

“CHRISTIANITY THE WESLEYAN WAY (#1):
JOURNEYING WITH JOHN WESLEY”

(Romans 3:21-26)

(c) 2012 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 1-15-12]

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1. [BOTH Services] Read Text (9:30am MSG; 11am, NRSV): Romans 3:21-26 and Pray.
2. What is a Methodist? Where did we come from? What do we believe? How do we practice our faith? And what does any of this matter, if we're all just supposed to be "Christians" anyway?

A--Well, over the next 5 weeks I want us to address these questions and more in a new sermon series called “*Christianity the Wesleyan Way*” in which we'll be exploring our unique heritage as Wesleyan (or "Methodist") Christians and how it can make a difference in our spiritual lives today.

B--As we begin, I want to acknowledge that some of you are exploring Christianity for the first time before making a commitment.

1--Others of you are new Christians who are new not only to *this* church but to *any* church.

2--And still others of you have been members of this or another Methodist church all your life, but have never really known what a *Methodist* Christian really is.

3--Well, regardless of how you got here, there was obviously *something* about the way we do things here that drew you here.

C--And it's my belief that as we learn about our spiritual heritage, we'll discover that that "something" more than likely is attributed to our heritage and practice as Wesleyan Christians, meaning that as we explore that heritage, we'll learn about ourselves and how our own spiritual tradition can make a positive difference in our everyday lives. ¹

3. Now, I also know that some of you'll say, “*But Pastor Brian, I don't really want to be 'Methodist,' or 'Baptist,' or any other denomination. I just want to be a 'Christian.'*” ²

A--And that's great! I wouldn't want it any other way, because when we all get to heaven God's not going to ask us what denomination or tradition we belonged to anyway.

1--But we're not in heaven *yet*, so what we need to understand is that whether we choose to use a spiritual label like “Methodist” or not, *ALL* Christians live out of specific beliefs and practices which define who we are. ³

2--And the spiritual labels / categories that we commonly use (like “Methodist”, “Baptist,” “Roman Catholic,” etc.) are merely short-hand ways (adjectives) to articulate these -- they give us a “handle” on who we are, what we believe, and how we practice faith.

3--And so, my goal in this series is not to make any of us “good little United Methodists,” but simply to help *all* of us be *great* Christians.

B--And it just so happens that for about 35 million believers around the world, the “handle” called “Wesleyan” (or “Methodist”) is the one that seems to *best* fit how we think about and practice our *Christianity*.

1--No, it’s not the *only* biblical “handle”, and it's not inherently "better" or "more spiritual" than any other Christian "handle" or tradition.

2--But it's one that does help *us* to understand, define and articulate *our* practice of Christian faith more clearly.

4. It's a tradition began with the life and ministry of an 18th-century priest of the Church of England by the name of John Wesley (which is why we’re called *Wesleyan* Christians).

A--So let's begin, then, by taking a "Journey" with John Wesley, learning about how God's grace (described in today’s scripture from Romans 3) worked through the history of this man to inaugurate a Christian movement which continues to this day. ⁴

B--It all started in England in the year 1703...

5. **[DADDY INTERRUPTS SERVICE with Character Portrayal of John Wesley...]**

6. [PRAYER... *for persons who have searched for meaning and purpose from life in all places but God to invite Christ into their heart to have a “vital piety,” just as John Wesley did...]*

7. [Closing 11am HYMN: (“*For the Anniversary of One’s Conversion*” = #57, “O For A Thousand Tongues”)]

John Wesley & The Early Methodists: Historical Overview

(Notes for use IF Daddy is not present)

1. John Wesley himself was born June 28, 1703 in Epworth, England as the 15th child (of which there were 19) of Samuel and Susanna Wesley.
2. The great discipline and strictness of the Wesley home gave John organizational skills he later used to build the Methodist movement, and even at an early age, it seemed John was destined for something great.

3. As one example of this, at age 5, John narrowly escaped death when his house caught on fire.
- A--In the nick of time, he was pulled from his second floor window as the roof caved in;
- B--His mother later remarked that she believed John spared from the flame for some great purpose -- that he was "*a brand plucked from the burning.*"
4. After going off to college and becoming an ordained priest of the Church of England in 1725, he became convinced that the way to Christian salvation was through "holy living" -- loving others and doing good deeds for them.
- A--This belief led he and his brother Charles (the noted hymnwriter) to form a religious society dedicated to disciplined and methodical personal devotion and service to the poor.
- B--Other students laughed at them and derisively called them the "*Holy Club*", "*Enthusiasts*", "*Bible Moths*", "*Sacramentarians*" (because they received communion every Sunday), and since they were so precise, orderly, and *methodical* about everything they did, "*Method-ists.*"
- C--Yet, despite all his discipline and good works, Wesley did not yet feel satisfied with his own Christianity.
5. So, in 1735, he traveled with General James Oglethorpe to serve as missionary chaplain in the American colony of Georgia
- A--His two years here were a disaster. His preaching had little effect on the Indians and to the rough colonists, one of whom remarked that he had "*rather spend the rest of his days rotting in a debtor's prison in England than be sentenced to the hell of Wesley's salvation.*"
- B--After a marriage courtship went sour (Sophey Hopkey), he was eventually run out of the colony and he returned to England lost, dejected, and close to what today we would call a "nervous breakdown."
- C--In his Journal, he records: "*I went to convert the Indians; But oh, who shall convert me?*"
6. Yet, on his way to America, he had been impressed by the vital and fervent Christianity of a group of Germans from Moravia (anybody ever been to Winston-Salem,N.C.? = Moravians)
- A--His friendship with several of them helped him to discover that Christian faith was more than merely good works and strict discipline, but rather was founded **in the heart** and in **personal trust** in Jesus Christ.

B--And so, on May 24, 1738 at a prayer meeting in London, Wesley had a new experience with Christ.

C--In his journal, he wrote these words:

*"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society on Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ -- Christ alone for my salvation; & an assurance was given me that He had taken away **my** sins, even **mine**, and saved **me** from the law of sin and death."*

7. Following Aldersgate, Wesley tried to preach this Christianity of **personal** faith in Christ in the established churches, but soon found himself turned out of many of them;

A--So, when the educated clergy and sophisticated Anglican laity wouldn't listen,...

1--...he remarked that "the world is my parish," and...

2--w/the encouragement of evangelist George Whitefield, he began preaching wherever he could gather a crowd --

B--...in the streets and fields of England, to the poor people of Britain's slums, factories and coal mines, sometimes to crowds as large as 20,000 or more.

C--When some of his new converts desired to grow further in their new faith, Wesley organized them into small groups led by committed laypeople, and also by women (unheard of in the 1700s!).

D--These "classes/bands" would meet together for prayer, Bible study, personal sharing, and service work, and became the basis for the Methodist movement throughout England, and eventually spreading to America.

8. Yet, despite their evangelical fervor, the early Methodists, following Wesley's example, were very active in social work.

A--Too often today, these two are seen as opposites -- but Wesley believed that they went hand in hand:

B--And so, the early Methodists...

1--Opened homes for widows and orphanages for children.

2--Made regular practice of visiting those in prison.

3--Collected and disbursed funds for the poor, even opening modest credit unions for them.

4--Opened schools for children, giving impetus to the drive for popular education.

5--His Methodist societies even sponsored literacy classes & taught skills for small-businesses.

C--They operated several free and low-cost medical clinics for those who couldn't afford high medical costs.

1--And in addition to his religious writings, Wesley himself wrote many tracts for the poor to help with education, medical assistance, relaxation, & other topics.

2--In fact, his most popular-selling book, Primitive Physick, was *not* a religious book at all, but an inexpensive medical guide of home-remedies.

3--Ever heard the phrase "*Cleanliness is next to godliness?*" -- *not* from Benjamin Franklin, but Wesley.

9. Wesley and the Methodists were, nevertheless, controversial:

A--For one thing, the practice of preaching out in the public, instead of the "officially sanctioned" Anglican churches, was vulgar & unrefined to many (& also illegal).

B--Consequently, in some towns, they were physically attacked and beaten when they tried to preach or hold meetings.

C--Like any controversial religious group or figure today, Wesley and his followers were satirized and made fun of by the press and by the elite and educated of society.

D--And while *some* of the reasons for the controversy involved Wesley's unique religious beliefs, other reasons involved the way those beliefs affected politics, the economy, and church organization:

1--For example, Wesley, unlike most Anglican clergymen, took a stand in vehemently opposing slavery and the slave trade -- a position not popular with the influential slave merchants.

2--He preached against the misuse and dangers of alcohol abuse, which didn't make him popular with the tavern owners.

3--And he was also criticized for his use of **lay people & women** (instead of ordained clergy) both in preaching and as leaders of Methodist small groups.

E--He was called everything from a "Papist" (in a day when Roman Catholics were not well-liked in England) to an "*open enemy of Christ*" by the Moravians after he split with them over theological issues.

10. After a number of Methodists took their new faith to the American colonies & formed small Societies there, Wesley sent clergy to assist the spread of the gospel in America.

A--During the American Revolution, Methodism in America, being closely associated with the Church of England, was almost snuffed out.

B--But after surviving, it flourished after Wesley gave it permission (quite reluctantly) to elect its own "superintendents" ("bishops," as they came to be called) and become a separate church in 1784.

11. Yet, in spite of all the controversy(& perhaps even *because* of it), Methodism spread and flourished wherever it went.

A--By the time of Wesley's death in March 1791, there were 72,000 Methodists in Britain/Ireland and another 50,000 in America.

B--During his lifetime, Wesley had traveled over 250,000 miles and preached nearly 44,000 sermons.

C--Today, world Methodism claims over 30 million members, with nearly 20 million of those in America alone in over 25 "Wesleyan" denominations.

12. So in *brief* form, that's a little about the life and impact of Wesley and the early Methodists.

ENDNOTES:

¹ I realize that those of you who are current East Cobb UMC members more than likely didn't decide to become a member *because* it was a United Methodist Church. In fact, some of you probably became members *in spite of* the fact that it was a United Methodist Church (and I'm glad you did)! But the reality is that we can't really effectively understand our own identity either as individual Christians or as a corporate church unless we first understand the spiritual heritage that drew us here in the first place.

² In fact, this is one concept that John Wesley (founder of Methodism) used to describe the early Methodists – they weren't "Presbyterians" or "Roman Catholics" or "Anglicans"; they were simply "Christians" [See his tract "*The Character of A Methodist*"]. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul faced a similar situation in his work with the Christians at Corinth [Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17].

³ This is true even of so-called "non-denominational" or "independent" churches. The fact that they claim not to be connected with any "official" denomination does *not* mean they believe and/or practice a non-sectarian / generic Christian faith. It simply means that they have not chosen to *call* themselves by the type of Christian faith that they practice.

⁴ Today's scripture from Romans 3 was the scripture that was being read and interpreted to John Wesley at a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London in 1738 during which he had his now famous "heart warming" experience, marking his heart-conversion.