

DEFINING THE ELEMENTS OF A METHODIST ETHOS*

[* The combination of specific doctrinal emphases (also held by other Christians) and the behaviour patterns of living out those beliefs create the ethos of the Methodist movement.]

A. EMPHASES IN METHODIST DOCTRINE

Methodists are:

1. **Orthodox Christians** – The truths of the Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian creeds are fully embraced.
2. **Catholic in spirit** – “In essentials unity... in non-essentials liberty... and in all things charity.” (Augustine)
3. **Protestant**
 - a. Sola fide – we are saved by grace through faith alone
 - b. Sola scriptura – Scripture is the primary authority as understood in the light of tradition, reason, and experience.
4. **Evangelical** – “All must be saved”

Methodists believe in:

5. **Universal Atonement** – “All may be saved”
6. **“The witness of the Spirit”** – “All may know that they are saved”
7. **A distinctive view of the interaction of grace, divine sovereignty and human freedom**

“God creates according to God’s sovereign will, and governs justly all that has been created. God does not over-leap and displace human freedom by coercing human decision making. Rather, God supplies humanity with sufficient grace to which freedom can respond and for which freedom is accountable.” (Oden, p. 117)

The reality of grace is undivided: it is the outpouring of the love of God in Christ Jesus through the gift of the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. But this same grace can be seen from different angles, depending on the results that it produces in persons at different stages of their response to that grace, and depending on the different situations in which that grace can be experienced. In every part of grace’s effect on us, God provides the gift with which we might cooperate, but against which we might tragically resist. We speak of the following dimensions of grace:

- a. Prevenient grace—“Enables one to choose further to cooperate with saving grace by offering the will the restored capacity to respond to grace so that the person may freely and increasingly become an active, willing participant in receiving the conditions for justification.” (Oden, p. 243)
 - b. Convicting grace—Before a person comes to faith in Christ, God is constantly present in his or her life, drawing this person to himself. When persons are convicted by the law that is written in their hearts, or when they respond with conviction to the gospel when they hear it, it is not a purely human act, but is first of all a response to God’s grace that convicts them.
 - c. Justifying grace—When we respond to the gospel in faith, in reality the grace of God gives the gift of faith, in which God constantly sustains us so long as we do not reject this gift of grace. One result of the presence of this grace-given faith in our lives is that our relationship with God is restored and we are released from the guilt of sin.
 - d. Sanctifying grace—Another result of the presence of faith in our lives is that we are transformed by God’s grace, in holiness and righteousness. Sin no longer need rule over us, and its influence begins to be overcome in our lives, with the goal that “we all attain to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” In the process of sanctification we are restored to the image of God, as we seek to be ruled entirely by the gift of love that is ours in faith.
 - e. Glorifying grace—After a life in which we have been changed “from glory to glory,” when we enter into the presence of God after this life, we will become like him, for we will see him as he is. Then grace will totally transform our being, and we will be delivered from all the effects of original sin.
8. **Eschatological responsibility** – “We are now called to understand our present ecological accountability within creation as a final accountability to which we will be called on the last day. God’s mercy will finally extend over all God’s works. God’s justice continues in the midst of the alienation of creaturely life, and will eventually work itself out. Meanwhile, we are encouraged to be merciful as God is merciful.... The promise of general deliverance softens our hearts to the hearts of those little ones for whom the Lord cares...enlarges our heart towards those whom God does not forget.” (Oden, p. 130)

B. IDENTIFIABLE PATTERNS IN METHODIST BEHAVIOURS

1. **Connectional** – Because we are “catholic in spirit,” we are connectional locally, nationally, globally and interdenominationally.
2. **Balanced worship** – Because we are “orthodox Protestant Christians” with an appreciation for tradition, reason and experience, our worship is warm (spontaneous) but ordered (employing the Scriptures and the sacraments), balancing the holiness (transcendence) and the love (immanence) of God.
3. **A passion for evangelism** – Because we are “evangelical” with a love for all people, we have a passion for evangelism. Methodists are innovative and flexible in the adaptation of evangelistic methods.

4. **A passion for Jesus that results in personal holiness** – Because we love Jesus passionately, we believe in sanctification and are passionate about personal holiness. “Justification gives us the right to go to heaven while holiness alone makes us fit for heaven.” (Victor Shepherd explaining Wesley.)
5. **A passion for social holiness and justice for all** – Because we believe in “eschatological responsibility,” Methodists experience anguish at ever increasing affluence (and the concomitant spiritual deterioration and unwillingness to make sacrifices for others) and are committed to actually helping as salt and light in the world.
6. **A passion to learn and to know God** – Because we believe that God can be known intimately in a personal relationship, we are keen to know Him and to understand what He created and His interaction with His creation.
7. **Ministry of the laity** – The clergy is respected but Methodists insist that every Christian is God’s minister, gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve.
8. **Mutual accountability** (small groups) – These are necessary for encouragement, correction, and edification in order that a person can make progress in spiritual maturity.

C. SOURCES

1. Notes on presentations on the Methodist distinctives by Dwight Gregory, Victor Shepherd, John Vlainic – provided by John Vlainic.
2. John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity – A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine, by Thomas C. Oden (Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).
3. Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology, by Randy Maddox (Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1994).

D. BOOKS TO READ FOR A FOUNDATION IN WESLEY’S THEOLOGY

- *Victor Shepherd’s recommendation:*
John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity – A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine, by Thomas C. Oden (Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).
- *David Ashton’s recommendation:*
Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology by Randy Maddox (Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1994).

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The Study Commission on Doctrine
September 15, 2000

(A-7 revised by SCOD, June 9, 2001)