

A People Called Methodist

Jeremiah 31:31-35

Preached January 4, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Introduction. Early in my ministry, I remember a mantra that was spoken by my DS: “I am Methodist born and Methodist bred, when I die I will be a Methodist dead.” Now more than 25 years later, I guess I could easily adopt that saying for I too am “Methodist born and bred.” Hopefully it will be awhile before I am a “Methodist dead.” As I grow older, I grow in my appreciation for the Methodist Church and my understanding of why I am a Methodist.

Many in our time question the importance of denominational affiliation. It seems to be less important for many who are looking for a church home. While this is true, I feel that denomination is an important part of heritage and culture. In many ways, our identity is like being part of a tribe. As a tribe we have an association with those inside our tribe. We share a religious cultural identity and claim an important spiritual kinship.

History of “Methodist.”

The name “Methodist” really does not have a religious ring to it. Unlike denominational names that emphasize a significant mark or practice such as Baptists or Seventh Day Adventist or takes the name of the founder, Lutheran, Methodist has a rather benign sound to it. How did we get our name?

In 1729, John Wesley and his brother Charles began meeting with a couple of gentlemen at Oxford College in England a few times weekly for the purpose of reading the Greek New Testament. Over the next couple of years a few others joined in this pursuit. Because of the “regularity of their lives” and studies, a gentleman from Christ Church called them “a new set of Methodists” (John Wesley, *History of Methodism*). The name stuck. A few later as John organized the converts from his preaching into groups, they kept the name “Methodists.” From that origin sprang our name. It was a nickname directed toward a disciplined and sincere group of Christ followers.

Later in an article titled “The Character of a Methodist,” Wesley

stated that the distinguishing marks of a Methodist were not a matter of *opinions, words, customs, or emphasis on a particular point of theology*. But Methodists were known by having the *love of God in their heart both for God and others, being happy in God, being a people of prayer and not doing anything that hinders one’s relationship with God but fully does God’s will*. From Wesley’s description, I believe every pastor, regardless of the label of the church, would like to have a church filled with Methodists.

A little over two hundred years have passed since John Wesley was around. Who are we today? What marks distinguish the people called Methodists? In the balance of this sermon, I want to highlight 5 things that I believe are critical to our nature as Methodists.

Marks of a Methodist.

1) We are a people who march under the *banner of Grace*. We believe that a right relationship with God is made possible only through the grace God offers by humanity through Jesus Christ. It is something we do not deserve, merit or earn.

Often we talk about three expressions of God’s grace. First, there is *prevenient grace*, the grace that *comes before*. Before any human being enters into a right relationship with God, God’s prevenient grace is at work in that person’s life. God makes the first move. It is grace that awakens a person to the need for God. It is grace that gives a person a sense of right and wrong and grace acts as one’s conscience. It is grace that steers one God-ward. Even

before we have any thoughts of God or turning to God, prevenient grace is at work. We believe prevenient grace is at work in all people.

The second expression of grace is *justifying grace*. This is the grace where we are declared right with God. When in faith we receive Jesus Christ, justifying grace makes us right with God. Through this grace we become daughters and sons of God. Our sins are forgiven and we are made right with our Creator. It is the grace that makes each of us a new creation through Jesus Christ.

The third expression of grace is *sanctifying grace*. This is the grace that continues to be at work in the life of the justified to make them holy and complete. You see, God does more than save us so we can get into heaven. He wants to bring heaven into us. He wants each of us to become all he created us to be. So, through his sanctifying grace he is at work within us to make us complete. As we accept and respond to each experience of grace (prevenient, justifying or sanctifying), its effect is appropriated in our lives.

A dear friend of mine grew up in a dysfunctional home in which his parents were alienated from God and claimed to be atheists. During his childhood, he had an aunt who would take him to church, an example of prevenient grace. As a youth, he began to wonder if there was a God and prayed for God to reveal Himself. He had the opportunity to attend medical school. Upon his graduation, he felt empty. A few years later, he was extremely depressed and wanted to end his life. He called out to God and the Lord heard his prayers. He experienced God's justifying grace. Through the years of our friendship, I have seen him

go through some tough struggles. Yet I have also seen God's sanctifying grace at work in his life. God is still at work in him to make him all God intends him to be.

2) A second important mark is our *evangelical emphasis on a personal faith in God and on social holiness*. We are a people who believe our faith is both personal and social. We believe in personal salvation and social justice. We are evangelistic and mission minded. We give altar calls and call people to serve their community. We will pray with the repentant sinner and serve the hungry a bowl of soup. We humbly speak to issues that concern our society.

3) Methodists are a people with both a heart and mind. Around the beginning of this millennium, a study was conducted by our denomination related to how to reach 25-54 year old seekers and how the strengths of the UMC could be used in this endeavor. From that study sprang forth a motto and advertizing campaign: *Open hearts, open minds, open doors, the People of the United Methodist Church*.

We are a people with a heart – a heart for God, a heart for people, a heart for one another. There is a passion in our soul. We claim our emotions as part of our spiritual nature. We are not ashamed to cry or to rejoice. We are a people who have warm hearts and fire within. We, too, get excited about our faith.

We are a people who are not afraid to use our minds. As Methodists, we affirm that the mind is a gift of God and believe our Creator wants us to use it. We think about matters of our faith and practice. We raise questions and explore thoughts. We approach the Bible and theology with open minds. We listen to others who

disagree with us. We try to understand who they are and where they are coming from. We desire to be open minded rather than closed minded about matters of life and faith.

4) As we reflect about personal and social holiness and being people of heart and mind, we quickly realize that each issue in these pairs often is in tension with another. That tension again is part of our identity. It is seen in other areas of our church life such as worship – liturgical and free style as expressed today in “traditional and contemporary.”

This tension that led Scott Jones, who is now a Bishop, to identify our understanding and practice as “*The Extreme Center*.” We are pulled on both sides of many issues to the right and to the left, to the conservative and to the liberal, to the heart and to the mind yet we tend to move toward the place of balance. We are not a person of the extreme outer edges but the extreme of the center. It is not a place of compromise but a place of balance.

In our pews we have people to the right and to the left, yet we act as a body, a community. Methodism is not an extremist movement. We may have people who are on the extremes but we, as a group, are people of the center. We claim we are part of the same family. We do not always agree on every issue but listen to one another and appreciate the other's point of view. We show respect and we love. We are a people of the extreme center.

5) The final mark that I want to highlight is that we, as United Methodists, are a covenant people. A covenant is an agreement between two parties that is carried out in action and practice.

In our scripture lesson, Jeremiah shares the new covenant God makes with his people. God promises to write his laws on their hearts and minds and to forgive their sins. The people will know God fully, from the least to greatest, and be God's people. There is a mutual relationship that exists in this great covenant. In a few moments when we gather at this table, we will celebrate and remember this covenant. The cup is the blood of the new covenant.

When people become full members of the UMC, they affirm a covenant with God and the church. They commit to turn from that which prohibits them from knowing God fully and to accept the grace God offers to make that happen. They confess Christ as Lord and Savior and receive the grace he offers. They pledge to live their faith faithfully. They commit to support the church through their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. When persons are ordained for ministry, covenant is central.

We are a covenant people. The covenant understanding leads

us to know that we cooperate with God both in his work in our world and in our lives. While God always takes the first step, He calls us to join in the journey and mission. He reaches out his hand in invitation. When we join ours to his, we share in covenant.

In August of 1755, John Wesley began discussing with his congregation in London the need of "joining in a covenant to serve God with all our heart and with all our soul" (A Short History of the People called Methodists). After discussing this with them for several mornings, they met for a service on a Monday evening with some 1800 people attending. At that service, they joined together in a renewal covenant. That was the origin of the Covenant Service. At least 10 other times this service was used by Wesley. It was a lengthy service. The covenant service became a staple of British Methodism and has been typically observed the first Sunday of each year.

Today, we have before us the Covenant Prayer that was used. This was written in its longer form

by Richard Alliene, who lived a hundred years before Wesley. As a covenant people, I want to ask you to join in this covenant prayer. Before we do, I would ask you to read it silently. Then ask, "Can I pray this prayer?" Then if you can, we will join in reading it together as our covenant to God.

Wesley's Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me
with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to
suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid
aside for thee, exalted for thee or
brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have
nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed
God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have
made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen