

Last week I told you the story of how a term of ridicule came to be associated with a group of disciples of Jesus who were known for their 'methodical' pattern of disciplines. Brothers John and Charles Wesley and a few others had come together to read the Bible, pray and engage with the poor, with children and those in prison. This band of disciples, who would later embrace this term of ridicule, came to be known as Methodists.

Soon, these methodical practices began to be embraced by more and more individuals. In time, John Wesley, would be put out of the Church of England for his 'preaching to the masses in the fields and the town centers.' The movement grew not only in England, but also in the colonies; and eventually the movement became a church.

You and I are a part of that great movement of God which began over 200 years ago in England. Our journey of centering our lives around loving God and loving others grows out of the practices of the early Methodists.

Since you are a part of that history I think it is important that you understand the background of our church and how together we live out our discipleship methodically. John Wesley was asked repeated to describe the principles and the practices of the people called Methodists; so he penned a small pamphlet that he entitled, '*The Character of a Methodist.*' So it is from that little pamphlet that I want to share a few ideas today.

Wesley began his *Character of a Methodist* by placing Methodists squarely within the realm of orthodox Christianity. 1. We believe that all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God. 2. We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice. 3. We believe Jesus to be the eternal Son of God. And, 4. as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.

When John Wesley and the others began their endeavors to live like Jesus, they never intended to start a new church. Their actions were intended to renew the Church of England. The Church of England, like all faith-traditions before it, had fallen into complacency and lost the passion of being disciples of Jesus.

It wasn't until the expansion of the Methodists in the Colonies following the Revolutionary War that John Wesley was forced to begin a new church by ordaining preachers for the rapidly expanding Methodist Church. So while Wesley and his followers established a new denomination; they still held to the basic teachings of Christianity that all other churches believed.

So we believe in the inspiration of Scripture, that the Bible is our source for what we believe and what we do and that Jesus is the Son of God. These are the basic tenants of all Christian churches. These are the things that are essential. How we organize ourselves, what we do in worship, our particular emphasis on one doctrine over another; Wesley said on these things 'we think and let think.' In other words, we don't care if you dunk 'em three times forward at baptism, or if you use grape juice instead of wine for communion; there some things which are essential while there are other points that are not.

So if Methodists hold to the same orthodox beliefs held by other Christian denominations; what sets them apart?

James Harnish, a UMC pastor in Florida, answered that question in an article he wrote in answer to a question about why he is a Methodist. Harnish stated four things:

1. The Methodist balance between God's providence on one hand and human freedom on the other.

While holding to a high view of the sovereignty of God, we don't believe that "God has a reason for everything." In other words we don't believe that God pre-determines every action; but that God gives us free-will. That free-will leaves us the ability to accept or reject the love of God.

2. The Methodist balance between heart and head.

This is a very oversimplified explanation but Methodists believe that it is not enough just to **know** the right doctrines; we believe that a **changed heart** is essential because *out of the heart* comes the actions that demonstrate what we believe.

3. The Methodist balance of personal piety with social action.

Methodists have always placed a great emphasis on the letter of James who says that *faith without works is dead*. The inner transformation of the heart must always lead a disciple of Jesus to want to change the world. Methodists act out the love we experience in our heart with our hands; because that is the example that Jesus set for us to follow.

4. The balance between present and future salvation.

Methodists believe that salvation is not a static thing, nor is it all about some future dwelling place. We believe that salvation is a present experience that is being worked out daily as we look forward to our heavenly home.

During Lent we are going to talk about our Methodist emphasis on grace and the importance of that word in our lives. But for now let's get back to the character of a Methodist.

Wesley then penned these words to describe a Methodist: "A Methodist is one who has the **love of God** shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Spirit; one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul; which is constantly crying out, 'Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee!'"

Wesley then went on to describe a Methodist's love of God in three ways: by praying without ceasing, rejoicing evermore and in everything giving thanks. *How well does that describe you?*

Rejoicing in God, being content in all things, and living in a spirit of prayer daily are marks which Wesley said described the character of a Methodist. These are also the very same things that Jesus asks of his disciples. And if we are making choices daily to center our lives around loving God then our lives should be marked by a joy that is not dependent upon our circumstances, but

upon the God we love. Likewise our contentment is not based on things but on our relationship with God.

Disciples of Jesus who are living methodically will seek to allow their love of God to change their outlook on life.

Then John Wesley turns from loving God to **loving others**. A Methodist is full of love to all mankind; those known and unknown, friend or enemy, and a Methodist never ceases to pray for them. Wesley elaborates on the character of that love as being born out a heart that God has changed. No longer is our heart dominated by the sinful nature; but by the Spirit of God at work in us.

Wesley emphasizes that a Methodist's character is such that our desire is to please God, not self. And that according to Wesley comes to be known by the fruit which a disciple displays in his or her life. Our desire to love God and love others is demonstrated in our obedience to God's commandments.

In the most practical sense Wesley describes this obedience through two passages of scripture that we have looked at already in this series.

The first is from Romans 12:1

And the second is from Colossians 3:17

In closing his writing on the *Character of a Methodist*, Wesley writes that a Methodist does good unto all people. I've already mentioned it earlier; but what sets Methodists apart is their passion to care. One of the hallmarks of those early Methodists was their work with the poor, children and those in prison.

Wesley believed that one could not be a disciple of Jesus without making an impact on the world around you. Historians credit Wesley's Methodists with saving the British Empire. From teaching children to read, to changing the direction of people's lives; Wesley and the early Methodists changed England for the better.

It was the Methodists in England led by William Wilberforce who ended the slave trade in England. In our own country, Methodists built schools, hospitals and championed the end of child labor laws. You see to Wesley, a disciple of Jesus didn't see their faith as a personal thing. Being a disciple of Jesus wasn't just about the change in your heart; it was making a life changing impact in the lives of others.

That is why we seek to make a life changing impact by serving others. We don't just want to **know** what a disciple of Jesus is; we want to be disciples who do what the first disciples; literally "turning the world upside down."

So if someone were to ask you what a Methodist is, do you think you could give them an answer?

We are disciples of Jesus centering our lives around loving God and loving others. Methodists have always been people who seek to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Now we are not a perfect church; we have our problems. But at the heart of it all we are simply methodical in the way that we seek to live as disciples of Jesus.

As we wrap this all up this morning I want to share with you some words that John Wesley wrote in the last years of his life. Wesley was wise enough to understand that if the Church of England had needed to be rescued from a stale and declining faith; the same could happen to the people called Methodists:

“I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.” (John Wesley, “Thoughts upon Methodism,” Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, 9:527)

May it never be said of the disciples of Jesus who make up this congregation of the United Methodist Church; that we exist as a dead sect, only having the form of religion without the power. Instead, may people here and around the world come to believe that the disciples of Jesus at Linglestown Life are alive with the power of God as they daily seek to love God and love others.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmlzwYTg_J0 Chuck Knows Church: John Wesley