
RENEWAL



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MEMBERSHIP MATTERS, PART II

Rev. Dr. Thomas W. Bentum

Last year at this time I wrote an article for the ERF Journal about membership in the United Methodist Church to hopefully give some light to the importance of Judicial Council decision 1032. In that decision the Council ruled in favor of Rev. Ed Johnson at South Hill United Methodist Church who postponed membership to a constituent who refused to leave the homosexual lifestyle. His bishop, Bishop Kammerer, had previously removed Rev. Johnson from his congregation believing that he was wrong in this action. The Council disagreed with the bishop on the grounds that the pastor has full authority to determine readiness for ministry.

In May of last year, resolutions were submitted and supported at the New England Annual Conference decrying the action of the Judicial Council. The main reason for the resolutions was the concern that Rev. Johnson was discriminating against a homosexual person. If that were the case, I would have encouraged support of the resolutions. However, since homosexuality is such a hot issue in our church, I believe the resolutions missed the even bigger issues that were going on here. They are the issues of pastoral authority in determining readiness for membership and, more importantly, what membership means in the United Methodist Church.

Fortunately, I was not the only one who saw that. The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry held a wonderful consultation in February dealing with the primary issues of Decision 1032. It is a wonderfully balanced discussion and it can be found at www.gbhem.org/asp/resourcelibrary.asp. Finally we have a healthy national debate on something that affects the very life of our church. Now ERF is presenting a resolution clarifying pastoral authority in the church this year at Annual Conference to fill in the gap in our Discipline concerning membership. Here is what I believe are the four most important reasons for the resolution:

1. This resolution is about fulfilling our purpose as a church to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We believe that for too long we have neglected connecting membership to discipleship and therefore have fostered unhealthy congregations that are ineffective in their mission and ministry. It needs to be clearly spelled out in our Discipline who ultimately is responsible to determine, in the course of a person's discipleship, her or his readiness for membership. Membership needs to mean something besides simply *willingness*. It needs to reflect *readiness*.
2. This resolution is about placing the authority to determine readiness for membership in the hands of the chief spiritual director of a congregation, the pastor. The word pastor, after all, means, shepherd. The pastor's role is to shepherd the sheep. If you understand the nature of sheep, you don't want to take the analogy too far! But in the best sense of the word it means being entrusted with the authority to guide and direct out of love and devotion with the best interest of the sheep in mind.

3. This resolution is about correcting neglect in relation to our historic roots dating back to the beginnings as a people movement called Methodists. The early Methodists took membership in the societies very seriously. Becoming a full member in early America even included a six month probationary period to determine readiness. It was part of the foundation of their success.
4. Most importantly, this resolution is about grace and redemption. Our membership vows are a wonderful means of grace leading people into a redemptive relationship with God and others. We dare not cheapen that experience by neglecting the need for discernment in readiness to take that step on the journey.

TEN REASONS WHY I BECAME AN EVANGELICAL UNITED METHODIST

Walter J. Ciesluk

I joined the United Methodist Church by profession of faith in May 1996 in my 56th year. It took most of my life to make that decision. I was raised in the Roman Catholic Church and probably would still be a member today if I hadn't met a nice United Methodist girl in my senior year in high school. When we couldn't get the priest in my parish to participate in some kind of joint wedding ceremony, I married my wife of 44 years, Gail, in her United Methodist Church. Although, a desire and longing to know God and his truth remained, I came away from that experience, disenchanted and turned off by church. So why did I eventually, after many years, join the United Methodist Church. I came up with 10 reasons.

1. **It Provided Me a Family and Community--** For years, I remained in the background while attending the local United Methodist Church with my wife and family. But, as the years passed, I became more and more aware of how many people in this church were profoundly affecting my life. First, a godly pastor was here to support Gail and I through the pain of the loss of our third child. I have had the privilege of Christian fellowship with devout and caring people from all regions of the country, ethnic and racial backgrounds and have gained from among them many true and loving friends. I have been moved by how the people of this church continuously reach out and minister to those who are ill or in need in our own church, in the local communities, and the poor in different parts of the world.
2. **It Nourished and Educated My Children --**My wife, Gail, made sure that our children were raised in the Christian faith in this church. This provided me the good fortune, to be able to watch with pride and satisfaction, as the pastors and teachers nurtured all our children in the Sunday school, confirmation classes and helped them grow into caring and sensitive young adults.
3. **It Called My Oldest Son to the Ministry –** As I attended church with my wife, I became keenly aware of how this church was nurturing my oldest son's love of the church, which eventually contributed to his call to Christian ministry. My oldest son, Greg, loved math during high school and aspired to become a math teacher. Instead, I encouraged him to try to follow in his father's footsteps and study electrical engineering. In response, he went off to the University of Mass and earned an EE degree. While at the university, he became very active in the Wesley United Methodist Church just off campus. So, when he announced that after graduation, he was going to seminary to study for the UM ministry, it was no surprise to me and I gave him my blessing.
4. **It Slowly and Patiently Nurtured Me in the Faith—**My son's decision forced me to re-examine my own life long doubts and reservations about God and religion that I harbored over many years. I felt drawn to pursue an intellectual search into the evidence for God, the person of Jesus Christ, and the claims of Christianity. I was moved to study over a period of many years, the Scriptures, Christian theology and apologetics, inspirational writings, and prayers. Through it all, I finally learned what it means to be a Christian and a member of a Christian community and have seen my own faith grow from one of doubt and uncertainty to one of conviction and commitment.

5. **It Finally Convinced Me to Trust and Follow Christ** --Through my personal search for God, I became impressed by the strong and persuasive historical arguments for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, based on the eyewitness testimony of the apostles presented in the gospels and Book of Acts. Mainly for these reasons, I have become convinced that the biblical claims about Jesus Christ are true and that He provides the way to life and salvation. I know that I can not prove this with certainty to people who do not believe. But I also know with certainty that no one can prove that it is not so. In the end, I simply decided to trust that God has shown me the way. Since then, I have felt at peace with God and myself. I have been motivated to try to serve Christ and His church, and to become a better person and Christian.
6. **It Professes a Biblically Based Faith and Practice** -- The UMC primarily looks to the Scriptures for the basis for belief and practice, tempered by tradition, experience, and reason. This leads to the well tested rule of Christian fellowship: In necessary things unity; in non essential things, liberty; in all things charity. Through the Disciple Bible study program developed by the UMC, I have been fortunate to have been awakened to the power and truth about God and His plan of salvation revealed in the Bible. I like all of you have heard Old and New Testament readings in church for years. But until I began to seriously study the Bible in Disciple classes, I was not totally aware of how the various stories, prayers, poems, and prophesies written by a myriad of different authors over a span of thousands of years tell an unfolding story; the story about God as the creator of the universe and sustainer of life; about the Jewish people chosen to reveal the one true God and his will for human beings; about the prophets who called the Israelites back to God when they fell away, and who foretold the coming of the Messiah to bring God's salvation to all; about the ministry, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and about the coming of the Holy Spirit on the apostles to empower them to spread the gospel. Clearly something very profound was being revealed in the Bible, and I learned about it all in the UMC
7. **It Provides A Powerful Worship Experience** – Throughout the years of attending worship services, I have heard over and over again the Scripture readings, creeds, sermons, hymns, prayers and music speak to me, encouraging me to seek the Christian truth. I now look forward to attending worship regularly and participating in the sacraments which we celebrate in our monthly communion services and our periodic baptisms and healing services.
8. **It Preaches Social as well as Personal Holiness** – I have been impressed with the fact that the UMC strives to preach the whole gospel by acting to bring about a more just society and to meet the needs of the hungry, naked, imprisoned, sick and poor, while at the same time offering an invitation to all persons to be initiated into the Christian life and the Church. The UMC strives to be the salt of the earth as well as the light of the world.
9. **It Is a Global Church** -- I am impressed with the fact that The United Methodist Church has always strived to be a global church with a strong world mission outreach focus. We see this when many of the people who have worshiped with us from other countries, have testified to how past UMC missions have brought a strong Christian witness to their countries. We see it through our relationship with the churches in Nicaragua and Angola. The UMC still has a strong presence and many missionary activities all over the world. The UMC is now growing the fastest in Africa and Asia.
10. **It Has A Strong and Effective Ecclesiastical and Political Structure** --The UMC has codified its faith and practice in the Book of Discipline. The Discipline addresses topics such as theological beliefs and articles of faith, social principles, and rules of governance. The theology and articles of faith reflect a traditional and evangelical bent. Guided by the Discipline, a Council of Bishops leads a number of Annual Conferences, which encompass congregations all over the world. I feel that this structure provides important strength, stability, as well as checks and balances to the UMC as it deals with the many tough contemporary theological and ethical issues impacting church and society today.

ARE YOU TOO BUSY TO PRAY?

Robbin R. Grill

Are you too busy with your daily tasks to take time to pray? Does your attention stray to the endless tasks of everyday life? Now, all of us are very busy. But how we order the many things that need to get done today is a reflection of what we think is important. All of these needs may be legitimate, but we also know if we really want to do something, that somehow it will get done – we will make the time for it. Well, God is certainly worth taking the time to pray!

One of the greatest times of prayer is when we gather in our congregations on Sunday morning and offer up our praises to God. But we need to make time to do more than that. We need to spend time with God in personal prayer. If we respond to God's invitation to spend time with him our relationship with God will continue to grow. Prayer helps us to be aware that the loving presence of God dwells within us and around us. It doesn't matter **where** we pray; what matters is that we **do** pray!

While we can pray at any time, it is important that we set aside a specific time to pray and be in conversation with God. I personally set aside half an hour before I begin my work day to be in communion with God. I receive three devotionals every morning via e-mail and use these to start my day. While I know these devotionals are received by thousands, it is amazing how many times the topics seem to hit home in a big way.

If you are just getting into a life of daily prayer, don't defeat yourself and say that you will pray for fifteen minutes a day if you have not started with five minutes a day. For a few minutes in the morning, each one of us should ask God for his blessing and guidance for the day ahead. We need to ask for wisdom in all our actions and to develop our individual gifts and talents. And it goes without saying that we need to say grace before each meal. For a few minutes every evening we should thank God for the many blessings which we have received that day. We can use this time to pray about situations and people we have encountered that day and for the sins we have committed.

The more we pray, the more we will want to pray to the point of carrying on a running conversation with God. Isn't it wonderful that we have a God who is waiting to hear from us every minute of every day? With God all things are possible; without God we are nothing. Prayer helps us to have a perspective on how we choose to conduct our lives. Too busy to pray? We cannot be too busy for God. God is looking out for us twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. His love for us is unlimited, unyielding and unconditional. I hope that each of us will resolve to spend some time each day in prayer with God. Do you have time **NOT** to pray?

Heavenly Father, you have heard our prayers

Spoken and silent.

Bless us, we pray, in our fear, anger, joy, remorse.

Let us never forget that in you we are loved, accepted, and known.

Help us to love, accept, know and forgive ourselves and others.

Create in us a burning heart for justice, sufficiency and peace for all the brothers and sisters around the world.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus who taught us the very meaning of prayer

Anonymous

RAISING EXPECTATIONS, A CALL FOR REVIVAL PRAYER

Deborah Botham

Now that I drive a truck, I am always looking for the best gas prices. The local “On the Go” fills both the bill and my tank. Since the management change a few months ago, I look forward to greeting the young cashiers when I grab a cup of coffee and pay for my gas. Last week, one young man’s response to “How are you doing this morning?” left me with a tinge of sadness and a new resolve. He looked me squarely in the eyes and said, “Hangin’ in there, but that’s all that can be expected nowadays, right?”

I wanted to yell, “Expect more!” but it was early, my brain wasn’t completely engaged, and there was quite a line forming behind me. You can believe that I prayed mightily for that fellow the entire 40-minute drive to work. Expect more. Ask more. Believe more. I need to pray not only for revival in my own heart, but that the Church experiences an awakening. We need the Word of God, plain and simple, to fill us, convict us, challenge us.

Dr. Kevin Meador of the online resource, www.prayerclosetministries.org, has wonderful resources that have helped me in my own prayer life. His prayer suggestions are straight out of Scripture, and we know that when the desires of our hearts are lined up with the will of Almighty God, things happen. He hears the prayers of His people, and He acts. As United Methodists in this area prepare for Annual Conference, we can use some foundation praying. I’ve chosen a few of Dr. Meador’s prayers, but urge you to visit his web site for more.

Plead that God will give the believers a deeper love for the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 4:1-3). The Spirit of God enables people to confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Revival is a powerful work of the Holy Spirit in which He draws believers closer to the Lord Jesus Christ. In revival, He leads believers to love and to confess Jesus Christ in a deeper, more faithful way than at other times. Pray that the Holy Spirit will deepen the believers' love for and confession of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord and Savior.

Ask God to deal with any unforgivingness or bitterness among the believers of the church (Ephesians 4:30-32). Unconfessed sin grieves the Holy Spirit. Yet, in the context of Ephesians 4, the emphasis is on right relationships in the church. When believers are at odds with each other, the Spirit is grieved. Nothing quenches the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit like broken relationships among believers. Pray that the broken relationships among believers would be healed. Ask Jesus Christ to bind Satan's work through the mending of broken relationships (Ephesians 4:27). Call on God to deal with the unforgivingness or bitterness that is grieving the Holy Spirit.

Father, Your gospel is the good news about Your Son, Jesus Christ. It is the glorious and gracious message that through His Person and His work, sinners can be brought into a right relationship with You. It is the power of God to salvation. It is the message that brings sinners into a right relationship to You. It is the greatest message ever given among people. Yet, we are not sharing this message. We have grown indifferent to this message. We have failed to proclaim this message on a continual basis to the lost who are in desperate need of it. Forgive us of this abominable sin! Have mercy on us, O God! Grant revival to us that we would share this message with the lost. Send genuine revival so that Your gospel will go forth in power from us! For the sake of Your gospel, I plead that You will grant revival (Romans 1:16).

Rise up and help the believers of the United Methodist Church; restore us to Yourself because of Your redeeming love (Psalm 44:8).

JOHN WESLEY AND UNITED METHODIST RENEWAL

James V. Heidinger II

At the time of the birth of Methodism, eighteenth century England was in a period of both spiritual and moral decline. John Wesley was preaching at a time that observers would consider Anglicanism's "glacial" era-cold, stiff, and uninviting. Poet Laureate Robert Southey went so far as to say, "There never was less religious feeling either within the Establishment, or without, than when Wesley blew his trumpet and awakened those who slept."

Today, we revere Wesley, seeing clearly in retrospect the full impact of his ministry. However, we may not appreciate how he was scorned and even hated by his contemporaries. In *England: Before and After Wesley*, J. Wesley Bready points to the following examples.

. John Kirkby, Anglican rector of Blackmanstoke, wrote in 1750, just twelve years after Wesley's Aldersgate experience, about "the horrid blasphemies and impieties taught by those diabolical seducers called Methodists." He said, "They pray in the language of a saint to Beelzebub himself," and "their religion could be forged nowhere else but in the bottomless pit."

. Dr. Smollett, in his *History of England*, wrote: "Imposture and fanaticism still hang upon the skirts of religion. Weak minds were seduced by the delusions of a superstition, styled Methodism, raised upon affectation of superior sanctity and pretention to divine illumination. Many thousands were infected with this enthusiasm by the endeavours of a few obscure preachers, such as Whitefield and the Wesleys." (Oh, to be so obscure!)

Such was the rancor spewed out at the Wesleys. But years later, historians gave a much different evaluation of what happened during those decades of the Wesleyan Revival. J. R. Green, in his *Short History of the English People*, claims the revival "changed after a time, the whole tone of English society." He also spoke of the mighty influence on the Anglican Church: "The Church was restored to new life and activity. Religion carried to the hearts of the people a fresh spirit of moral zeal, while it purified our literature and our manners. A new philanthropy reformed our prisons, infused clemency and wisdom into our penal laws, abolished the slave-trade, and gave the first impulse to popular education."

Stanley Baldwin, speaking as Prime Minister in 1928 at the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the opening of Wesley's Chapel, said that historians of the eighteenth century "who filled their pages with Napoleon and had nothing to say of John Wesley, now realize that they cannot explain nineteenth century England until they can explain Wesley." Then, he added quite poignantly, "And I believe it is equally true to say, that you cannot understand twentieth century America, unless you understand Wesley."

Permit me one more word about Wesley's life, this from Bready's unsurpassed prose, in reminding us of the significance of this one life: "The 'conversion' of the one-time don of Oxford, which 'strangely warmed' his heart toward God and impelled him forth as the friend and releaser of the outcast, vulgarized masses, was fraught with a succession of results destined finally to change the whole trend of social history throughout the British Empire and the English-speaking world. Nor was the impact of this prophet, who claimed 'the world for his parish,' confined even within those spacious limits. Millions of many colors, climates, and tongues, inhabiting the four corners of the earth, have lived richer, happier, nobler, and more serviceable lives because, in 1738, fire from off the altars of God purged and illumined the soul of a downcast and disillusioned English priest."

Now, I believe we can do more today than look wistfully at our Wesleyan heritage, or reflect on it with nostalgia. I believe that there are certain aspects of it that can guide us today as a church in great need of renewal, especially theological renewal.

Theological boundaries

It is not uncommon today to hear claims that United Methodism is not a creedal church. We are, rather, a church that focuses on a reasoned faith and on experience. One dramatic example of this claim was seen in a commentary in the *United Methodist Reporter* written by Rhett Jackson, a layman from South Carolina. He has been to eight General Conferences and 42 Annual Conferences as a delegate. He said he was a part of a group in his church seeking a "religion of reason." Their problem is that "we do not believe in the virgin birth, physical resurrection, ancient creeds

or any of the other magic revealed in much of our liturgy and literature." He admitted to reading John Robinson's *Honest to God* decades ago, and it changed him dramatically. He sees "magic" revealed in our liturgy.

We also recall retired Bishop Joe Sprague's speech in January of 2002 at Iliff School of Theology, where he shared with the students "candidly and vulnerably" about just who "Jesus the risen Christ is for me." In his message, the bishop denied the classic understandings of Jesus' full and unique deity, virgin birth, blood atonement, and physical [bodily] resurrection. To believe these, he cautions, is "idolatry."

In response to this, we must say that theological indifference cannot be justified by an appeal to Wesley. He was theologically informed and deeply concerned about maintaining a solid doctrinal foundation for the people called Methodists. One good example of Wesley's insistence on doctrinal faithfulness is his provision governing the purchase of "preaching houses."

In 1763, Wesley drafted a Model Deed which stipulated that the pulpits of the Methodist chapels were to be used by those persons who preached only those doctrines contained in Wesley's New Testament notes and his four volumes of sermons. The provision stated that if a majority of the trustees felt any preacher was not conforming to these standards in either doctrine or practice, then another preacher was to be brought in within three months. Wesley was not at all broad-minded in this regard, and it was an effective way for him to maintain doctrinal fidelity in his "preaching houses."

In 1808, American Methodism gave further prominence to doctrinal standards. At that year's General Conference delegates adopted the first "Restrictive Rule" which provided that the General Conference "shall not revoke, alter, or change our articles of religion, nor establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine."

However, in the early 1900s, during the Modernist/Social Gospel era, there developed a growing antipathy toward creeds. A. H. Goodenough wrote in the *Methodist Review* in November, 1910: "Creeds have had their day. They are no longer effective. Without doubt, they were well intended. Possibly they have done some good-they certainly have done much harm. The church has been loyal to her creeds, and has spent much good blood and splendid brains in the defense of them. All this was considered the very essence of Christianity. It was child's play, as we now see it, and in some instances paganism..The creeds are retired to the museums and labeled 'Obsolete.'"

This antipathy to creedal formulation was also seen in the changing requirements for membership. Since 1864, the Methodist Episcopal Church had required members to subscribe to the Articles of Religion, but in 1916, this requirement was removed. Belief in the Apostles' Creed continued to be required beyond 1924 because it was in the baptismal ritual, but it, too, was dropped in 1932.

It may well have been in response to General Conference's dropping of the Apostles' Creed in 1932 that led to Dr. Edwin Lewis' article of alarm about "The Fatal Apostasy of the Modern Church." He was a professor of systematic theology at the Theology School at Drew University, and wrote stinging words about these changes: "But what does the modern church believe? The church is becoming creedless as rapidly as the innovators can have their way. The 'Confession of Faith'-what is happening to it? Or what about the 'new' confessions that one sees and hears-suitable enough, one imagines, for, say, a fraternal order. And as for the Apostles' Creed-'our people will not say it any more': which means, apparently, that 'our people, having some difficulties over the virgin birth and the resurrection of the body, have elected the easy way of believing in nothing at all-certainly not in 'the holy catholic church.'"

It is no surprise that a Methodist bishop would claim in 1908 that since 1812, there had been no definite content given to that particular phrase ("established standards of doctrine"). However, Dr. Robert Chiles claims there are, indeed, "existing and established standards of doctrine" with definite content. He contends, "According to reputable scholars, it can be historically demonstrated that the standards referred to in this Restrictive Rule are the Twenty-Five Articles of Religion, Wesley's Standard Sermons, and Notes Upon the New Testament."

In light of the present claims today that Methodism has never been a doctrinal or creedal religion, but only an experiential one, we should begin with Wesley and recover those basic core doctrines which have generally been considered essential and non-negotiable for Wesley-those basic doctrines which represent what Methodists must believe. In doing this, we discover our core differs little from the major beliefs of historic, ecumenical Christianity. Or

as Thomas C. Oden would say in citing Vincent of Lerins, our doctrines simply represent "what has been believed always, everywhere, and by all."

What are those core doctrines? Robert Chiles agrees with Methodist theologian Colin Williams (author of *John Wesley's Theology Today*) and lists the doctrines which Wesley insisted on at various times in his ministry as "original sin, the deity of Christ, the atonement, justification by faith alone, the work of the Holy Spirit (including new birth and holiness), and the Trinity." These were non-negotiable and nothing less than the great historic tenets of catholic Christianity through the ages. Take away any one of the six and you have something less than classic Christianity. Nor will it do to interpret them in such a way that they are scarcely recognizable when weighed against Christian teaching across the centuries.

Now, the revisionists have been hard at work with Wesley. Liberal, or perhaps naïve, United Methodists have often quoted Wesley's well-known dictum that Methodists "think and let think." We've heard it again and again. However, what is not quoted is his qualification at the beginning of that statement in his tract "The Character of a Methodist": "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think."

Another famously misquoted statement from Wesley is the statement from his sermon "Catholic Spirit," which says "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? Then give me thy hand." This sermon is very helpful but is notoriously abused. In this sermon, Wesley shows a gracious, non-dogmatic view toward opinion, but not toward basic doctrine. Under "opinion," Wesley includes modes of worship, forms of church government, prayer, baptism, and specifics about the Lord's Supper. But then he goes on to explain what he means by the question, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?" He spends no less than seven lengthy paragraphs, some 64 lines in my edition of the sermon, asking, "Do you believe.? Do you believe.? Have you the divine evidence.?"

For John Wesley, right doctrine was a vital ingredient for a right heart. Your heart could scarcely be "right" in Wesley's terms if you denied, for example, the deity of Jesus Christ or the bodily resurrection. In fact, Wesley goes on to make his ringing, clarion charge that United Methodists today very much need to hear, saying, "A man of truly catholic spirit, has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine." Wesley allowed pluralism in matters of "opinion," but certainly not when it came to essential doctrine. In these understandings, Wesley is exceedingly relevant for our reductionist and revisionist age.

Primacy of Scripture

In 1988, the United Methodist General Conference approved a new theological statement from the Theological Commission headed by the late Bishop Earl Hunt. The significance of this new version, "Our Theological Task," is that "theological pluralism" was intentionally removed and the phrase "the primacy of Scripture" was inserted numerous times. In this way, we moved back toward our Wesleyan roots.

Wesley continually subjected tradition and experience to the "written Word of God." In the "Character of a Methodist," he wrote "We believe, indeed, that 'all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God'. We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice" (Works, VIII, 340).

Wesley was not a simplistic proof-texter, casually pasting together texts from here and there. In his words is his own practice: "I want to know one thing-the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights. I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, 'comparing spiritual things with spiritual.' I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach" (Preface, *Standard Sermons*, 1746).

Being homo unius libri did not mean that Wesley rejected all other books, learning, and writings. To the contrary, Wesley stressed also the importance of reading the works of the saints of the Church down through the centuries in order to share in the insights God gave them into his (God's) revelation.

Williams points out that Wesley must be placed with the Reformers in his principle of sola scriptura, in the sense that Scripture is the final authority in matters of faith and practice; not in the sense that tradition and experience have no value, but in the sense that those further sources of insight must be congruous with the revelation recorded in Scripture.

Wesley said in fact, "It is no part of my design to save either learned or unlearned men from the trouble of thinking. On the contrary, my intention is to make them think, and assist them in thinking." But his own mind and heart was so full of Scripture that he scarcely gets through a sentence without including a phrase or portion or a verse of Scripture. His life, mind, and writings are saturated with the sacred text of Scripture.

The teaching of perfection

There is no question about the importance of the doctrine of perfection in the history of Methodism. Wesley believed that this emphasis was a peculiar heritage given to the Methodists in trust for the whole Church. He wrote in 1790, just a year before his death, "This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up" (Letters, VIII, 238).

For Wesley, the work of salvation was not completed with conversion, justification, adoption, the new birth, or assurance. These were the beginning. From there, the believer needed to go on to Christian perfection. Our discomfort with this doctrine today is seen in services of ordination when candidates are asked, "Are you going on to perfection?" Our misunderstanding about this often brings uneasy chuckles and quick disclaimers that we certainly don't claim to be "perfect" in our Christian life. When asked about "going on to perfection," Dr. Bob Tuttle used to respond, "Well, what's your alternative?"

Wesley was very serious about this teaching. He used various terms to describe a new, deeper stage or relationship in the life of the believer-perfection, holiness, entire sanctification, perfect love, full salvation. This teaching came to Wesley from his careful reading of the Apostolic Fathers. In fact, their writings formed the first volume of his Christian Library.

It was in these writings that Wesley saw the theme of perfection as an important one for the Christian, especially with their discussion as to whether a second repentance is needed, which shows an expectation of a deeper change in the life of the believer, such as was described in Wesley's doctrine. We sometimes call it a deeper cleansing or full surrender. Wesley had become convinced that the spread of Methodism depended on the preaching of this doctrine. He wrote in his journal, "Wherever this is not done, the believers grow dead and cold. Nor can this be prevented but by keeping up in them an hourly expectation of being perfected in love."

For Wesley, the holiness about which he spoke and preached was one in terms of unbroken relationship to Christ the Holy One. The perfect Christian is holy, Wesley would say, not because he has risen to a required moral standard, but because he lives in this state of unbroken fellowship with Christ. Wesley stated what perfection is: "We mean one in whom is 'the mind which was in Christ,' and who so 'walketh as Christ also walked;' a man 'that hath clean hands and a pure heart,' or that is 'cleansed from all filthiness of flesh and spirit;' one in whom is 'no occasion of stumbling,' and who accordingly, 'does not commit sin'" (Works, XI, 384).

Those made perfect in love by faith were never so perfect that they did not still need forgiveness and were not perfect in such a way as to be able to live independently from Christ. Little wonder that he saw this doctrine as a key to his movement.

The Wesleyan legacy

In our quest to renew the United Methodist Church, we should rely upon the unique strengths that marked the ministry of John Wesley-theological seriousness, doctrinal precision, reliance upon Scripture, Christian perfection, and aggressive social ministry. These were the key elements that sustained the birthing of early Methodism and distinguished John Wesley throughout his life.

We also should note in closing that we can learn much from Wesley about dying. These poignant words from the last hours of his life tell a deeply moving story. "The strength of his body being spent, long periods of sleep ensued. As the fever waned, his countenance would kindle, and his eyes sparkle, as though beholding some wondrous vision, afar," Bready wrote of John Wesley's final hours. "No murmur, no complaint, escaped his lips. The lines which focused his consciousness, and which again and again he sang, were: 'I'll praise my Maker while I've breath; And when my voice is lost in death; Praise shall employ my nobler powers.'

"On the evening preceding his death, he smiled benignly on all about him, and with great effort, raising his hand, exclaimed calmly and clearly, 'The best of all is-God is with us!' About 10 a.m., on the morning of March 2, 1791, casting his eyes again slowly from person to person around his bedside, he whispered: 'Farewell!' Instinctively, all present fell on their knees; and as Joseph Bradford led in prayer, the holy man's soul, without struggle or groan, sped forth to the spirit centre of the Kingdom of God. A winsome smile enwreathed his face. No sooner was his spirit released, than those who had come 'to rejoice with him,' burst into an anthem of praise."

In plans for his passing, Wesley remembered the poor. He directed that "Whatever remains in my bureau and pockets, at my decease," was to be equally divided among four poor itinerants, whom he named. To each of the traveling preachers within the connection six months after his death, he left copies of the eight volumes of his sermons. He also requested that neither hearse nor coach take any part in his funeral, but desired that six poor men, in need of employment, be given a pound each to carry his body to the grave. And while multitudes filed silently by Wesley's body, which lay in state in his City Road Chapel, the funeral and interment were kept secret among his inner circle, being conducted by torchlight before the dawn of day.

"Do you think we shall see John Wesley in heaven?" an over-aggressive Calvinist had inquired of George Whitefield years earlier (Wesley outlived Whitefield). "I fear not," replied the fellow evangelist, musing about his long-time friend. "No!-he will be so near the throne, and we at such a distance, that we shall hardly get a sight of him."

Bready concludes his moving account with this: "If spiritual values and spiritual attainments be the ultimate standard of greatness, few greater than this little English preacher have yet trodden the earth; and none greater, has spoken the English tongue."

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RECENT BOOKS ON CHRISTIANITY AND RENEWAL

QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics, Doug Powell, Holman Reference, Copyright 2006

In the Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics, Doug Powell defends the Christian faith in a new key; taking time honored approaches in apologetics and freshly presenting them for a new generation. Chapters include: What Is Apologetics? The Cosmological Argument for God's Existence; The Teleological Argument for God's Existence; The Axiological Argument for God's Existence; Which God Exists? Where Did the New Testament Come From? Is the New Testament Reliable? ExtraBiblical Evidence for Jesus; Is the Old Testament Reliable? The Fulfillment of Prophecy ; What About Miracles? Was Jesus Raised from Death? Did Jesus Claim to Be God? Is He the Only Way? How can God allow Evil, Pain, and Suffering?

Finding the right angle from which to approach an unbeliever can be tricky without guidance. Some people simply disbelieve God's existence, some believe in a different deity (or more than one), and some think that who they worship and who you worship are the same when it is plain to you that they are not. Unbelievers have problems with the reliability of the scriptures, the historicity of Jesus or the problem of pain and suffering. Knowing the basics of these issues and their biblical solutions can greatly enhance your introduction of evangelistic basics, tailored to each person's mindset. While apologetical arguments are not evangelistic techniques in the strictest sense of the words, the information presented in this book can go a long way in both your understanding of the worldview of the unbeliever and building your faith to accurately stand up to assaults of modern religions. In today's pluralistic society, not every approach to sharing the gospel will work with all people. Being ready to give reasons for the hope we have in Christ means understanding the contextual framework of the people we are addressing.

Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism, Mark A. Noll, Carolyn Nystrom, BakerAcademic, Copyright 2005

For the last few decades, Catholics and Protestants have been working to heal the wounds caused by centuries of mistrust. This book provides an evaluation of contemporary Roman Catholicism and the changing relationship between Catholics and evangelicals. The authors examine past tensions, post-Vatican II ecumenical dialogues, and social/political issues that have brought Catholics and evangelicals together. While not ignoring significant differences that remain, the authors call evangelicals to gain a new appreciation for the current character of the Catholic Church. Written by Mark Noll, one of the premier church historians of our day, and Carolyn Nystrom, this book will appeal to those interested in the relationship between evangelicals and the Catholic Church.

Cross of Christ 20th Anniversary Edition, John R.W. Stott, Intervarsity Press, Copyright 2006

This book is the work of a lifetime, from one of the world's most influential thinkers, about the heart of the Christian faith. "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?" With compelling honesty John Stott confronts this generation with the centrality of the cross in God's redemption of the world--a world now haunted by the memories of Auschwitz, the pain of oppression and the specter of nuclear war.

Can we see triumph in tragedy, victory in shame? Why should an object of Roman distaste and Jewish disgust be the emblem of our worship and the axiom of our faith? And what does it mean for us today? Now from one of the foremost preachers and Christian leaders of our day comes theology at its readable best, a contemporary restatement of the meaning of the cross. At the cross Stott finds the majesty and love of God disclosed, the sin and bondage of the world exposed. More than a study of the atonement, this book brings Scripture into living dialogue with Christian theology and the twentieth century. What emerges is a pattern for Christian life and worship, hope and mission.

Destined to be a classic study of the center of our faith, Stott's work is the product of a uniquely gifted pastor, scholar and Christian statesman. His penetrating insight, charitable scholarship and pastoral warmth are guaranteed to feed both heart and mind.

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Purpose Statement

Confessing Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord, the Confessing Movement exists to enable the United Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal identity, and to live it out as disciples of Jesus Christ

ERF Executive Team (1 July 2007-30 June 2009)

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