

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath May 20, 2007

PART 27: IN CONCLUSION

The United Methodist Church (UMC) is an inclusive church. In other words, all who have recognized their inability to save themselves and who have accepted the salvation of Jesus Christ are welcome to join. If they believe this in their own heart, they are welcome at the Lord's Table. On joining a UMC, individuals are asked to respond before the congregation to several straightforward questions. Answering in the affirmative makes them acceptable as members. The key question is:

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your savior, put your whole trust in His grace, and promise to serve Him as your Lord, in union with the church, which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races?

Furthermore, an ordained minister from any other denomination is welcome to become a pastor in a UMC.

This, along with what has been written in previous papers, gives the essence of Methodist belief. Rather than go into more detail on specific topics, it is perhaps more useful to clarify a few bedrock beliefs of all Protestants (including Methodists, of course.)

1. The fundamental principle of the Reformation is the direct accessibility of Christ to all people. All are free to read the Gospels and to respond to Christ. No ecclesiastical intermediaries are needed. The Christ we see in the Gospels is, in many ways, mysterious and beyond our full understanding. But, with such a splendid personality and character, and with God's help, some will become His captives. He is unique, self-authenticating and needs no further credentials. It is the basic faith of Protestants that this figure of Christ will be accepted by many.
2. The second basic principle of Protestantism is the belief in the manner of reconciliation and redemption. It is usually stated in Paul's term, "justification by faith." Protestantism is not a mechanical or legalistic religion. One cannot attain salvation by the scrupulous carrying-out of certain rituals or practices or by doing good works to merit God's acceptance. God, as the initiator, has acted and yearns for our response. Rituals, then, become an aid to help us focus on God's great deeds and worth. One chooses to do good works out of gratitude.
3. The Protestant concept of the church is that of a free association of believers. It was historically stated in the somewhat incorrect phrase "every man his own priest." This phrase captures the inescapable responsibility of every person to come to terms personally with God. Yet, a better phrasing would be "every man his neighbor's priest." However, a careful reading of the New Testament teaches us that the priestly line terminated with Jesus Christ. A better

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description is in Luther's phrase, "the communion of the saints." Here the term "saints" signifies those who are saved by trusting in the grace of God as presented in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice (as opposed to the more common use of the term to signify those who have attained moral perfection.) Perhaps it is best expressed for us in "mutual ministry." Protestantism means "social religion" as John Wesley said. It means communion, mutual ministry, and sharing the most sacred things of life. The church is the body of Christ. Protestants recognize, as Christians, all who sincerely respond in faith to the offer of salvation as tendered in the gospels, regardless of their form of church governance or theology. The church is the community of the forgiven and the forgiving. In a more colorful phrase, it is a community of thieves and renegades bonded together to catch other thieves and renegades!

4. As stated before, the Bible is to be read by all and interpreted in the light of its overall message, traditions, reason and mutual experiences. It is the history of God's way with humanity. It presents the way of God's initiative and salvation. It contains historical events, stories, character sketches, many personality types, warnings and enticements. It relies heavily on symbolism, imagery and metaphor. Many things dealt with in the Bible do not lend themselves to a literal interpretation. In the Protestant concept, scripture is to be interpreted not by a hierarchy of clergy, but in the shared experience of the community. We also believe that the Holy Spirit is witnessing in each of us and to each other so as to help us find our truth in our time and place. Every believer is both an expositor and a learner. Some are recognized as having more insight than others on occasion; but none are infallible and none are denied a hearing.