

“CHRISTIANITY THE WESLEYAN WAY (#3):
THE SCRIPTURE WAY TO SALVATION”

(Ephesians 2:1-10)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 1-29-12]

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1. Read NRSV Text [**BOTH Services**]: Ephesians 2:1-10 and Pray.
2. Today we’re continuing our sermon series called “Christianity the Wesleyan Way,” in which we’re exploring our spiritual heritage as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians.

A—And as I’ve done before, let me remind you again that my goal in this series is not to make us into “good little United Methodists,” but instead to help us be *great* Christians, who just happen to live that out in a uniquely *Methodist/Wesleyan* way.

B—Now, last week I reminded us of the many beliefs and practices that we share in *common* with Christians of other traditions.

C—But today I want to begin exploring some of the aspects of Methodist/Wesleyan Christianity that are *unique*, beginning by looking at some of our distinctive *beliefs*.¹
3. Now, while it's true that we're not a "creedal" church -- meaning that "being Methodist/Wesleyan" is not defined by our strict adherence to any set "creed"/statement of belief² -- nevertheless there *are* some fundamental beliefs which have historically defined *our* understanding and practice of Christianity as *different* from that of (say) Baptist, Roman Catholic, or Pentecostal Christians.

A—And all of these center around our unique understanding of what we believe the Bible teaches about *grace* and *salvation* -- both of which we read about in today's scripture from Ephesians 2, where (among other things) Paul says (Verse 8), “*By grace [we] have been saved through faith, and this is not [our] own doing; it is the gift of God.*”

1--Now, "Grace," of course, refers to the “*unmerited favor*” of God -- and *all* Christian traditions believe in that.

2--But what makes Methodist/Wesleyan Christianity *different* is our unique understanding of *how* grace brings us to salvation -- our belief is that within the one, overall grace of God, there are essentially 3 stages / movements of God’s grace to bring us back to a relationship with Him.

B--And, taken together, these three make up are what the founder of Methodism John Wesley called “*The Scripture Way to Salvation*” (today's sermon title), and I want to share not only what these *are*, but also how they *affect* our lives as Christians.

-II-

4. First of all, we believe in what we call “**PREVENIENT GRACE**” – the idea that God's grace first "comes (to us) before” any conscious, personal awareness on our part (Verses 4-5a describe this as God's "great love/embrace" of us).³

[And this is the main reason why we Methodists baptize infants and don't limit who can receive Holy Communion -- because we the Bible teaches that God's grace is not limited by whether *we* understand it or are church members or not]

5. But Prevenient Grace is just a beginning that *moves us towards* a second stage of salvation: “**JUSTIFYING GRACE**” – which is God's grace changing our hearts and putting us back into a right relationship with Him through his son Jesus.⁴

A--Vss. 5, 6 & 8 describe this as being "made alive with Christ" & "saved through faith" while other phrases for this are being “converted,” “born again,” or “accepting Christ.”

B--For some people (like the apostle Paul), it happens suddenly and dramatically, like a lightning bolt, while for others (like Peter and the other Disciples), conversion happens gradually over time, like a sunrise.

C--But whatever phrase we use to describe it, we believe it means us inviting Jesus into our hearts, and promising to follow him from now on.

6. And yet, we Methodists also believe that there's a third movement in the grace of God: “**SANCTIFYING GRACE**” – in which we're actually transformed over time back into God's image, and during which we become more and more like Jesus each and every day.

A--We find this idea in Verse 10 where it talks about the "works" we were created to show forth,⁵ and in Wesleyan circles we also refer to it as “holiness,” “sanctification,” or “moving towards Christian perfection.”

1--You see, we don't believe that it's enough to merely have a “conversion” or “born again” experience (as if that's the end-all or goal of salvation).

2--No. We believe the Bible clearly teaches us that we must also seek to *walk and grow in* that salvation.

B--And that's why we Methodists don't preach holiness like some Christians do – to make us feel bad or guilty, but instead we lift it up as something that we want *aspire to*, because not only is it an awesome way of life, but (as Verse 10 says), it's the “end” for which (the reason why) we were created in the first place!⁶

7. So here, then, is a tri-fold understanding of how the grace of God brings us to salvation that's unique to Wesleyan/Methodist Christianity. And yet, there are at least three implications to this understanding that are unique to us, as well.

8. The first of these is that we believe **biblical Salvation is best understood as being a process**, rather than as a *once-for-all event / experience*.

A--Now, it's true that salvation can (and usually does) contain pivotal events and experiences (i.e., instantaneous "points") along the way.

1--You and I may or may not have dramatic spiritual experiences at an altar, on a retreat, at a camp meeting, or at a religious revival/crusade.

2--But we don't believe salvation should be understood primarily *as* these events, but instead primarily as a *journey through* the 3 movements of grace that may or may not *include* dramatic events and experiences along the way.

B--That's why you won't hear me refer to the conversion experience as "being saved," because biblically, "being saved" includes *everything* from Prevenient *through* Justifying *and* Sanctifying Grace.

1--I have Baptist friends who'll sometime ask me *when* I was "saved" (as if there always *has* to be a time and place to it).

2--I tell them God wooed me as a child, I accepted Jesus as my Savior as a teenager, and I've been continually "being saved" since then – and they often then look at me like I'm a nuts! ⁷

C--But you see, for Wesleyan/Methodist Christians, salvation /"being saved" is as much a *journey* as it is a *destination* – it's as much a *process* as an *event* (and that's unique).

10. ...Which brings us to second implication to our understanding of grace: our belief that **the Christian life is best understood primarily in terms of relationship**, rather than status.

A--For us it's not primarily a *state* to be achieved, but a network of relationships between God, ourselves, others, and creation itself.

1--For a Wesleyan Christian, the Christian life has more to do with an ongoing, living relationship with our heavenly Father *today* than simply repeating a sinner's prayer or coming down to an altar at some other time in your life.

2-- So it's not a matter of whether we've been "saved" or "not saved" in the *past*, but it's instead about where are we in our relationship with God *now*.

3--Consider this example: We can go through a marriage ceremony five years ago, but if we haven't spoken to our spouse since then we don't have much of a relationship, do we?

B--So, this is exactly why we don't believe the concept of "*once saved, always saved*" (that some traditions talk about) is biblical.

1--Sure, from God's perspective in heaven, we have eternal security – but *none* of us live life from *God's* perspective!

2--No, since from our *human* point of view we're constantly striving to become more of what God wants us to be, we are to (Paul's words in Philippians 2:12) "*work out our salvation with fear and trembling.*"

C--In other words, what's most important in our Christian life is *not* what experiences we've had in the *past* with God, but what kind of relationship we have with Him *today*.

11. A third and final implication unique to Wesleyan/Methodist belief about grace is that we believe **Salvation is intended not only for the individual, but for all of creation**, as well ⁸ – for institutions, for governments and politics, for nature, as well as for people!

A--We believe biblical salvation includes *personal* holiness and *social* holiness –it should affect not only our heart and mind, but also our interactions with others, and with our world environment.

B--And this is one reason why we Methodists are so involved in social issues, standing up when there are injustices in the workplace or in government, being advocates for the poor and outcast, and for proper stewardship of our environment and world.

C--It's why we believe that issues like terrorism, war, global warming, recycling, and saving the rainforests are *not* simply issues that should be left to some "liberal agenda," but instead are at the *heart* of God's renewal of creation itself, described in Revelation 21 and other passages. ⁹

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12. So here, then, are some of the distinctive *beliefs* that we as Wesleyan / Methodist Christians have historically embraced, all of which center around our unique understanding of what the Bible teaches about God's grace and salvation.

A--Now again, we don't have to *believe* or agree with all of these things in order to "be a Methodist," but these *are* the beliefs which define us in a distinctive way:

1--We believe in grace from God which reaches out to all people and creation -- a grace which initiates us into a lifelong relationship with God through Jesus.

2--...And an "amazing grace" which is continually transforms not only our individual souls, but also all other things around it.

B--And as United Methodist Christians, we believe that it's a grace which offers a "*Scripture Way to Salvation.*"

13. [PRAYER: “*Lord, some of have come to this church or some other all our lives. We’ve been essentially good people. And whether we understood it or not, we’ve always believed in your great Prevenient love and grace given to us. But Lord, at the same time we’ve never allowed your Justifying Grace to come and change us, because we’ve never given our heart to you. Today there are some among us who want to do that. Forgive us of our sin. We invite your Son Jesus in our hearts to be our Savior and Lord, and we promise to follow you all our lives.*”

There are still others of us, Lord, who made that commitment at some time in the past, but we’ve mistakenly believed that that was all we needed in our Christianity. As a result, we’ve never grown in Holiness or in your Sanctifying Grace, seeing our connection to other people and even to creation itself as a part of full salvation in you. Lord, forgive us, and help us this day to follow you as our Methodist forebearers did: in Holiness of heart and life. We come to you today trusting in your amazing grace to bring us to full salvation in You. In the name of Jesus we pray this, Amen.”]

14. [11am Closing Hymn: #378, “Amazing Grace”]

ENDNOTES:

¹ Some people today may ask why beliefs are important anyway? After all, if all Christians have a relationship with God through Jesus, then why do the individual unique beliefs matter? I would argue that they matter because they help us understand *who* we are in our Christianity. While it is true that beliefs are *not* Christianity itself (which consists mainly of our *relationship* with God), they nevertheless *do* help us to define and articulate our *understanding* of that relationship, and our own identity within it.

² For example, unlike some Christians churches, organizations, and institutions, we don’t deny people a place to be “Methodist” just because they can’t or won’t sign a statement of faith to belief in certain doctrines or doctrinal positions. Instead, we believe that as long as it doesn’t affect the *heart* of Christian faith, then there’s plenty of room for differences, which is why there are Methodists who are “liberal, conservative, feminist, charismatic, high-church, evangelical” and so on – and there’s room for all of them in the Methodist family!

³ Other key passages for this concept include Romans 5:8, Psalm 139 (esp. Vs. 13), Romans 2:4, Isaiah 49:1, Galatians 1:15, Romans 5:16-20, and others.

⁴ Because we believe the Bible teaches Justifying Grace, we believe a biblical Christian is *not* simply a “good person,” or is a person who goes to church, or prays, or reads their Bible. These things can *help* us become or grow in Christian faith, but our Christianity is not defined by us doing them. No. As Jesus says in John 3:7, “*you must be born again.*” Other key biblical passages for this concept include John 3:3-8, Romans 3:24, Romans 5:1, Galatians 2:16, 1 Peter 1:23, .

⁵ Other key biblical passages for this concept include Hebrews 12:1-2, Philippians 2:11-12, Hebrews 6:1, Matthew 5:48, Romans 6:19b-22, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7, Titus 3:4-7, and others.

⁶ What’s unique here is that we believe works should follow/be a result of Prevenient and Justifying Grace; that “faith makes possible works.” So then, we believe that biblical salvation is not only about God’s grace *alone* – it’s *also* about our own human responsibility to *respond* to and actively work *with* that grace, as well. In theological terms, this is called “synergism”: God works, so we can work; God then works even more, so we can work even more, etc. In this understanding, there’s an integral relationship between divine grace and human response: God’s grace makes possible human works and responsibility, but *both* are important to the other.

7. The Greek translation of Verse 8 today's text literally means "*by grace you are being continually saved through faith.....*"

8. In theological terms, we call this the "larger eschatological context to salvation." That is: it is "wholistic" in it's context (who and what it includes). In fact, the very word "salvation/saved" comes from the Greek root word "sozo" which means "wholeness/completeness."

9. For example, in addition to Revelation 21, read Isaiah 11, Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Corinthians 5:17, and Galatians 6:15. For an excellent overview of this concept, read John Wesley's sermon "The New Creation" in Albert Outler, The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6, Sermon 64, pp. 288-296.