conversion experience is similar to that claimed by many Methodists. However, they do not insist that conversion be sudden or dramatic; it can occur gradually over time.

< Points of Change in Methodism >

According to a book by a retired Methodist bishop entitled *United Methodism in Theory and Practice*, "Methodists have chosen to be governed by a law embodied in a book (The Book of Discipline, SK), they have at the same time insisted that this shall be a changing book"; the laws are changed every four years in the General Conference as the "times, situation, and mission warrant" (Short, p. 24). Some practices once common among Methodists which are now scarcely known are as follows:

1. **Mourner's Bench and Altar.** In past years in a Methodist service, the unconverted were encouraged to come forward to a "mourner's bench" and pray with a minister to be led "into that repentance and exercise of faith that resulted in the experience of conversion" (Short, 1974, p. 194). While some Methodist churches still have a practice loosely similar to this, the mourner's bench is mainly a thing of the past.
2. **The Sunday School Superintendent.** Once one of the most well known offices in the Methodist Church, the head of the local Sunday School has now been replaced in many churches by commit-tees and graded curriculum.
3. **All Male Clergy.** Women have been admitted to the clergy of the Methodist Church. The 1980 Discipline stated, "Both men and women are included in all provisions of the Discipline which refer to the ministry." (Patterson et al., p. 192).
4. **Strict Moral Code.** The General Rules of the Methodist Church written by Wesley forbade such things as "buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them." Later Methodists led the Temperance movement in the U.S. and outlawed the use of tobacco by their ministers. Modern Methodists take a much more relaxed view of such issues.

Cross-points

The following is a comparison of official Methodist doctrine as found in their Discipline with the official doctrine of Christ as found in the Bible. These points of contrast are merely representative; many more could be given.

The Methodists

1. **The Old Testament.** "Of the Old Testament...no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral" (Discipline, Articles of Religion, VI).

The Bible

1. **The Old Testament.** "Having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us, and He has taken out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Colossians 2:14, cf.

Galatians 3:24f.; Romans 7:1 ff.).

2. Justification. "Wherefore, that we are justified by faith, only, is a most wholesome doctrine and very full of comfort" (Discipline, Articles of Religion, IX).

3. Doctrine. "By what methods can our doctrinal reflection and construction be most fruitful and fulfilling? The answer comes in terms of our free inquiry within the boundaries defined by four main sources and guide-lines for Christian theology: Scripture, tradition, experience, reason" (Discipline 1980, par. 69).

4. Source of Law. "The Discipline is the book of law of The United Methodist Church. It is the product of the many General Conferences of historic religious bodies which now form The United Methodist Church" (Discipline, 1980, p. v).

5. Ordination of Bishops. "Jurisdictional Conference delegates, in electing bishops, shall give due consideration to the inclusiveness of The United Methodist Church with respect to sex, race, and national origin." (Discipline, 1980, par. 506). A bishop is "an elder who has been elected to the office of bishop by a Jurisdictional or Central Conference" (Discipline, 1980, p. 636).

6. Baptism of Children. "...because Jesus explicitly included the children in his kingdom—...parents or guardians (are) to

2. Justification. "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (James 2:24).

3. Doctrine. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profit-able for doctrine...that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:1

4. Source of Law. "There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy" (James 4:12a)

5. Ordination of Bishops. "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you-- if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless..." (Titus 1:5-7a; cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Acts 20:17 & 28).

6. Baptism of Children. "...both men and women were baptized" (Acts 8:12b). "And the eunuch said, 'see, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?' Then Philip said, 'If you believe with all your

present their children to the Lord in _____ heart, you may.'" (Acts 8:36b–37a).
 Baptism at an early age." (Discipline, 1980,
 par. 221).

< Weak Points in Methodism >

1. They write their own laws. Methodists proudly proclaim that they "are a people choosing to be governed by a law which, in the end, they themselves have written" (Short, 1974, p. 25). While that is a very democratic idea, anyone can see the weakness in it when it comes to religion. It leads to laws which are based on principles of convenience and popularity, rather than truth and righteousness.

2. They tolerate many differing doctrines. Any religious group that demonstrates almost no power or inclination to determine what its members are to believe is weak by definition. The Methodists' lack of concern over what doctrines are held among them has led to worldliness and liberal theology within their ranks. They say it doesn't make any difference what you believe, but it has made a difference --their denomination has drifted further and further into the world in many practical areas.

 Methodists would do well to study First and Second Timothy. In I Timothy 4:6 Paul refers to the "good doctrine" which Timothy had "carefully followed." In 4:16 Paul instructs Timothy to "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine." In 5:2–3 Paul says that if anyone does not consent "to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing..." In II Timothy 4:1–4 we read of those who "will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth..." Did Paul think we should tolerate many differing doctrines?

3. They claim that their traditions must be Scriptural in order to be right, but have many traditions which are contrary to Scripture. Their 1980 Discipline states, "All church traditions profess themselves bound to Scripture for their original insights and may rightly be judged by their essential faithfulness to its disclosures" (p. 79). Really? Are practices like infant baptism, voting on bishops, salvation by faith only, choirs, instrumental music or writing your own church laws faithful to any scriptural "disclosures"?

Questions on Methodism

1. Who founded the Methodist movement?
2. What two things exemplified by the Wesleys are still the ideal pattern for Methodism?
3. What is The Book of Discipline? How important is this book to the practice of Methodism?
4. List several changes which have taken place in Methodism over the years.
5. Explain the process Methodists use to change church law.
6. Generally, what is the attitude of Methodists toward those in other denominations?
7. In your opinion, what is the most distinguishing feature of Methodism?
8. On what point do you think Methodists most plainly contradict the scriptures?

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