

**ROOTS**  
**WHAT WE BELIEVE AND HOW WE LOVE**  
**SEPTEMBER 19, 2021**

More than once, a guest at our worship services has told me,  
 “You’re not very Methodist.”  
 What do you mean?  
     A common answer used to be, “You do contemporary worship.”  
     To which I would ask, “What makes that unMethodist?”  
 Another regular answer is,  
     “I’ve heard you do immersion baptism.”  
     Ahhhh, Methodists can baptize by immersion.  
     It says so in our Book of Discipline.  
         We can sprinkle, immerse, or even pour water over the head.  
 I’ve been told, “I’ve been going to a Methodist Church in such-and-such state.  
     It was so nice to hear you actually preach from scripture and explain it.”  
 Those interactions raise an interesting question:  
     What is a Methodist?  
         What makes someone a Methodist?  
         What are the marks of a Methodist?  
     Everyone tends to answer that by describing the congregation in which they grew up.  
     Baptize this way, this style of worship, that type of theology, UMYF, UMW....

In this series I want to suggest we would do well to return to our roots.  
 But not the roots of my childhood or yours.  
 I mean going back to scripture, Jesus,  
     and to John Wesley and the earliest Methodists in 18<sup>th</sup> century England.  
 Wesley himself pointed to the parts of our heritage that were most important to him.  
 In 1786, after 50 years of ministry, he wrote,  
     “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.”  
     (J. Wesley, Thoughts Upon Methodism, 1786)  
 Today I’m going to zero in on the “doctrine” and “spirit” part.  
 Next week we’ll consider the “discipline” part.

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Doctrine.

What is the importance of doctrine?

When I realized God was calling me to pastoral ministry,  
 the first people I told were my parents.  
     My dad’s first response was,  
     “You realize you won’t make the kind of money you’re used to living with.”  
     My mom was quiet and thoughtful about it.  
 Then I told my pastor about my sense of call.  
     He was affirming.  
 What was curious to me was what other pastors said to me as I entered into the process,  
     “One of the wonderful things about the Methodist Church is:  
     you can believe pretty much whatever you want.”  
 That puzzled me.  
     I’d always thought Christians were supposed to believe certain things  
     and not believe certain other things.  
     And I’d assumed there were certain things United Methodists believed  
     that other Christians might think differently about.

But we live in a time when many people do not think  
 religious doctrines are all that important.  
 The idea of Truth with a capital T has given way to  
 my truth and your truth and multiple truths.

Our roots, however, do not fit well with that idea.

In the earliest church, there were concerns that people be taught Truth with a capital T.

Paul wrote to encourage and instruct a young pastor named Timothy,  
 who was dealing with some false teachers in his community.

“Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching;  
 continue in these things,  
 for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1Tim.4:16)  
 Will save both yourself and your hearers.  
 Notice: Paul emphasized right teaching,  
 because the stakes are eternal.

“But understand this,  
 that in the last days there will come times of stress.  
 For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money,  
 proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents,  
 ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates,  
 fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit,  
 lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,  
 holding the form of religion but denying the power of it.”  
 There’s the phrase Wesley used  
 to describe his fear for the Methodists. (2Tim.3:1-5)

“All scripture is inspired by God and profitable  
 for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,  
 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2Tim.3:16-17)

“The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching,  
 but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves  
 teachers to suit their own likings,  
 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.  
 As for you, always be steady, endure suffering,  
 do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry.” (2Tim.4:3-5)

John Wesley also believed doctrine matters.

He believed it matters a lot.

He repeatedly said our doctrine, our beliefs, ought to be rooted in Scripture.

He called himself “a man of one book.”

Listen to a little bit of what he said about the Bible:

“I want to know one thing, -  
 the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore.

God himself has condescended to teach the way:

For this very end he came from heaven.

He hath written it down in a book.

O give me that book!

At any price, give me the book of God!

I have it:

Here is knowledge enough for me.

Let me be *homo unius libri* ("a man of one book").”

(From the "Preface" to the *Standard Sermons*)

"My ground is the Bible.

Yea, I am a Bible-bigot.

I follow it in all things, both great and small."

(From the *Journal*: "June 5, 1766")

On the foundation of divinely inspired Scripture,  
 and in the framework of the ancient creeds of the church,  
 Wesley taught standard orthodox Christianity:

God is the creator of all things.  
 Human beings were created in the image of God,  
     but have fallen into sin in such a way that the image of God is blurred and distorted.  
     Because of our sin,  
         we are alienated from God and destined for eternity apart from God.  
 There are no exceptions to this.  
 “ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”  
 And “the wages of sin is death,”  
     both physical death and the spiritual death of a broken relationship with God.  
 But God took on flesh in Jesus,  
     entering our world to provide the way of salvation.  
 The cross of Christ deals with our sin,  
     bearing the penalty we owed,  
     taking the punishment we deserved,  
     and offering forgiveness and reconciliation with God.  
 We cannot earn this, we do not deserve this,  
     but we can receive it as a freely given gift.  
     We receive it through trusting in Christ.  
 The bodily resurrection of Jesus means the power of death has been conquered,  
     and if we follow him in life  
         we will also follow him through death to eternal life.  
 The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, will empower us to live a Christ-like life.  
 And one day, Jesus will return,  
     bringing final judgment and the establishment of his completed kingdom.  
 Wesley taught that God’s grace is at work in our lives from beginning to end,  
     prevenient grace giving life to our spirits, so we can respond to God with faith,  
     justifying grace forgiving our sins and making us God’s children,  
     and sanctifying grace drawing us closer to Christ and making us more like him over time.  
 Those are all widely held, biblically based beliefs that you can find throughout church history,  
     and today in many denominations and many non-denominational churches.  
 It was not innovative teaching.  
 Wesley gave special emphasis to the understanding that  
     the Holy Spirit can empower us to grow spiritually,  
         to become more and more Christ-like in character and action.  
 He made clear that it does not happen by our own grit and determination,  
     but by the power of the Holy Spirit.  
 And because it is the work of the Spirit, it is a work that is without limits.  
     He called his people to “go on to perfection.”  
     By that he did not mean flawlessness that never makes a mistake.  
     He specified that we can “be made perfect in our love for God and others.”  
 Wesley vigorously enforced the preaching and teaching of right doctrine  
     among his preachers and in all the Methodist preaching houses.  
 If a preacher did not adhere to right doctrine,  
     they would be removed from the ranks who aligned with Wesley.  
 If a preaching house tolerated the teaching of false doctrine,  
     the preachers and teachers would be removed,  
     the lay leaders corrected or removed,  
     or, failing all those efforts, the group would be evicted from the building.

Doctrine was that important to Wesley.

But doctrine was not his only concern.

He had a second concern for the future of the Methodists:

    That we maintain “the spirit... with which we first set out.”

    Doctrine is vitally important.

    But it’s not the whole thing.

    Wesley said we must maintain “the spirit.... with which we first set out.”

What did he mean by “spirit”?

It could be the Holy Spirit.

It is true that Wesley's teaching emphasized the work of the Spirit far more than was usual in the Church of England, particularly the role of the Spirit in the growth process of sanctification.

And his evangelistic ministry saw more outward evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit than was usual in the churches or even the rest of the revival movement.

There were people slain in the spirit.

There were physical healings and exorcisms.

Often in his journal he used the vague phrase "signs and wonders."

It is possible his reference to maintaining the spirit has to do with the Holy Spirit.

But... he didn't capitalize "spirit."

It was the convention of the day that,

if you were referring to the Holy Spirit you capitalized both Holy and Spirit.

Wesley did not.

I have to think he meant a heart-level engagement with our faith,

our attitude toward God and others,

particularly our *love* for God and others.

Of course, that concern has deep roots in scripture.

When asked what was the most important of the Old Testament laws,

Jesus himself said,

"You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment.

And a second is like it,

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Mt.22:37-40)

And he was quoting from the Old Testament. (Dt.6:5; Le.19:18)

Wesley picked up Jesus emphasis on loving God and others

and named it as the primary point of the Holy Spirit making us more Christ-like.

When he talked about the Holy Spirit sanctifying us,

going on to perfection,

he specified that we could be "made perfect in love."

Wesley described it as having "purity of intention",

"dedicating all the life to God",

"loving God with all our heart",

and as being the "renewal of the heart in the whole image of God."

A life of perfect love meant living in a way that was centered on

loving God and one's neighbor.

For many years Methodists were known as "warm hearted,"

because their focus was not just on right doctrine,

but living a life of love.

That is so important.

Timothy Keller wrote,

"Love without truth is sentimentality;

it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws.

Truth without love is harshness;

it gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it.

God's saving love in Christ, however,

is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are

and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us."

Think about that.

Love without truth is mere sentimentality.

It allows everything and stands for nothing.

It's just warm fuzzies without any substance.

But on the other side, truth without love is harshness.

Even if we get biblical truth right in every way,

if we do not have love,  
 we may form the equivalent of a Christian Taliban,  
 enforcing truth and falsehood, right and wrong,  
 with an unyielding hardness that does not point toward Jesus.

Recall the words of Paul to the church in Corinth:

### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-7

If I get every doctrinal point right, every moral issue correct, but do not have love...

It does not serve the purposes of Christ.

If I correctly identify sin in another person,  
 and then go hammer them for it...

If I take a stance against immorality in the world,  
 and label the sinner as my enemy...

If I know I'm right and others are wrong,  
 and refuse to associate with them in any way...

If my doctrine is carefully aligned with scripture,  
 and I look down my nose at those who differ...

"Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.  
 Love never fails."

Truth alone is as harsh as a Christian Taliban.

But love alone is just sentimentality.

But it's not an either/or choice, doctrine or love.

The biblical way, the Wesleyan way, is both/and.

John's Gospel says,

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,  
 full of grace and truth." (Jn.1:14)

"The law was given through Moses;  
 grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (Jn.1:17)  
 Grace and truth.

Both/and.

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus,

recognizing that false doctrine must be guarded against,  
 and urged his readers,

"We may no longer be children,  
 tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine,  
 by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

Rather, speaking the truth in love,  
 we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head,  
 into Christ." (Ep.4:14-15)

Speaking the truth... in love.

Both/and.

Jesus lived this out.

His ministry was rejected by the religious leaders of Judea.

His healing miracles were written off as demonic.

His teaching was under constant suspicion,

and when one of the leaders asked him a question of theology or morality  
 it was to try to trip him up.

But with all of that, his attitude toward them was not what we might expect.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!

How often would I have gathered your children together

as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,

and you would not!

Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate.

For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say,

'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Mt.23:37-38)

There was no glee in his voice.

There was pain.

"I *longed* to gather your children together  
 as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."  
 He loved Jerusalem like a mother hen cares for her chicks.  
 He wanted to protect them, to bring them close. and into his family.  
 But they rejected him.  
 That did not turn his heart against them.  
 It broke his heart.

Grace and truth, speaking the truth in love.

Jesus lived it out.

Can we?

Will we?

It started out with him sneaking alcohol.

Though he wasn't of age, he'd have a few beers with his buddies on a Friday night.

When he came home he avoided getting near his parents,  
 but went straight to his room.

So they didn't smell it.

They loved him and thought the best of him.

He was just out with his friends, as far as they knew.

Then it was some hard liquor entering the mix.

Then marijuana.

His parents started noticing his grades dropping, changes in behavior.

But, they wanted to believe, it can't be anything serious.

He's just going through a rough spot.

He'll pull out of it.

Before long, it was pills and cocaine.

The behavioral issues became more pronounced,

he was skipping school more than he was showing up,

and his parents could no longer assume everything was OK.

A search of his room revealed drugs and paraphernalia.

When they confronted him,

he immediately became defensive and accusatory.

From there things quickly spiraled downward.

They tried to talk to him, they sought professional help, and they prayed,  
 all with tears in their eyes.

But it only got worse,

complete with an arrest.

It was time for tough love.

They had tried not to go there,

but now there was nowhere else to go.

They laid out the choice before him:

"We love you.

Continuing on the way we are is not good for you.

We want better for you.

So here's the deal:

You can remain at home with us,

but under some clear rules that include

curfew, no lock on your bedroom door,

random drug checks and room searches.

Or... you could leave, and live elsewhere."

They laid it out clearly,

put it before him in writing,

and with tears in their eyes.

they offered him a pen

so he could sign his name to the covenant.

The choice was his to make.

It was out of love for him

that they forced him to make a conscious choice.

It was grace and truth,  
speaking the truth in love.

Will we be a church that holds to both truth and love?

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**Sermon notes:**

“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.” (J. Wesley, Thoughts Upon Methodism, 1786)

Doctrine (1Tim.4:16; 2Tim.3:1-5, 16-17; 4:3-5)

Spirit/Love (Mt.22:37-40; Dt.6:5; Le.19:18; 1 Cor.13:1-7)

Both/and (Jn.1:14, 17; Ep.4:14-15; Mt.23:37-38)