

# I'm a Methodist, 'Tis My Belief

Romans 3:21-30

## PART I I AM A METHODIST

For the title of my message, I have to thank Tom Grubb. A couple of years ago, he introduced to our congregation the old Gene Autry song "Methodist Pie". The title of my message is a line in the song. Gene Autry was the grandson of Methodist pastors, by the way.

On this Father's Day, I must acknowledge my own father, who has spoken many times from this very pulpit and profoundly influenced this message.

Many years ago, a couple was leaving a Catholic church after services concluded. They had been going to this particular church for years and had raised their children there. A nun came up to them and greeted them, then asked them why she hadn't seen their son for a while. The couple said that he'd married and had become a member of his new wife's church.

"Oh, and which church is that?" the nun asked.

"The Methodist Church on the south, side of town," the mother answered.

"Methodist?" replied the nun, "They're nice," she continued, implying that she had no objection.

Nice? Is that how we're perceived? That's good, I guess. I'm sure God wants us to be "nice". But if that's all people see of the Methodists, they're missing quite a bit. Our denomination, The United Methodist Church is just one part of the gigantic Methodist movement which has spread all over the world and has left a huge footprint. Did you know that there about 80 million of us in dozens of Wesleyan and Methodist denominations around the globe? Methodists are involved worldwide in actions that spread God's word.

I've often joked that I'm amazed that my parents could tell from the time I was an infant that I was a Methodist, and that they had the foresight to raise me in a Methodist church. I cannot tell you if my Methodist upbringing made me a Methodist or simply unleashed who I was already. Since I've grown and come to understand what's behind our denomination, I'm very deliberate about it. When I travel out of state to visit my children, I attend Methodist churches and feel very "at home". I doubt that my faith would be able to thrive as it has if I were in another denomination.

Years ago, I was asked by my fiancé's fundamentalist pastor "Why are you a Methodist?" That was his way of asking "Why have you chosen to live out your discipleship in the context of those loosely believing people in Methodist tradition?" The implication was clearly "Methodist" was "less than Christian". I don't think at the time I had a good answer, and I've never been quick on my feet anyway. If I was, I could have related the story about a feisty little Methodist woman who visited a Baptist Church where the fire-breathing preacher asked, "Why are you a Methodist?" She replied, "Because my parents and my grandparents were

Methodists.” He shot back, “If your parents and grandparents had been fools, what would you be?” She said, “I guess I’d be a Baptist.”

I was in my 20s then and have grown substantially in my faith since (by the way, I expect to grow a lot more before I’m done here on earth – I’ll always be reading, meditating, and taking classes). Anyway, now I could give a very good answer. It would be a long answer too, because there are many deep reasons why I am deliberately a Methodist.

## **PART II                    WHY I AM A METHODIST**

### **1. Freedom to think and to experience my own struggle with God**

First, I have the freedom to struggle with God’s word. I think that this is good! One of my Biblical heroes is Old Testament Jacob, specifically when he spent the night alone on the Jabbok River. He was returning from his mother’s relatives in Mesopotamia to Canaan to meet his brother Esau for the first time since he cheated him out of his birthright and blessing. There he wrestled with the stranger – variously referred to as an “an angel” and God. He struggled all night and in the morning was renamed Isra-el, which means “Struggled with God”, and that name became a nation.

This story tells me that I have “permission” to wrestle with parts of my faith that I don’t understand. I can engage God in Socratic discussion – oh, and in this case, I don’t play the part of Socrates, by the way. I identify very strongly with Nicodemus in John 3, when he asks how he can be “born again”. “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” he asks. My engineer’s mind needs non-tangible and spiritual things explained clearly and plainly. In the Methodist tradition, I don’t have to just sit and listen and accept everything at face value. I get to ask questions – dumb questions – and expect that God will be patient with me, and eventually, I’ll understand. I like that I am not told how to think or the exact details of what to believe, but I am encouraged to think and consider, and am given the resources by my church to do so. The results are deep, personal beliefs that I have struggled to attain and, because I have struggled with God, he has made them a part of me.

### **2. Freedom to accept God’s salvation by MY choice**

The second reason for me being deliberately Methodist is that it allows me salvation by choice. I have chosen to believe that God sent his son Jesus to save the world, and accept the gift of salvation that he offered to me. This is a very “Methodist” thing.

I’m going to tell you a Presbyterian joke to make my point. But before I do, let me say that today, Methodists and Presbyterians work very closely together and that there is a great deal of mutual respect. In fact, you’ll find me at Stone Presbyterian Church on the first Tuesday evening of the month for their Taizé service. But they have a fundamental difference in the roots of their theologies that is very important: Presbyterians come from the Calvinist tradition and Methodists don’t. This joke illustrates what I mean.

Two pastors, a Methodist and a Presbyterian, decide to exchange pulpits one Sunday. The Methodist walked down the street toward the Presbyterian church where he was to give

his message and just happened to meet the Presbyterian pastor half way. They shook hands and the Presbyterian pastor remarked how remarkable this event was.

“Just think,” he said “at the beginning of creation, God pre-ordained this beautiful pulpit switch!”

The Methodist pastor smiled, turned around, and headed back to his church, much to the chagrin of the Presbyterian pastor, who shouted to his colleague’s back “He pre-ordained you’d do that!”

One can think of the Presbyterian and Methodist denominational labels as representing two great branches of Christian theology which go all the way back to the 17th Century, not long after the Protestant Reformation. On one side is the Calvinist or Reformed tradition represented by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and most Baptist and fundamentalist churches. On the other side is the Arminian or Wesleyan tradition represented by the Methodists, Episcopalians, Nazarenes, Pentecostals, and many others. By the way, I think that it’s very interesting that this divide passes right through the “liberal-conservative” line.

Calvinists believe in “predestination”. God planned the world carefully and has already decided what is going to happen. Strict Calvinism tells us that who is going to be saved and who isn’t have already been decided. There is nothing we can do to change it.

Did you pick up on the word “Arminian”? I think it’s important. As I was growing up, my father used the term “Arminian” many times when talking about Methodism. I really didn’t pay much attention to the term except to wonder what the Armenians, from the eastern part of Asia Minor, had to do with Methodism. Well, they didn’t – Arminian is even spelled differently. By “Arminian”, he was referring to a Dutch theologian from the 17<sup>th</sup> century named Jakob Harmenszoon. His name was “Latinized” to Jacobus Arminius. If it was Anglicized, it would be “James Hermanson”. I asked that Arminius’ picture be put on the front of the bulletin so you could see his name and face. *[hold it up]* Arminius was a brilliant Calvinist theologian in the Dutch Reformed Church, and in about the year 1600 was charged with writing a defense of Calvinism. But while writing it, he discovered that he didn’t believe in it – that it was wrong. Salvation wasn’t “predestined”. It was free and available to anyone, by God’s grace.

John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, picked up on it in the next century and advanced it. He was a priest in the Church of England, and the Church strongly embraced Arminianism during Wesley’s day. Wesley was such a staunch supporter that he published “The Arminian Magazine” starting in 1778. In it, he wrote many articles defending Arminianism and scathingly criticizing Calvinism. He used to say that Calvinism put the devil out of a job.

In 2009, Time magazine listed “The New Calvinism” as one of the “10 Ideas That Are Changing the World.” The article said “Calvinism is back ... complete with an utterly sovereign and micromanaging deity, sinful and puny humanity, and the combination’s logical consequence, predestination ... It offers a rock-steady deity who orchestrates absolutely everything ... by a logic we may not understand but don’t have to second-guess.” This sort of theology perhaps satisfies some people, but would cause my mind to revolt and flee. Thank goodness I don’t have to be subject to this thinking. I’m a Methodist!

I live out my discipleship as a Methodist because of the Wesleyan balance between God's providence on one hand and human freedom on the other. Methodists don't believe in "a micromanaging God who orchestrates absolutely everything." We don't believe that "God has a reason for everything." Rather, we believe in the God who loves us enough to give us the freedom to reject that love; the God who is relentlessly at work to fulfill his saving purpose for us while never abrogating the freedom he planted within us; the God who invites everyone — not just a predestined few — to receive his love and grace in Jesus Christ. This is the God who I have experienced and love.

You've probably experienced words of attempted comfort from people after a tragedy, "It's God's will", or "God has a purpose behind it that we can't possibly understand". Though spoken with the best intentions, these sort of expressions of sympathy often cause even more pain for those suffering. In Paul Young's novel, "The Shack", "Pappa", his "God the Father" figure says, "Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don't ever assume that my using something means I caused it. Grace doesn't depend on suffering to exist, but where there is suffering you will find grace." Paul Young would make a great Methodist.

### **3. The Methodist Church helps bring the scriptures to life**

Going back to my fiancé's pastor: he asked me how I read the Bible, then told me I should be able to read it like a newspaper. I was too young to respond properly to that direction. If I were older, I'd have taken offense. Reading the Bible like a newspaper? What a horrible thing to say! Why, that would take the life out of it. It would "flatten" the Bible. It could no longer speak to me in so many different ways. Certainly, the authors of the scriptures never intended for us to read it like a newspaper.

I love the Bible. And fortunately, in the Methodist church we love it and take it seriously and respect it enough not to confine it to dead words printed on paper. The Methodist church puts great resources into Bible study and produced two excellent programs: Disciple and Covenant. I'm particularly thankful for Disciple. My first time taking it caused a quantum leap in my understanding and faith.

We are a Bible church and here, the Bible is alive and read. Our United Methodist Book of Discipline says "The Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation". John Wesley said "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 a man of one book."

May I have a different interpretation of some passages than others do? Yes. But don't we all? And my interpretations vary from time to time as God's living word speaks to me, I grow in faith, and God nudges me towards his ultimate truths. It's that area of learning and growing that the Methodist church cultivates so well. The Bible reveals God's holiness, his grace, his heart, his salvation, and his return and victory. It also reveals the sins of God's people, their misconceptions, and their mistakes, their trials and errors.

I believe in the whole Bible, and that's another reason I'm a Methodist.

## **4. The Methodist Church is Evangelical**

The mission of the United Methodist Church is to “Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World”. I buy into it. I believe that’s what we are called to do. That’s exactly what Jesus says at the end of the Gospel of Matthew.

John Wesley said to his preachers: “You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go not only to those that need you, but to those that need you most. It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society; but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance.”

The language Wesley used when he said that may be a bit off-putting today, but taking into account language changes, it’s a very powerful statement that defines our purpose. The word “repent”, by the way, means simply to turn around, to change direction. We are driven to repentance by the kindness of Christ. His gracefulness and emphasis on mercy is all about seeing more and more people come to know the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Methodists go about evangelism in a very practical way. John Wesley didn’t write books of theology. He wrote sermons. He was a practical man, teaching and preaching a practical faith. We are a practical people. We hold the mission of the church above all things. We try to meet people where they are. We are not focused on just ritual, or the mode, or the tradition. We try to be focused on Jesus above all else. That’s who Wesley was and that’s at the heart of our methods. Practical people trying to impact others with the Gospel. More in love with Jesus than with anything else.

We know that we are just one part of Christ’s holy church. When you join our church from another Christian denomination, do you know what? We accept your baptism. And do you know why? Because we know we aren’t the only denomination. There are lots of them doing lots of good work all around. They are on our team. We work together. We are on the same side. That’s who we are and what we believe. That’s part of being practical. And that’s another reason why I’m a Methodist.

## **5. The Methodist Church is Graceful**

This is what it says in Romans 3:23: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. And since we have all sinned, we are all in need of grace. And why am I Methodist? That key word: Grace. God gives us grace after grace after grace. Our entire walk with God is based upon grace. We know that he loves us based on what he has done, not upon what we have done. It’s grace.

And our walk with each other must be the same. If I am sinful and in need of grace, then so are you. And if I want God to give me grace, then I must give you grace. We are all just beggars looking for bread. We all need grace. We all must give grace to each other, as God has given us grace.

Methodists even have their own definition for a form of grace: prevenient grace. The grace that goes before. It is divine grace that precedes human decision. It exists prior to and without

reference to anything humans may have done. And it's deeply rooted in Arminian theology (that term again). It exists before we are or have done anything. Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you". Luke 19:10: "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Often, prevenient grace is described as God wooing you as if he were your suitor. Or that God is courting us. He's not forcing us, but he lets us know that he wants us.

This makes me feel good – valued and important. It's another example of God seeking us out like the lost lamb, and rejoicing when we accept his grace, as with the prodigal son.

We are a graceful people. And that's another reason why I'm a Methodist.

Here are a few more reasons:

#### 6. The Methodist Church has a worldwide mission

When an earthquake struck Haiti, we were there immediately. In Africa where malaria is crippling and killing children, we send nets. When any disaster strikes, we're there because Jesus wants us to be.

#### 7. We are instrumental in social change

We've advocated for workers' rights and safe working conditions. The 19<sup>th</sup> century women's suffrage movement was led by Methodists such as Sojourner Truth. The Abolition of Slavery movement found great support among Methodists. Methodists have fought against alcohol and drug abuse. Methodists have advocated for gay rights even when they disagreed about the central issue of homosexuality.

#### 8. And more:

We sing. We have potlucks. We celebrate. We socialize. We support each other. And we have fun.

And that is why I'm a Methodist! And, my friends out there, I think you all have made a very good choice.

AMEN