

“CHRISTIANITY THE WESLEYAN WAY (#4):  
PRACTICAL DIVINITY”  
 (1 Timothy 4:6-11, 15-16)  
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**[PROP NEEDED: “A River Runs Through It” Video]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 2-5-12]

--I--

1. Read NRSV Text [**BOTH Services**]: 1 Timothy 4:6-11, 15-16 and Pray.
2. Today we’re continuing our sermon series called “Christianity the Wesleyan Way,” in which we’re exploring who we are as Wesleyan / Methodist Christians.

A—As I’ll begin as I have the last 3 weeks saying that my goal in this series is not to make us into “good little United Methodists,” but instead to help us become *great* Christians who just *happen* to live out our Christianity in a uniquely Wesleyan/Methodist way.

B—So far we’ve looked at where we came from historically, talked about the beliefs that we share in *common* with other Christians, and a few beliefs which are *unique* to us.

3. So, make no mistake... beliefs are important! We find this in Verses 6-11 of today’s scripture from 1 Timothy 4, where we find Paul describing the value of knowing and understanding our *beliefs*.

A—But then, in Verse 15 he writes these words: “*Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress...*”

1—In other words, as important as *beliefs* are, he says it's equally important that we know how to *live out* those beliefs (i.e., "practice" them) in our daily life.

2—In the words of the founder of Methodism John Wesley, our Christianity should be a “*Practical Divinity*”<sup>1</sup> (today's title).

B—So with that in mind, I want to turn our attention to at least **three distinctive/unique practices of Wesleyan / Methodist Christianity.**<sup>2</sup>

-II-

4. The first of these is our claim as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians that a biblical practice of faith should be *balanced* between religion of our “**HEAD**” **AND** that of our “**HEART**.”

A--John Wesley was himself highly educated: he spoke numerous languages, and could easily converse with and debate the most knowledgeable people of his day.

1--No wonder, then, that education was an important hallmark of early Methodism.

2--In the late 18th and early 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries, Methodists established the forerunners of what became the Sunday School and Public School movements, and went on to found some of the most well-known colleges and universities in America: ...Duke, Emory, Drew, SMU, and others.

B--At the same time, though, Wesley recognized that “religion of the head”(as he called it) did a person absolutely no good *unless* it was *also* felt in the “heart.”

1--For him, there was nothing wrong with using reason and intellect to help us *understand* or articulate our Christian faith and experience, but it could never *take the place of* a personal, heart-felt trust in, and relationship with, God.

2--So for Wesley, *passion of the heart* was as important as *intellect of the mind* – the two always went together, hand in hand.

C--And as a result, this unique mixture of “heart” and “head” religion, became a hallmark of Methodism... as we see in this clip from the movie “[A River Runs Through It](#)” [SHOW VIDEO CLIP.. (1:03:18-1:03:39)]

1-- “*Baptists who could read*” – I’m not sure whether that’s more of a put down to Baptists or us Methodists, but at least the movie writer felt that Baptists had a great deal of enthusiasm and passion about their faith (and still do), but that (at least back in the 1920s) they generally weren’t very well educated. And his take on Methodists was that we were equally passionate about faith, but also brought along intellect and reason, as well.

2--And that’s precisely what we Methodists have always done *at our very best*.<sup>3</sup>

D--You see, if in our Christianity we take away either *passion* or *intellect*, we end up with an “out of balance” Christianity: ...either a faith that’s all “wind and smoke and emotion” (because it lacks intellect); or a faith that’s “crusty, dry, and emotionless” (because it lacks heart) -- but we believe “head” & “heart” are meant to be *partners*.<sup>4</sup>

5. In addition to this, though, we Wesleyan/Methodist Christians believe that our faith practice should also be balanced between **EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL ACTION**.

A--That is, we believe our Christian witness should be manifested through both word *and* deed -- it should be a *personal* faith (which connects us to *God*) AND a *social* faith (which connects us to *others* and to our *world* itself).

1--On the one hand, at our best, we Methodists have always had a passion for “seekers” (i.e., those who do not yet know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord) -- and so we talk about the importance of giving out hearts and lives to Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

2--On the other hand, though, we believe faith must have an *equal* emphasis on *actions & deeds* which help others and God's world = why we have a Pastor's Pantry, support M.U.S.T. Ministry, and have an annual Great Day of Service. <sup>6</sup>

B--As Methodist evangelist Alan Walker once put it, "*There is no greater menace in the church than a born-again Christian without a social conscience.*" <sup>7</sup>

C--You see, we believe that social action is just as important in our Christian witness as sharing our faith-story, or leading someone in a "sinner's prayer" -- that evangelism and social action are, in fact, just two sides to the same coin = partners to each other.

6. And yet, if we're to achieve balance in these first two practices of our Christian lives, we Methodists also believe that God has given us various (what we call) "**MEANS OF GRACE**" for us to use to first *encounter*, and then to *grow* in Him.

A--In Wesley's day, these were expressed through the early Methodists' practice of regular attendance at the Methodist "Society" and "class" meetings (small groups for worship, service & accountability *required* of every Methodist),...

1--...And in their keeping of what was called the Methodist "*Discipline*," which back then consisted of 3 "general rules": "*(1) Do no harm; (2) Doing good; & (3) stay in love with God*" through prayer, bible study, fasting, Holy Communion, regular worship, and fellowship with other believers -- each Methodist was held accountable *every* week to how well they kept these.

2--In addition to these, today we United Methodists *still* have a "discipline" of sorts which helps us grow in faith, by committing to serve God through our "*prayers*," our regular *presence* in worship & a small group, our financial *gifts*, our volunteer *service*, and our *witness*" (these are our U.M. membership vows).

B--And my point is that we Methodists have always believed that Christians should use the spiritual "tools" God gave us to both encounter & grow in our relationship with Him.

1--In other words, we believe the Bible teaches that there's a "*method*" for growing as Christians -- which is one reason we're called "*Method*"-ists...

2--...Because we believe that if we're going to pursue a life with God -- if we're going to discover the great adventure of the Christian life -- then it requires *more* than just letting it happen on its own.

3--No, it requires an *intentionality* on our part to seek God in those places (those "Means of Grace") where the Bible says that God *most often* shows up.

C--So I want to ask each of us here today:

- 1--What's your prayer and devotional life like lately?
- 2--How often do you attend Sunday worship?
- 3--Do you receive Holy Communion when it's offered? How often do you Fast?
- 4--Are you active in a Sunday School class, bible study, or other small group?
- 5--Does the financial amount you give to God through this church *really* reflect how much you love Him? (or is it merely the "left overs" of what you have?)
- 6--Are you serving Him by volunteering in some ministry here at East Cobb?
- 7--Are you sharing your faith with others by your words and your deeds?

D--You see, these are some of the “means of grace” that we believe the Bible challenges *all* Christians to practice, and so we also believe they should be *especially* important in the life of any Wesleyan / Methodist Christian. <sup>8</sup>

–III–

7. So then, here are a few of the distinctive *practices* of Wesleyan / Methodist Christianity...

A--...A balance between “Head & Heart,” between “Evangelism & Social Action”, and an intentional use of various “Means of Grace” given to us by God.

B--And Verse 16 in today's scripture urges us to “...*continue in them* [meaning these *practices* of faith], *for in doing them you shall save yourself and those who hear you.*”

1--Now, Paul is not saying here that we're “saved” *because* of the doing of these things, but doing of them in faith brings our salvation *to life!*

2--For him, you see, Christianity is not just a set of rational *beliefs* that we *think about/contemplate*, but also a lifestyle of *actions and behaviors* that we *live by*.

C--And *this* is why we Wesleyan/Methodist Christians say that we are called to live a uniquely “*Practical Divinity*” -- to *practice* our faith each and every day of our life.

8. [PRAY]

9. [11am Closing HYMN: #395, “Take Time to Be Holy”]

### **ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> This is opposite a Christian faith which is what Wesley called merely “*speculative*”/intellectual/rational in nature.

<sup>2</sup> The first two of these highlight our understanding of the Bible as teaching that the Christian life should be *balanced*, and the last one highlights our claim that various *tools* are needed to achieve this balance.

<sup>3</sup> This is why one of most important things I do as your pastor is to take time to carefully prepare and write out my sermon for you each week. I've had Pentecostal friends say that if I was led by the Spirit I wouldn't need to write out my sermon. I would submit to you that if they were led by the Spirit, they'd *be able to*, because they'd understand that the Holy Spirit has never yet rejected good, solid, biblical planning or preparation, in addition to prayerful discernment about what to preach.

<sup>4</sup> Whether consciously or not, somewhere along about the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, we Methodists as a whole began to lay aside our passion and feelings as being something for "unsophisticated people," and we began to pursue only the intellectual side of faith. So there came a point after the 1930s where you could go into our churches and we were very staid, formal, pious and reverent. But like the Church of England that Wesley sought to reform, you couldn't tell if we had a pulse (there's some UM churches like this today). Thankfully, that's started to change -- over the last 20-30 years, I've noticed Methodists start to recapture our passion of faith again.

But the opposite of this is just as bad: passion/feeling *without* intellectual grounding can send us off base, chasing the "buzz" of all kinds of emotional "highs." That's precisely what's unfortunately happened in a lot of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches -- there's a lot of emotional "hype," but quite often very little theological *depth*. Interestingly enough, one trend we're seeing more of across the country today is that increasing numbers of Christians who've been Pentecostal are leaving and joining traditions like United Methodist, because at our best we offer a religion of *both* the heart *and* the head.

<sup>5</sup> And when we're true to our Wesleyan heritage, this means that we value evangelism and personal faith-sharing as *vital* parts of our own walk with God, and recognize the absolute importance of this in the life of our local church. However, even our evangelism/faith-sharing is unique in *how* we go about it. For instance, in our Methodist tradition, we feel that the very *best* and most biblical method of evangelism is our very lifestyle. This *doesn't* mean we don't also tell our faith story, but we believe our evangelism should have more to do with how God uses our *life* to impart faith rather than walking people through a rational, intellectual exercise just so we can add another person to our "saved souls" belt. An excellent book summarizing this understanding of evangelism is Rodney E. Wilmoth's [How United Methodists Share Their Faith](#) (available from [www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com)).

<sup>6</sup> And it's why for us as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians, social issues aren't "liberal" or "conservative," but are simply at the very heart of what Jesus taught his disciples to do and be about.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Walker, speaking in South Africa in 1980, cited in Ron Sider's [One-Sided Christianity?](#), p. 137.

<sup>8</sup> There are actually at least two more “balances” which are unique to the United Methodist practice of Christianity that time did not allow us to address.

First, there is the balance between **THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY**. In a day and time (at the beginning of the English Industrial Revolution) where people were often used as objects, Wesley and the early Methodists on the one hand emphasized the importance and value of each and every *Individual*. They visited the condemned in prison and prayed for and led many to salvation. For that matter Wesley’s preaching in general was first directed at touching the hearts of individuals. He believed that only by transforming the individual *first* could society as a whole be changed. This is, in fact, exactly what happened: many Methodist converts grew and matured and became prominent leaders in their society and government in both England and early America – so much so that by the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries, it was Methodists that led social reforms such as the banning of the slave trade in England, and in America the establishment of public schools, fair and equitable child labor laws, women’s right to vote, prohibition, and even the genesis of what became the Social Security system.

On the other hand, this emphasis on the individual (even in early Methodism) was always lived out within the context of Christian *Community* – for each individual to grow and mature in holiness and sanctification, each Methodist was required to be a part of a small group for prayer, service, fellowship, and accountability. In the early days, if you weren’t active in a small group, you were no longer considered a “Methodist.” It was this network of Christian small groups, you see, that formed the backbone of the early Methodist “connection.” And even though we lost most of this emphasis in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, today small group ministry is making a radical comeback in dynamic churches. The bottom line, you see, is that we as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians don’t believe we can practice a biblically effective faith *alone or apart from* our being connected to/with other Christians. This is precisely why you hear me stress over and over the importance of the local church, of every Christian being a part of a small group, and of our larger United Methodist “Connection” (that I’ll talk about next week).

Finally, we Wesleyan/Methodists also claim that a biblical practice of Christian faith should be balanced between **“TRADITIONAL” AND “CONTEMPORARY” MINISTRY PRACTICES** (“old ways” vs. “new ways”). Throughout our history, Wesleyan/Methodist Christianity has also sought to balance out *both* of these – maintaining the best of the traditions, rituals, and emphases from the *past* while *at the same time* utilizing new technologies, new ministry models, new worship and/or music styles, etc. to maintain cultural relevance in moving forward into the *future*.