

Methodists

Today we are going to examine the contribution the Methodists have made to the Protestant Reformation. Therefore, it is only fitting that all the music on today's program will be sung by the Ridgecrest United Methodist Church Choir, directed by Janice Anderson.

[Music: Lord, I Want to be a Christian]

Part 1

George Vandeman's book titled, "What I Like About ...", tells how each Protestant denomination rescued a neglected Bible truth. Here's what he says about Methodists.

There are many things I like about my Methodist friends. I appreciate their historic stand on sober and disciplined living. I admire their organized church government. I salute their concern for the handicapped and for social outcasts. I enjoy Methodist music. Some of my favorite hymns were written by Charles Wesley, John's brother.

Let me say it again—there are so many things I like about our Methodist friends. But there's one thing I especially appreciate: the Methodist movement was called by God to rescue a neglected truth. Wesley stressed that Christians will yield the fruit of obedience as the result of their relationship with Christ.

You remember that Luther restored a neglected truth as well—salvation by faith alone. And John Calvin proclaimed the good news that salvation comes directly from God, not from the church. This also had been a neglected truth. Then the Anabaptists came along to champion truth that had been forgotten. So it was also with Wesley. He brought a necessary balance to the teachings of John Calvin and Martin Luther.

By the eighteenth century, England had backslidden from God. Wesley's preaching jolted the nation out of its spiritual slumber. Of course, not everyone appreciated the awakening. Trapped in the cobwebs of tradition, the churches closed their doors against the new Reformer. So Wesley took to the fields. He preached outdoors, at sunrise, before workers began their daily toil.

Listen to his diary entry from September 21, 1743: "I was awakened between 3 and 4 AM by a large company of tanners, who, fearing they should be too late, had gathered round the house, and were singing and praising God. At five I preached once more, on, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.' They all devoured the word."

Converts crowded Wesley's meetings. He tried to keep his movement within the established church. But most of his recruits had been unchurched, so Wesley organized

them into societies to provide for their spiritual care. Even so, he insisted they attend regular Church of England services.

But in spite of Wesley's loyalty to the official church, the religious and civil authorities rejected this ministry. And Wesley suffered more than mere refusal of this right to preach. On July 4, 1745, a mob smashed into his house and demanded his death. Listen as he describes the experience:

"I stepped forward at once into the midst of them, and said, 'Here I am. Which of you has anything to say to me? To which of you have I done any wrong? To you? Or you? Or you?' I continued speaking till I came ... into the middle of the street, and then raising my voice, said, 'Neighbors, countrymen! Do you desire to hear me speak?' They cried vehemently, 'Yes, Yes. He shall speak. He shall. Nobody shall hinder him.' ... I spoke ... till one or two of their [mob] captains turned around and swore, [that] not a man should touch [me]."

Sometimes opposition to Wesley backfired, as his diary in September of 1769 recorded:

"Then they lifted up their voice [against me], especially one, called a gentleman, who had filled his pocket with rotten eggs; but, a young man coming unawares, clapped his hands on each side, and mashed them all at once. In an instant he was perfume all over; though it was not so sweet as balsam."

Never a dull moment for John Wesley! And never an idle moment, either. He rode on horseback a quarter of a million miles in his ministry. For more than half a century he averaged at least fifteen sermons a week.

Let's visit the place where so many of those sermons were written. Wesley's house still stands today in London. I've visited it on several occasions.

In front of the window in Wesley's prayer room is a table with a kneeling bench and chair. And on the table just two things—Wesley's Greek New Testament and a candle. Every morning at four Wesley came into this little room to kneel down and talk to God. This was the power place of Methodism.

Near the end of Wesley's long and faithful life he wrote:

"I am now an old man, decayed from head to foot. My eyes are dim; my right hand shakes much; my mouth is hot and dry every morning; I have a lingering fever almost every day; my motion is weak and slow. However, blessed be God, I do not slack my labor: I can preach and write still."

Wesley's long ministry centered on two great truths which had been overlooked: God's forgiveness is free to everyone, and all of us are responsible to trust and obey. ¹

¹ George E. Vandeman, 1986, What I Like About--, Pacific Press Publishing Association, pages 37-39.

Can you see why I like Methodists? God had called Luther and Calvin to proclaim forgiveness. Then He brought Wesley on the scene to stress clean living and Christian growth. All of them brought back vital truths that had been neglected.

Of course, John Wesley did not claim to have all the light himself. He knew that as long as time would last, new truths would unfold from God's word.

Have you ever wondered why we have so many denominations? Maybe you have begun to see the answer in these past several chapters. We tend to follow our leaders—to believe everything they believe but little more. To advance no farther than they do before they die. To draw a circle around their teachings and form a creed.

Now, creeds have expressed in profound language the roots of the Christian faith and have also provided a convenient way for expressing our beliefs. But they can unfortunately lock us into a particular set of teachings and keep us from following newly rediscovered truth. We find refuge in our heritage, and that is fine up to a point. But then we tend to dig in our heels. We refuse to advance past the boundary of our established beliefs.

Can you see how this has happened in the history of the church? When God introduced advanced light—neglected truth—in the days of Luther, the Catholic Church refused it. So the Lutheran church was born. When God brought more light with the Anabaptists, most Lutherans did not accept it. The Baptist Church emerged. And when additional truth came through Wesley, many Calvinists and others turned him down. So we have the Methodists. The story goes on and on.

Will it ever end? We shall see.

Let me give you something to think about. Is it possible that there may be advanced light for *us* to follow? Neglected truths from God's Word we need to follow today—whatever our denominational ties? Proverbs 4:18 says, "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

But many people seem to be reluctant to welcome new light, unlike a little girl in colonial New England who had caught the spirit of Wesley. She penned a little poem which a circuit-riding preacher copied in his diary. May I share it with you? Believe it or not, the girl who wrote this poem was just nine years old. Listen to her message:

Know then that every soul is free,
To choose his life and what he'll be.
For this eternal truth is given,
That God will force no man to heaven.

He'll draw, persuade, direct him right,
Bless him with wisdom, love, and light,

In nameless ways be good and kind,
But never force the human mind.

Yes, friend, God will never force the human mind. You and I are free. Free to do whatever we will as truth goes marching on. We can refuse to grow beyond the beliefs of our ancestors. Or we can choose for ourselves to walk in the light that continually shines from the inexhaustible Word of God.

God help us to make the right choice! ²

[Music: We will Walk in the Light]

Part 2

Ellen White wrote a history of the church from apostolic times through the present day titled, The Great Controversy. In chapter 14, Later English Reformers ³, she had much to say about the formation of the Methodist Church. Here are some excerpts from that chapter.

In a day of great spiritual darkness, Whitefield and the Wesleys appeared as light bearers for God. Under the rule of the established church the people of England had lapsed into a state of religious declension hardly to be distinguished from heathenism. Natural religion was the favorite study of the clergy, and included most of their theology. The higher classes sneered at piety, and prided themselves on being above what they called its fanaticism. The lower classes were grossly ignorant and abandoned to vice, while the church had no courage or faith any longer to support the downfallen cause of truth.

The great doctrine of justification by faith, so clearly taught by Luther, had been almost wholly lost sight of; and the Romish principle of trusting to good works for salvation, had taken its place. Whitefield and the Wesleys, who were members of the established church, were sincere seekers for the favor of God, and this they had been taught was to be secured by a virtuous life and an observance of the ordinances of religion.

Whitefield and the Wesleys had been prepared for their work by long and sharp personal convictions of their own lost condition; and that they might be able to endure hardness as good soldiers of Christ, they had been subjected to the fiery ordeal of scorn, derision, and persecution, both in the university and as they were entering the ministry. They and a few others who sympathized with them were contemptuously called Methodists by their ungodly fellow students--a name which is at the present time regarded as honorable by one of the largest denominations in England and America.

As members of the Church of England they were strongly attached to her forms of worship, but the Lord had presented before them in His word a higher standard. The Holy Spirit urged them to preach Christ and Him crucified. The power of the Highest attended their labors. Thousands were convicted and truly converted. It was necessary that these

² George E. Vandeman, 1986, What I Like About--, Pacific Press Publishing Association, pages 43-45.

³ <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/gc/gc14.html>

sheep be protected from ravening wolves. Wesley had no thought of forming a new denomination, but he organized them under what was called the Methodist Connection.

Mysterious and trying was the opposition which these preachers encountered from the established church; yet God, in His wisdom, had overruled events to cause the reform to begin within the church itself. Had it come wholly from without, it would not have penetrated where it was so much needed. But as the revival preachers were churchmen, and labored within the pale of the church wherever they could find opportunity, the truth had an entrance where the doors would otherwise have remained closed. Some of the clergy were roused from their moral stupor and became zealous preachers in their own parishes. Churches that had been petrified by formalism were quickened into life.

The servants of God trod a rugged path. Men of influence and learning employed their powers against them. After a time many of the clergy manifested determined hostility, and the doors of the churches were closed against a pure faith and those who proclaimed it. The course of the clergy in denouncing them from the pulpit aroused the elements of darkness, ignorance, and iniquity. Again and again did John Wesley escape death by a miracle of God's mercy. When the rage of the mob was excited against him, and there seemed no way of escape, an angel in human form came to his side, the mob fell back, and the servant of Christ passed in safety from the place of danger.

The Methodists of those early days--people as well as preachers--endured ridicule and persecution, from church members and from the openly irreligious who were inflamed by their misrepresentations. They were arraigned before courts of justice--such only in name, for justice was rare in the courts of that time. Often they suffered violence from their persecutors. Mobs went from house to house, destroying furniture and goods, plundering whatever they chose, and brutally abusing men, women, and children. In some instances, public notices were posted, calling upon those who desired to assist in breaking the windows and robbing the houses of the Methodists, to assemble at a given time and place. These open violations of both human and divine law were allowed to pass without a reprimand. A systematic persecution was carried on against a people whose only fault was that of seeking to turn the feet of sinners from the path of destruction to the path of holiness.

Said John Wesley, referring to the charges against himself and his associates: "Some allege ... , '[Our] doctrine is too strict; [we] make the way to heaven too narrow.' And this is in truth the original objection, (as it was almost the only one for some time,) and is secretly at the bottom of a thousand more, which appear in various forms. But do [we] make the way to heaven any narrower than our Lord and His apostles made it? Is [our] doctrine stricter than that of the Bible? Consider only a few plain texts: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength.' 'For every idle word which men shall speak, they shall give an account in the day of judgment.' 'Whether ye eat, or drink, or whatever ye do, do all to the glory of God.'

"If [our] doctrine is stricter than this, [we] are to blame; but you know in your conscience it is not. And who can be one jot less strict without corrupting the word of God? Can any steward of the mysteries of God be found faithful if he change any part of that sacred depositum? No. He can abate nothing, he can soften nothing; he is constrained to declare

to all men, 'I may not bring down the Scripture to your taste. You must come up to it, or perish forever.' This is the real ground of that other popular cry concerning 'the uncharitableness of [us].' Uncharitable, are [we]? In what respect? Do [we] not feed the hungry and clothe the naked? 'No; that is not the thing: [we] are not wanting in this: but [we] are so uncharitable in judging! [we] think none can be saved but those of [our] own way.'" ⁴

The spiritual declension which had been manifest in England just before the time of Wesley was in great degree the result of antinomian teaching. Many affirmed that Christ had abolished the moral law and that Christians are therefore under no obligation to observe it; that a believer is freed from the "bondage of good works." Others, though admitting the perpetuity of the law, declared that it was unnecessary for ministers to exhort the people to obedience of its precepts, since those whom God had elected to salvation would, "by the irresistible impulse of divine grace, be led to the practice of piety and virtue," while those who were doomed to eternal reprobation "did not have power to obey the divine law."

Others, also holding that "the elect cannot fall from grace nor forfeit the divine favor," arrived at the still more hideous conclusion that "the wicked actions they commit are not really sinful, nor to be considered as instances of their violation of the divine law, and that, consequently, they have no occasion either to confess their sins or to break them off by repentance." Therefore, they declared that even one of the vilest of sins, "considered universally an enormous violation of the divine law, is not a sin in the sight of God," if committed by one of the elect, "because it is one of the essential and distinctive characteristics of the elect, that they cannot do anything that is either displeasing to God or prohibited by the law." ⁵

These monstrous doctrines are essentially the same as the later teaching of popular educators and theologians--that there is no unchangeable divine law as the standard of right, but that the standard of morality is indicated by society itself, and has constantly been subject to change. All these ideas are inspired by the same master spirit--by him who, even among the sinless inhabitants of heaven, began his work of seeking to break down the righteous restraints of the law of God.

In answer to the claim that at the death of Christ the precepts of the Decalogue had been abolished with the ceremonial law, Wesley said: "The moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments and enforced by the prophets, He did not take away. It was not the design of His coming to revoke any part of this. This is a law which never can be broken, which 'stands fast as the faithful witness in heaven.' . . . This was from the beginning of the world, being 'written not on tables of stone,' but on the hearts of all the children of men, when they came out of the hands of the Creator. And however the letters once wrote by the finger of God are now in a great measure defaced by sin, yet can they not wholly be blotted out, while we have any consciousness of good and evil. Every part of this law must remain in force upon all mankind, and in all ages; as not depending either on time or place, or any other circumstances liable to change, but on the nature of God, and the nature of man, and their unchangeable relation to each other.

⁴ John Wesley, Works, vol. 3, pp. 152, 153.

⁵ McClintock and Strong, Cyclopedia, article "Antinomians."

"I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.' . . . Without question, His meaning in this place is (consistently with all that goes before and follows after),--I am come to establish it in its fullness, in spite of all the glosses of men: I am come to place in a full and clear view whatsoever was dark or obscure therein: I am come to declare the true and full import of every part of it; to show the length and breadth, the entire extent, of every commandment contained therein, and the height and depth, the inconceivable purity and spirituality of it in all its branches." ⁶

Wesley declared the perfect harmony of the law and the gospel. "There is, therefore, the closest connection that can be conceived, between the law and the gospel. On the one hand, the law continually makes way for, and points us to, the gospel; on the other, the gospel continually leads us to a more exact fulfilling of the law. The law, for instance, requires us to love God, to love our neighbor, to be meek, humble, or holy. We feel that we are not sufficient for these things; yea, that 'with man this is impossible;' but we see a promise of God to give us that love, and to make us humble, meek, and holy: we lay hold of this gospel, of these glad tidings; it is done unto us according to our faith; and 'the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us,' through faith which is in Christ Jesus. . . .

"In the highest rank of the enemies of the gospel of Christ," said Wesley, "are they who openly and explicitly 'judge the law' itself, and 'speak evil of the law;' who teach men to break (to dissolve, to loose, to untie the obligation of) not one only, whether of the least or of the greatest, but all the commandments at a stroke. . . . The most surprising of all the circumstances that attend this strong delusion, is that they who are given up to it, really believe that they honor Christ by overthrowing His law, and that they are magnifying His office while they are destroying His doctrine! Yea, they honor Him just as Judas did when he said, 'Hail, Master, and kissed Him.' And He may as justly say to every one of them, 'Betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?' It is no other than betraying Him with a kiss, to talk of His blood, and take away His crown; to set light by any part of His law, under pretense of advancing His gospel. Nor indeed can anyone escape this charge, who preaches faith in any such a manner as either directly or indirectly tends to set aside any branch of obedience: who preaches Christ so as to disannul, or weaken in any wise, the least of the commandments of God." ⁷

To those who urged that "the preaching of the gospel answers all the ends of the law," Wesley replied: "This we utterly deny. It does not answer the very first end of the law, namely, the convincing men of sin, the awakening those who are still asleep on the brink of hell." The apostle Paul declares that "by the law is the knowledge of sin;" "and not until man is convicted of sin, will he truly feel his need of the atoning blood of Christ. . . . 'They that be whole,' as our Lord Himself observes, 'need not a physician, but they that are sick.' It is absurd, therefore, to offer a physician to them that are whole, or that at least imagine themselves so to be. You are first to convince them that they are sick; otherwise they will not thank you for your labor. It is equally absurd to offer Christ to them whose heart is whole, having never yet been broken." ⁸

⁶ Wesley, sermon 25.

⁷ Wesley, sermon 25.

⁸ Wesley, sermon 35.

Thus while preaching the gospel of the grace of God, Wesley, like his Master, sought to "magnify the law, and make it honorable." Faithfully did he accomplish the work given him of God, and glorious were the results which he was permitted to behold. At the close of his long life of more than fourscore years--above half a century spent in itinerant ministry--his avowed adherents numbered more than half a million souls. But the multitude that through his labors had been lifted from the ruin and degradation of sin to a higher and a purer life, and the number who by his teaching had attained to a deeper and richer experience, will never be known till the whole family of the redeemed shall be gathered into the kingdom of God. His life presents a lesson of priceless worth to every Christian. Would that the faith and humility, the untiring zeal, self-sacrifice, and devotion of this servant of Christ might be reflected in the churches of today!

[Music: Servants of the Almighty God]

Let's close our broadcast with a song of love in our hearts.

[Music: There's a Song of Love in My Heart]