

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE **METHODIST?**

May 9, 2024

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION TO METHODISM

An overview of the origins and key beliefs of Methodism.

ORIGINS OF METHODISM

Methodism traces its origins to 18th-century England with the evangelical movement led by John Wesley, his brother Charles Wesley, and George Whitefield. The movement sought to reform the Church of England (the Anglican Church) and revitalize Christianity in England through a methodical approach to faith and practice, hence the name "Methodism" (which was originally a derogatory title given to the original participants).

What became a world-wide movement began with the Wesley brothers' zeal and hunger for a powerful, devout, and pietistic Christianity that moved beyond the cultural Christianity which marked much of Anglicanism in England at the time. The Wesley's believed in the promises of scripture for believers who were supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit—on the basis of Christ's atoning work—to live free not only from the guilt of sin but also **the power of sinning**. They believe that 2 Timothy 3:5 perfectly described Anglican Christianity as a "form of religion but denying the power" (2 Tim. 3:5), and were moved by the hunger for righteousness to preach the good news of a life that conformed to the risen-ness of Christ rather than the fallen-ness of Adam.

John Wesley famously wrote in "Thoughts Upon Methodism":

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America, but I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.

Because of his passion for discipleship in addition to evangelism, John Wesley emphasized the importance of small group accountability through "class meetings" and "bands." His preaching in open fields, often to the working class, led to the growth of Methodism as a separate movement within the broader streams of orthodox Christianity.

Wesley never intended to start a movement that was separate from the Church of England, but his unconventional methods of preaching and evangelism, along with the Revolutionary War in America, were driving factors behind Methodism becoming something independent from the Anglican Church.

As the Second Great Awakening was kindling in America, Wesley needed leaders who could preach and administer sacraments. The Anglican Church was unwilling to ordain lay leaders for such roles in America, so Wesley, following his sense of the leading of the Holy Spirit, moved forward in ordaining lay ministers for the sake of advancing the Kingdom of God in America.

At the time of the founding of the United States, Methodism gained massive ground through the efforts of circuit riders like Francis Asbury, who traveled extensively to spread the Methodist message across the frontier. Methodism, then, became a leading force during the Second Great Awakening, contributing to the shaping of American religious landscape.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Methodism experienced several schisms and mergers, resulting in the formation of various denominations such as the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church. These denominations eventually united in 1939 to form The Methodist Church, which later merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968 to become the United Methodist Church.

Since 2019, more than 7,000 congregations across the United States have disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church over the church's views on sexual ethics (specifically, the ordination of practicing homosexuals). While sexual ethics has been the presenting symptom for this most recent schism, the true cause of the split is the doctrine of the inspiration and authority of scripture.

Today, Methodism remains one of the largest Protestant denominations worldwide, with various branches and offshoots continuing the Wesleyan tradition.

KEY BELIEFS AND PRINCIPLES OF METHODISM (WESLEYAN-ARMINIANISM)

- **The Great Tradition of Christianity.** Wesley stood in the broader streams of classical, orthodox Christianity in his affirmation of the first seven ecumenical creeds and councils. He was a strong believer in Christian tradition, as long as it accomplished its goal of preserving the biblical witness rather than adding to what scriptures teach in a way that contradicts the biblical message.
- **Entire Sanctification.** Wesley believe that God raised up Methodists for the single purpose of proclaiming the message of entire sanctification. Wesley described this doctrine as, "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodist; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up." Most people misunderstand entire sanctification. Wesley defined the doctrine as, "A full salvation from all our sins, from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief, or, as the Apostle expresses it, "Go on to perfection" [Heb. 6:1 KJV]. But what is perfection? The word has various senses: here it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love "rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in everything giving thanks" [1 Thess. 5:16-18 KJV] ("The Scripture Way of Salvation"). In sum, entire sanctification can be defined as the fullness of the Spirit, victory of sin, and a life of holy love (much more on this to come!).
- **Assurance of Salvation.** One of John Wesley's major contributions to Western Christianity was his robust teaching on the doctrine of assurance (the ways we can be sure that we are, in fact, reconciled to God and walking with him). Wesley believed that we could be sure of our salvation both inwardly and outwardly.
- **Arminian Theology.** Unlike many within the Protestant tradition, Wesley was an Arminian, meaning that he believed that salvation was less of a change in status and more of a love

relationship. This view depends that the individual be enabled by grace to willingly cooperate with the work of God.

- **Salvation as a Journey Over a Change in Status.** Many within the Protestant tradition think of salvation first and foremost as a change in status from guilty to innocent (justification).. Wesley believed in justification, however, he believe that at the heart of Christian conversion was the new birth (regeneration) along with an ongoing, reconciled relationship with God. Wesley, in other words, emphasized what God does in us above what God does for us in salvation. Salvation, thought Wesley, should be thought of as a life-long journey of faith in which we walk in a love-relationship with God on the basis of Christ's atoning work and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, Wesleyans understand that salvation in the life of the individual is about the healing, or redeeming of the image of God in humanity, over and above a transactional status change.
- **Social Holiness.** The Methodists strongly emphasized the importance of discipleship in the small group setting (what they called "bands"); that holiness of heart and life cannot be fulfilled in isolation, but in community.
- **Means of Grace.** Central to Methodism is a robust understanding of two forms of the Means of Grace ("means of grace" being the ways in which God's sanctifying grace is administered in the life of the believer). The first form of the means of grace is works of piety (e.g., spiritual disciplines such as Bible study, prayer, fasting, etc), and the second being works of mercy (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting prisoners, etc.).