

Introduction

In his introduction and warning Bishop Willimon ends with the following challenge:

“On the first Easter evening, a couple of disciples were trudging from Jerusalem toward the village of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-25). Suddenly, a stranger walked beside them. The stranger asks why they are so depressed. The two disciples are shocked that the stranger doesn’t seem to know the terrible events in Jerusalem that crucifixion weekend. The stranger questions the disciples, then “opens the Scriptures.” Still, the disciples don’t understand. As evening falls, they invite the stranger to stay and have supper with them at an inn.

There, in the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine, their eyes are opened, and they see the stranger as none other than the risen Christ. The stranger vanishes, once again on the move. And the disciples run back to Jerusalem proclaiming, “We have seen the Lord.”

This is a parable of Christian believing. We are on a journey. We believe some things about Jesus, but we don’t understand everything. Through study of the Scriptures and conversation, we are questioned in our commitments. Not leaving us to our own devices, Jesus comes and walks with us, reveals himself, speaks, and gives us what we need to believe. Our lives are changed as we walk with him. We journey not alone. He is undeniably present to us, though still not completely grasped by us; he is on the move and never confined by us. And we run back home shouting, “We have seen the Lord.”

That’s sort of what we United Methodists mean when we say, “We believe...”

I welcome you as a fellow traveler on this journey. As we journey through these 40 days of Lent, may we too have our eyes opened and our hearts strangely warmed.

This resource is a companion guide for your use with Bishop Willimon’s book, “United Methodist Beliefs, A Brief Introduction.” Each chapter except the last has two reflections and questions written by laity throughout the North Alabama Conference. Use these reflections and questions with each of the chapters as a guide and spring board for discussion. Whether we study alone or in a small group, may we grow in our understanding of who we are as United Methodists, as we “forge ahead” on this journey together.

Ellen H. Harris, Lay Leader
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CHAPTER ONE

We Believe in the Triune God

Zac Riddle

The world says that we are in control of our own destiny. We are self-made people. However, this story is not the truth. The great truth is that God is in control. We are who we are. But we are who God created us to be. God is who God is. Bishop Willimon writes that “Like most Christians who are schooled in Scripture, we have no interest in the modern infatuation ‘Is there a God?’ The Bible’s question is ‘Who is the God who is?’”

Bishop Willimon discusses that there is no way for us to actually perceive the God who is. Our connotations of God come through our own perceptions and our own limited imaginations. However, we cannot fathom the omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence of the triune God. No matter how big we make our God, we cannot capture with our human limitations the wonder of “a living, active God.”

The Trinity is a Holy Mystery that Bishop Willimon does not try to water down and make palpable. Instead, he encourages us to look into the complexities of this Holy Mystery - God, who created; Jesus Christ, the word made flesh; the Holy Spirit, who is always with us – one God.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you begin to grasp and attempt to explain the wonderful mystery of the triune God?
2. When have you had an experience (or experiences) when you have felt your heart “strangely warmed”? When has the living God surprised you?
3. Does the belief that “God’s love desires to control us for God’s purposes, rather than the other way around” offend you? Why does (or why would) many people find this belief offensive?
4. What hymns / praise songs give you a glimpse / help you understand the awesome mystery of the Holy Trinity?

The Trinity

Leonor Delcastillio

We believe in the Divine Trinity, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. This is one of the greatest mysteries in Christianity, and even though we can not completely understand this concept, it is real.

God created man according to who God is. God is the source of man and man is the expression of God. He created man with a spirit, a soul, and a body, exactly to His image.

The purpose of the Divine Trinity is to work Himself into his created man, therefore; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit become the life-giving Spirit working in us.

The three of them are one. They have the same “substance”, the same “essence”, the same nature; but not the same functions and personalities. Every one has a role to play in us and among us.

All things depend on God. We can't do anything apart from him. If we believe in Him it's because of his mercy and love. The Father is the one who puts the calling in our heart, the Son is the bridge to reach that calling and the Holy Spirit is the guide to bring us back to the Father.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How can the Divine Trinity work perfectly in us?
2. How can the Divine Trinity be one and in the same time are three different persons?
3. Why did the Trinity choose to work with human beings?

CHAPTER TWO

We Believe in Salvation through Jesus Christ

Tim Culpepper

How blessed we are to worship a God who has made covenant with us and even though we have broken that covenant time and time again, continues to nurture us and attempts to bring us along no matter how sinful we are. We are sinners and we need to be redeemed. Thankfully, we can be through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Christ loves us and wants us to become better people so we can share love with others.

Atonement, at-one-ment, Jesus is here with us acting as intercessor between us and the Father. Loving us to bring us closer to him. God loves us so much he sent Jesus to die for us and now Jesus is our best friend and our teacher. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice and continues to sacrifice for us daily, loving us and getting us through each day. In return, he expects us to live for him and share his love with the world as disciples.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the three absolutely essential beliefs of Methodists according to John Wesley?
2. How does God try to get closer to us?
3. What does atonement or at-one-ment mean to you?
4. How do you see Jesus working in the world around you?

We Believe in Salvation Through Jesus Christ

Bart Styes

“For United Methodist Christians, salvation has a face, a name, a particular way of living and dying, and rising and being present. That name is Jesus.” (Pg. 18, United Methodist Beliefs)

It was a Sunday evening in early August. I was at the visitation for a young man who had been a fixture in our summer camping program at Sumatanga. He had died suddenly and much too young. Walking to the altar, I realized that I had yet to truly grieve for him. When I saw the photos of him throughout his life, I broke down. I couldn't stop sobbing. I couldn't support my own weight. The only words I could speak between the tears were, “Help me Jesus! Help me Jesus!”

I'm one of those Methodists who were baptized as an infant. So I've done my fair share of praying. I've prayed in silence, in a group, from my heart and from a hymnal. That simple, three word prayer, asking Jesus to share the burden on my heart is about as honest a prayer as I've ever lifted up.

I am weak. I am a sinner. I am lost without God. Because of these truths, I am constantly in need of saving. I'm also a human and because of that truth, I constantly do my best to deny that I need help, trying to make it through this world on my own. I thank God for sending Jesus, a Savior with dirt under His fingernails. I thank God for a Savior who held a meal with friends as sacred. I thank God for a Savior who wept. Salvation through Jesus Christ means we are never alone. Jesus is with us always, in celebration and in pain, healing our broken humanity and urging us on towards salvation.

That same day as his visitation, the young man's girlfriend and roommate both joined the church where he had played in the praise band.

Questions for Reflection

1. Where and when are you offering Christ, beyond Sunday morning? Specifically, where and when are you personally taking advantage of or losing opportunities to offer Christ to others?
2. If God is very, very busy, then United Methodists should be very, very busy. What is your church busy doing? How does it align with the focus of this chapter?
3. Many people in our culture seem willing to accept Jesus as a great ethical or moral teacher but not as divine. How can we faithfully share the Gospel while attempting to resonate with a skeptical culture?
4. What are some ways that you have seen sinful, human nature separate us from understanding or celebrating the salvation offered through Jesus Christ?

CHAPTER THREE

We Believe in The Holy Spirit The Spirit Made Me Do It!

Carole Y. Toney

Some might remember the late Flip Wilson's comedy routine in which he said "The devil made me do it" to explain some unacceptable behavior. We people called United Methodist believe that we can do nothing without the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit!

Bishop Willimon said in his chapter on the Holy Spirit, "It is one thing to say that you believe that there is a God; it is quite another to believe that God is there for you." United Methodists believe that God is there for us in the person and presence of the Holy Spirit. We believe that God the Holy Spirit is active in our lives. The Holy Spirit resides in us, seals us, searches us, helps us, comforts us, confronts us, intercedes for us, in-dwells us, fills us, unifies us, teaches us, bears witness for us, bears fruit in us, reveals truth to us, advocates for us, and transforms us. The Holy Spirit can and will do all of the things mentioned above, and more, if we allow Him control of our heart, mind, and body.

Charles Spurgeon said "Do you desire to speak for Jesus – how can you unless the Holy Spirit touches your tongue? Do you desire to pray? Alas, what dull work it is unless the "Spirit maketh intercession for you" (Romans 8:26)!" We can do nothing worthwhile without the Spirit.

I remember reading a book on the Holy Spirit many years ago that was written by Billy Graham in which he made a comment that was so meaningful to me. He said, we don't get more of the Spirit, "we allow the Spirit to have more of us." What would your church, indeed the North Alabama Conference, look like if we all allowed the Holy Spirit to have more of us? What could we accomplish that is so impossible that it could only be accomplished by the Holy Spirit? What would our priorities be if we were led by the Spirit? What is the "bold mission" and "risky work" we would undertake for the Lord?

We say in my church each Sunday that we are a church that is Spirit Bred, Spirit Fed, and Spirit Led. What does that assertion mean and how do we get there? When we practice the spiritual disciplines of praying, fasting, attending upon the sacraments, and inward searching in solitude we are placing ourselves in a position to yield to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we are allowing the Spirit free reign in our lives. It is scary! The Spirit might lead us into places we don't want to go. The Spirit might open our eyes to things we don't want to see. The Spirit might open our hearts to thing we don't want to believe. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, to take us beyond our safe little cocoons so that we can care for the "least of these" as Christ commanded, and "turn the world upside down" as did the early church.

As Christians and as United Methodist we are willing to be led by the Spirit. So, being a Christian and being a United Methodist means we are willing to be

transformed by the renewing of our minds, that we may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Being a Christian and being a United Methodist Christian means we are willing to take unpopular stands, we are willing to stand up against injustice; we are willing to take the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who are the marginalized in our society, not just those who look like us and live like us. Being a Christian and being a United Methodist Christian means we are willing to have the mind that was in Christ Jesus. As a Christian and a United Methodist we are willing to love our enemies and our friends. We are willing to listen with open hearts and open minds to those who have opinions that might differ from our own. We are willing to work for unity among all Christians (even other United Methodists) and peace in the world. As United Methodists (to quote the Book of Discipline) “We insist that personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world. By joining heart and hand, we assert that personal religion, evangelical witness, and Christian social action are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing. Scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world.” We don’t get to choose which part of God’s word we will follow, not when we are led by the Spirit. When we yield to Him our body and soul, the Holy Spirit will “make us” do strange things. Are you ready?

Questions for Reflection

1. Can you recall a time when the scriptures came alive for you? What were the circumstances? What did you do as a result of it?
2. Are you willing to allow the Holy Spirit to shape a new beginning in you as He did the new church at Pentecost? Are you willing to allow the Spirit to transform your life? Why? Why not?
3. How is your life exhibiting the Fruit of the Spirit? Are you unsatisfied with your Spirit Fruit, and if so, what are you going to do about it?

We Believe in The Holy Spirit

Pat Meadows

The Holy Spirit comes to us as a gift of God. As Christians we experience the Holy Spirit's presence in our everyday walks of life. We also know the Spirit's activity in powerful and extraordinary ways. Although usually listed after God the Father and God the Son in our Christian affirmations of faith, the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity is in no sense diminutive or in "third place" in importance. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and like the wind blows where it pleases. This movement of God in and around our lives, however, is neither arbitrary nor capricious, but is always purposeful and intentional. Holiness in being is at once the object and demonstration of God's Spirit. It is almost too marvelous to think that God would willingly condescend to show us some part of His glory we are to emulate and cultivate as the evidence of our efforts to "work out our own salvation" is clearly imperfect and flawed.

Individual Christians as well as entire communities of believers know and experience the Holy Spirit. For instance, the Holy Spirit gave John Wesley the assurance at Aldersgate that his sins had been taken away, allowed him to believe in Christ alone for salvation, and gave him that certain knowledge he had been saved from the law of sin and death. Of this experience John Wesley said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." Likewise, on Pentecost Day tongues like flames of fire appeared and filled the community of disciples with the Holy Spirit. Devout Jews from every nation immediately began to understand in their own language "the great things God has done." Peter explained to the crowd that Jesus was both Lord and Messiah. Peter urged those gathered to "repent and be baptized ...in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins." By doing that Peter said, "You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Some three thousand accepted Peter's word and were baptized.

Bishop Willimon points out that the Holy Spirit not only warms our hearts, but "strengthens our hands and puts our feet in motion." The power of the Holy Spirit, he says, allows us "to live transformed lives in service to God." We turn from sin and turn toward God as the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf. There is no part of our relationship with God and His people where the Holy Spirit is not present illuminating our understanding, guiding our activity, perfecting us in love. Whether we apply ourselves to discern the meaning of scripture, recognize the need to offer intercessory prayers, determine to share our resources with others, are moved to offer words of encouragement or demand accountability, or ask God to forgive us of our sins and restore us unto Himself, the Holy Spirit is present with us and for us. According to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is not only our advocate, He is the Spirit of truth and will guide us into all the truth. John 16:13.

Questions for Reflection

1. Does the name "Holy Spirit" bring feelings and images to your mind that are Positive? Negative? Ambivalent or Not sure? A slightly different way of

examining this question is if you were told the Holy Spirit's wind was blowing in your direction would your immediate inclination be to try to run away or run toward the Spirit's presence, or would you be inclined to simply do nothing and try to wait it out? What do you think causes you to have these feelings?

2. Have you ever had times in your life when your prayers to God, in essence, became figurative lassos or nets you were casting in an effort to catch hold and pull in the Holy Spirit? Did your efforts succeed or fail? How did God answer the needs you expressed?

3. Jesus promises in the Beatitudes that those with pure hearts will be blessed and shall see God. What part do you think the Holy Spirit has in making this possible or is this something that simply must wait until we get to heaven?

4. One's life can never be the same after experiencing the Holy Spirit. How does one's repenting and asking for the forgiveness of one's sins make it possible for him/her to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit?

5. Reflect on the times you closely felt the presence and assurance of the Holy Spirit in your life. Was this an experience you wanted to share with others or was the experience too intimate and private with God for anyone else to know about?

CHAPTER FOUR

We Believe in Christ's Universal Church Paulette West

There are many opportunities on Volunteers in Mission teams to see and experience just how connected we are as Christians and especially as United Methodist. Although cultures and traditions vary, our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord creates commonality; and it is important to acknowledge this commonality. Because we follow Jesus, we must live out our lives creating God's Kingdom where ever we live. As we move within our communities or throughout the world, we can see God already working there; but sometimes others need to be made aware of His presence. Even though we are not saved by our good works, our Christian beliefs should move us to live out our faith through deeds as well as words. This is how others learn and understand who Jesus is.

Recently, I participated in an exploratory mission trip to Mozambique and the team was comprised of both Brazilians and Alabamians. Few of us spoke the same language of the other nor did many of us speak the same language of those in the areas we worked in Mozambique; but we were able to communicate the love of Christ through the work, compassion and love that we showed. We never considered ourselves as separate teams from two different places; we were one team representing one Lord and His church. We found by putting what differences we have aside and focusing on the mission that brought us there, our efforts may not have changed the medical or economic conditions, but it did transform lives – theirs and ours. I think all of us on that team now have a better understand of what God is calling His church to through Jesus Christ and our responsibility to participate in His mission.

Questions for Reflection

1. How is your faith manifested in individual and collective experiences? Which is more important to you?
2. What does “responsible grace” (grace that empowers us to live new lives for Christ rather than ourselves) mean in your life?
3. How is your local church connected to the broader church? How do you participate in the connection?

We Believe in Christ's Universal Church

Scott Selman

If we believe in Christ, we must believe in Christ as he is – embodied and embedded in the church, shortcomings and all. We have to get past the notion that there are people in the church that we don't like. The church is where Jesus chooses to be!

Webster defines the word catholic as "... of, relating to, or forming the church universal..." Our United Methodist Book of Discipline is clear about our catholic intent: We understand ourselves to be part of Christ's universal church when by adoration, proclamation, and service we become conformed to Christ.

United Methodists believe in the kingdom of God, praying "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Thus, we believe in God's kingdom in the here and now, as well as God's kingdom in the future. We believe God's kingdom can be experienced today as an active expression of God's work in human lives. And, although the kingdom cannot yet be experienced in all of its fullness, we envision the hope of the coming kingdom. This hope of the coming kingdom helps us defeat resignation.

Questions for Reflection

1. The Christian faith is a group thing, and United Methodists understand themselves to be part of Christ's universal church. How does the church help us be less individualistic and more focused on the world beyond ourselves?
2. Our United Methodist connection affirms our belief in the holy catholic church and our Christian responsibilities. Thus, our connectionalism is less about organizational and managerial technique and more about theological affirmation. Explain. (Hint: John 15:2-4.)
3. United Methodists believe "... we are called to be visible witnesses to the essential unity of Christ's holy catholic church." Give examples of how United Methodists seek to be conformed in Christ.
4. United Methodists depend on a little help from their friends. According to Willimon, we are eclectic, "...inveterate borrowers, embracers, experimenters, and ancient-future spongers." What does Willimon mean by this?
5. John Wesley stressed participation in Christ's love, not merely reception of Christ's love. What does this mean?
6. Wesley believed that human sin was more of a malignant disease than simply total and complete depravity. What is the cure for this malignant disease called human sin?

7. What does Willimon mean when he says God's grace is not irresistible?
8. Explain United Methodist ecclesial schizophrenia.

CHAPTER FIVE

We Believe in Practicing Theology

Gloria Holt

Theology is not just something we learn, but something we feel and something our soul yearns to fully understand. As United Methodists we profess our commitment to engage in practicing theology, becoming practical Christians, and living more faithfully for Jesus.

Living our faith means that we cannot be content to just listen to God's word, but to have a passion that compels us to be drawn into a deeper relationship with our Creator. Through study, reflection, and prayer we will be able to really hear and understand the message God is trying to get through to us. As United Methodists we put strong emphasis on the "Wesley Quadrilateral" (scripture, tradition, experience, reason) as our model for theological reflection.

The General Rules remind us that salvation evidences itself in good works. When we yield ourselves to Christ we become transformed people who are committed to following where the Spirit leads us living theologically and putting our beliefs into action.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you know that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life?
2. What is theology?
3. Our call as United Methodists is "to spread scriptural holiness over these lands." Is this reflected in the doctrine and ethics of our church?
4. How can the "Wesley Quadrilateral" (scripture, tradition, experience, reason) be used as a means for theological reflection?
5. As "professional theologians" (every one who professes Christ is a "professional theologian") what are our responsibilities?

We Believe in Practicing Theology

Dr. Neal R. Berte

Bishop Willimon presents in Chapter 5 of his book, *United Methodist Beliefs*, theological highlights of why I am grateful to be a United Methodist. In this chapter, titled “We Believe in Practicing Theology,” we are reminded that John Wesley gave foundational gifts of “practicality” as the focus for the theology of our denomination through crafting liturgies, devising sermons, and composing hymns. Bishop Willimon underscores these practical contributions of John Wesley and states that our theology as United Methodists should be focused on God’s gracious action in our lives, and more specifically, to what Jesus Christ has done as the “author and perfecter of our faith.” We hear so much talk today and see so much in the world around us that is so self-centered that we sometimes miss the focus of our faith that should be there - - God’s gracious action in our lives, God’s self-revelation.

Our theology further focuses on Jesus as we represent our calling, not only as United Methodists, but as Christians. But the danger, as Bishop Willimon points out, is a kind of “cultural accommodation” or becoming an apologist for our faith rather than letting the doctrines transform our lives into the persons who live out our faith in the world in ways that God intends.

In our churches, and in the larger world, there is so much “noise,” so many sound bites, so many glib one-liners, that it can appear that we do not have an intellectual foundation to our faith. Bishop Willimon reminds us that the “societies” formed by Wesley focused on “living” theology as revealed in Scripture, based on tradition, formed by personal experience, and soundly based on reason. The “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” become the foundation of our beliefs as United Methodists. An important focal point of this chapter puts these four means of theological reflection in perspective. As Bishop Willimon notes, whatever we think “reasonable” must be tested by experience and by the tradition of the Church and above all by Scripture. “Reason is a divinely given gift that enables us to appropriate God’s gracious revelation.” (Page 66) When Bishop Willimon talks about a healthy acknowledgement of the distance between Scriptures’ originating context and our own situations, he also reminds us of our dependence on the Holy Spirit in our Scriptural interpretation.

Our standards affirm the Bible as the source of all that is “necessary” and “sufficient” unto salvation (Articles of Religion) and the Bible “is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice.” (Confession of Faith) (Page 69).

Bishop Willimon has a gift for reminding us that “theology is too important to be left to the professional theologians, and ministry is too essential to be left to ordained pastors.” For those of us who call ourselves United Methodists, pastors, theologians and laity alike, theology becomes the framework for our social conscience, for our interaction with others with the ultimate goal of “Practical Christianity” as the means of yielding ourselves to Christ. (Page 71).

Questions For Reflection

1. Bishop Willimon reminds us that of the four components of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, Scripture is primary. How do you interpret that statement? What does this say about the other three parts of the Quadrilateral - - experience, tradition and reason?
2. Where do you see examples in our larger society of how we have “accommodated” Scripture in our modern-day world and lost the true meaning of Scripture?
3. Bishop Willimon reminds us “that there are few rules and regulations in Scripture and very few principles for better living.” What does that statement mean to you?
4. Bishop Willimon states that “theology is too important to be left to the professional theologians, and ministry is too essential to be left to ordained pastors.” What are ways you feel members of the laity can do a better job of living out our theology as United Methodists?

We Believe in Transforming and Perfecting Grace

Michael O'Kelley

“Our relationship to Christ is instituted by His gift of himself, and it is sustained through countless gifts of love that generate through the Holy Spirit, gracious holy living.” Bishop Willimon writes of our relationship with Christ as a gift. We don't deserve it, we don't buy it, we don't earn it – it is a gift freely given to us. God has determined to make something of His creation that will honor and care for this world and those in it.

Willimon gives us a clearly Wesleyan description of prevenient (coming before), justifying (conversion), and sanctifying (holy living) grace. God presents and fills us with His grace as we are “transformed” to one persevering to live like God. We understand that though grace is a gift, it is not a one time event. We constantly receive and experience God's grace as our lives are transformed through our journey to holy living.

John Wesley described the “way of salvation” as God's work for us and in us in transforming and perfecting grace. God will continue to do good work in us and through us as we respond to Him. Willimon calls those who follow God's call “grace agents” for the Kingdom. We become part of the great church on earth which is just a taste of the full Kingdom of God to come. In seeking and following God's path for us we are perfecting ourselves to live the life God has chosen for us using the gifts He has given us. We succeed and fail and succeed and fail along our journey as sinners in a sinful world but focused on a “grace giving” God that shows us the way.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is the foundation of the church or the rationale for faith described in the reading?
2. Prevenient grace is that that comes before us. How does that idea conflict with our self sufficient approach to our lives?
3. How is salvation described as a present experience rather than something received on the other side of death?
4. What are some of the marks of the assurance of salvation described in the reading?
5. How does John Wesley describe the Christian life as a progression toward God and neighbor?

CHAPTER SIX

We Believe in Transforming and Perfecting Grace

Jeff Darden

In Bishop Willimon's chapter entitled "We Believe in Transforming and Perfecting Grace" we find the importance and the heavy involvement that "Grace" plays into the foundation of the United Methodist community. Grace is defined as, "Divine love and protection given to mankind by God." Although short in words, this definition is deep in context and understanding, and thus may be the reason Wesley and the United Methodist Church have broken the large picture of Grace into different levels. If you are a life long Methodist or familiar with the Walk to Emmaus, then the concept of Grace in three forms: Prevenient, Justifying, and Sanctifying is not unfamiliar. Even if you are familiar with these forms of grace they may still be somewhat unfamiliar in association with our lives. In Bishop Willimon's book the different forms of grace are explored in depth, both in formation and application.

In this chapter you the reader will explore Prevenient Grace that surrounds and precedes all, the grace that is working in us even before we know that God is working in us to Justifying Grace where we realize our sins are forgiven and we are restored to Christ, to Sanctifying Grace where we realize we must have response or "fruits" to the works that God has done through us. This chapter will explain the theology behind these forms of grace as well as the common dialogue that opponents often counter with. As United Methodists of today, it is our responsibility to know about our heritage and foundations so we may both promote and defend with sound and logical backing. "United Methodist Beliefs" helps give us that understanding of our heritage.

Questions for Reflection

1. Where does Bishop Willimon see the correlation between Easter and The United Methodist Church? Have you ever made or heard this correlation before?
2. What are the three forms of grace in the United Methodist belief and a brief description of each? Have you heard of these forms of grace before? If so where outside of the Methodist church?
3. How does John Wesley describe the experience of Justifying Grace? How do we know our assurance of grace is not merely self-assurance?

4. How did John Wesley part company with traditional Lutheran and Calvinistic teachings on Sanctification?
5. How did John Wesley counter those who said he had the dreaded Protestant view of Salvation through works?
6. How has your view on Grace and its' role in the United Methodist church changed or grown through this study?

CHAPTER SEVEN

We Believe in Faith and Good Works

Betty Likis

We as United Methodists believe that faith and good works are both vital to being Christian. We might say that faith is the source of good works, or we might say that they are two sides of the same coin. Faith is more than belief in a set of propositions to which we give mental agreement. It involves a relationship with God that includes trust and commitment, love for God and love for neighbor. This leads us, inspires us, motivates us to do good works. In Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus tells us that to minister to the poor and needy is to do it to him, and that our eternal destiny depends on our action.

The remaining question is HOW do we best do this? We can do direct, personal, immediate, emergency help that gives people short-term relief. This is often done as a response or reaction to a crisis, treating the effects of injustice or misfortune. This is sometimes called charity. Or we can work on long-term solutions that attempt to understand the underlying causes of the problems, and change them when possible. This is called justice. This may involve the church and community working together to change unjust laws and policies, as Alabama Arise does. “This is a more pro-active way of helping the poor, enabling us to prevent some of the problems people face, rather than just reacting to them.”

(Segregation and slavery were legal but sinful systems/structures that needed to be changed by law to help alleviate and eliminate the suffering of the oppressed. Direct, individual action did not and could not end those evils, except by persons with great power and authority.) Laws, policies, and systems in place today still keep people in poverty. They need to be changed, even while we are giving more immediate relief. God commands us to love our neighbor and to do justice. (Micah 6:8)

Questions for Reflection

1. John Wesley believed in both personal and social holiness, and worked to end slavery, the slave trade, and child labor. What comparable actions should we be involved in today?
2. When Jesus said, “You always have the poor with you”, did he mean we should not concern ourselves with the poor, or that if we are Christians, we will be with the poor?
3. Read Matthew 7:21 How does this relate to faith and works?
4. Do we understand justice as a good and positive thing, or something to be feared and spared? How is justice seen in Amos 5:21-24? In Micah 6: 6-8?

5. Compare Jesus's words in Luke 6:20-31, the Sermon on the Plain, with his words in Matthew 5:2-12, the Sermon on the Mount. Which is more challenging?

*Bonus question (if you dare)

In a discussion of the Social Principles on page 92, Willimon says about divorce that we're against it, but recognize that it sometimes is a "regrettable alternative in the midst of brokenness." What is the BIBLICAL basis for the difference in the way we treat divorce and the way we treat homosexuality? What role does culture play in our attitudes?

Personal Reflection on “Faith and Good Works”

SangAE Kim-Park

Our bishop insists, as a characteristic of the Methodist doctrines, that “God’s grace calls forth human response and discipline.” It reminds me of both joy and failure in my spiritual journey. Like any other Christian, I have sought to respond to God’s grace through good works as much as I can. However, I have sometimes encountered difficulties, just like “Miss March,” in putting my faith into practice. Sometimes, uncomfortable feelings and, other times, impatient judgment about the people served. Even though I know that these are due to the lack of sincere love, they are real obstacles to interrupt my spiritual well-being. Overcoming the obstacles requires certain disciplines, which would make it easier and more joyful to bear the yoke of the Lord. God’s grace calls forth our response and discipline!

It is through discipline that “faith is known by its fruits,” as our bishop stressed. Faith produces its fruits through our obedience to the commandments of love. Faith acts in and through the works of love, which would deepen and widen our faith. It would be called “the circle of faith and love.” What matters is to enter into the circle, regardless where we start, and to complete the circle. It goes like a spiral. This chapter gives me a clear picture of Christian life in relation of faith and good works and encouragement toward its perfection.

Questions for Reflection

1. God’s grace and human activity go together. How do we respond to God’s grace in our family life or/and workplaces?
2. Discipleship and discipline go together. When we try to follow Jesus Christ, what is the most difficult obstacle to prevent us from serving the others in need?
3. In putting our faith into action, why do we feel sometimes uncomfortable, or sometimes irritating, or difficult to keep consistency?
4. Faith is active in love. This love is seated in our hearts, but it becomes visible in our social actions. What works of love do our transformed hearts produce?

CHAPTER EIGHT

We Believe in the Coming of God's Realm and Reign to the World

Suzy Usry

It can be easy to get caught up in this world and to fear the end of our mortal life. Knowing that there is eternal life at the end of this life can give us comfort and peace. However, we must not become complacent. We must not take for granted all that God has given us. We must reflect on the gifts that God has given us in this world and figure out how to use them. Knowing that in the end there is a purpose, is crucial to us as United Methodists and as Christians.

When we reflect upon judgment and the gift of eternal life it can spur us into action in this life. The thought of judgment can act as a sort of wake up call. It can become our energy to go out and do more with our gifts. We can open our eyes to those around us that need us and find opportunities to help the helpless. If we focus on faith, hope, and love in our actions; when we meet God we will be able to fulfill his purpose for us: to worship and praise him forever.

Questions for Reflection

1. It is easy to forget that we have a purpose beyond this world and to get caught up in the things of this world that are passing. What are some of these things and how can you avoid becoming caught up in them?
2. Is there danger in becoming consumed in the “how” and “when” of Christ's coming?
3. What kind of responsibility comes with the receiving of the gift of salvation?
4. What kind of gifts has God given you in this life? How have you used them? What can you do to better use them?
5. Who are some people in situations worse than yours that you can help? In what ways can you help them? How does knowing that God has given us the gift of eternal life encourage you to help these people?

We Believe in the Coming of God's Realm and Reign to the World

Bill Prestridge

Eventually everything on this world will come to an end. Everyone will die. We are mortal and no matter how well we treat our bodies we will eventually die. However because we believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and because he died on the cross for our sins, and then arose and now sits at the right hand of God, we know that we can have eternal life. A life spent in the presence of God himself, where there is no pain, no crying, and no sorrow. When this day comes we will face judgment. We will be asked what we did with what we were given. Have we been good stewards of our life? Jesus expects us to carry on the work that he started here on earth. We are to reach out to the hungry, the poor, and the mistreated. In other words we are to spread God's love through the world.

In Revelation St. John tells us that he looked up and saw a new Heaven and a new Earth coming down. This new Heaven and Earth will be ruled by the one sitting on the throne. This is our promise that God will eventually reign over all the earth, just as he reigns over the church today. The church today and the love of God that shows through the church and its members is a small taste of what awaits after death. This is what we must strive to show to the world. We may not win all the battles now but in the end God will win and on that glorious day when Christ comes again we won't have to read about what will happen. We will meet God face to face and we will see ourselves perfected and at home.

Questions for Reflection

1. Knowing that you will die and everything will end how can you be more intentional about being prepared?
2. Knowing you will face judgment are you sure you are using your talent wisely?
3. Is your local church excited about the good news to the point that everyone can see God's love pouring out?
4. Does knowing that God will win in the end make the life of being a Christian easier for you?

CHAPTER NINE

Thinking like Wesleyans

Lynn Douglas

For Wesley there is no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness. The communal forms of faith in the Wesleyan tradition not only promote personal growth; they also equip and mobilize us for mission and service to the world... to become active in love and intensifying our desire for peace and justice....

“Book of Discipline:” Nurture and Mission of the Church, p.48

Too often Methodists only emphasize John Wesley’s concern for discipline and methodology relating to the nature of the church, usually overlooking or minimizing his concern for the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded. Wesley’s ministry with the poor included feeding, clothing, and housing the needy; preparing the unemployed for work and finding them jobs; visiting the sick and prisoners; providing healthcare and education for the indigent; and raising questions about systems of government that produce poverty. He was dedicated to doing “good to all men” motivated by his love of God and others. To love others is one of the essential characters of a Methodist as outlined in his essay written in 1742. Wesley believed that through the power of the Holy Spirit, Methodists can experience God’s love and share it with others through acts of compassion and mercy.

Wesleyan doctrine is grounded in love: “God has created us, commanded us, and enabled us to love”. Through obedience, we can allow God’s love to work in us and through us resulting in good works and compassion toward others. For Christians, love must be a way of life, which “is a sign and validation that God is with us.”

Questions for Reflection

1. If the Methodist movement Wesley begun was so successful, why isn’t the world a better place?
2. Why hasn’t Christianity done more good even among Methodists?
3. How do we know if we have been successful as the church of Jesus Christ?
4. What does it mean to practice love in our believing?

