



Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



Unit 1: God's Grace Goes Before Us

Session 1: Distinctively Christian

Why United Methodists Are Not "Baptist Light"

When I was in middle school, a classmate who was part of another church in my small town would harass me about being United Methodist. He would say, "Yeah... I saw you Methodists had a lot of cars in the parking lot Sunday. You must have been having hamburgers after church. You Methodists just come to church for social hour and food." Or "You Methodists don't really believe in anything." Or "You Methodists believe everything." At the time, I absolutely knew that none of those things were true. First, we hardly ever ate hamburgers, although we were experts at the potluck dinner. Secondly, and more importantly, we United Methodists do indeed embrace specific beliefs of faith and practice. Although I did not have language to articulate it at the time, I realized that the United Methodist tradition in which I was raised had solid doctrine, or teachings, that had been handed down to me from the deepest roots of early Christianity. I also sensed that some of the teachings from my classmate's denomination were lived out in a more inflexible context. Perhaps that is why a person from the Baptist tradition might think hamburgers were required to persuade Methodists to come to church. In this case, whereas my classmate's tradition as lived out in his particular local church seemed to focus more on the enforcement of specific behavior, my tradition seemed to focus more on God's love.

When I began to pastor congregations in the United Methodist Church, I discovered that my classmate's misconception was also present in the congregations I served. A number of members, many of whom originated from other denominations, had the impression that United Methodism was mostly like the Baptist Church but not as strict. I overheard a man in one of my congregations describe to a friend that being United Methodist was like being "Baptist Light." According to him, United Methodists could "drink and dance" while Baptists could not. As my stomach turned and my head began to ache, I was brought front and center with the reality that I had a lot of work to do.

Our Shared Beliefs

Certainly United Methodists, like the Wesleyan Christians before them, continue to share many beliefs in common with other Christian traditions. For example, we believe in the Holy Trinity: in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We believe in the mystery of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. We believe in one holy and universal Church of which we are but a part, in the present and coming Reign of God, in the authority of scripture in matters of faith, in our justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And we believe in grace, which is a belief we also share with other Christians.

As a matter of fact, grace is a big word for Christians who are rooted in the Wesleyan tradition. **Grace** does not refer to a prayer one offers before a meal, but instead is the undeserved, unreserved, all-encompassing love that God has for human beings, both collectively and individually. We believe grace is fundamental to God's very nature, and that it truly is amazing. For us, grace is not merely a part of the way God acts in the world; instead, grace is present through God's creation of and relationship with human beings and the created order. The Wesleyan emphasis on grace is so significant that it can be described as the most outstanding characteristic of our faith and practice. Grace is more than a piece of our Wesleyan tradition. Indeed, it permeates every part of who we are.

We read in Ephesians 2: 8-10, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."¹

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

Our understanding of God's grace is one of the distinctive beliefs that come from our Wesleyan tradition. It is a big "root" for us - probably the biggest of all the Wesleyan roots. There are other distinctive beliefs as well, and we will learn more about many of them as this study progresses.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, scripture in Wesleyan Roots is taken from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. 1989, 1995. All rights reserved.

Wesleyan Roots Session 1: Distinctively Christian

Another way in which the United Methodist Church is different than some other Christian traditions is that there is no “litmus test” needed to become a member. Some denominational and non-denominational Christian groups require new members to sign a statement pledging that they believe a specific set of Christian teachings. United Methodist do not require this. We do make specific promises regarding baptism and church membership, and we do take these promises seriously. We are a doctrinal denomination. Doctrine in this context refers to the teachings of the Church that, in the case of the UMC, have been handed down to us from scripture and tradition, including the perspectives of John and Charles Wesley, as well as many women and men of the United Methodist movement.² Some Christian traditions profess points of belief and practice that are somewhat more inflexible when compared to the belief and practices of Wesleyan Christians as a whole. For example, some denominations require that persons who receive Holy Communion be members of that particular congregation.

In the Wesleyan tradition, Holy Communion is offered to everyone. While the United Methodist Church ascribes firmly to beliefs deemed essential (such as the Trinity and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) we are more flexible in allowing interpretation of how doctrine is taught and practiced. We will cover this more in the session entitled “Diverse by Design: Companions on the Journey.”

Little did I know at the time, but what my classmate intended as an insult turned out to be a great blessing for me and has shaped most of my preaching and teaching over the years. May you be blessed in your continued journey through Wesleyan Roots.

Marsha Engle Middleton

2 You can learn more about it in ¶102 in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, especially in the sections entitled “Our Common Heritage as Christians,” “and “Basic Christian Affirmations.”

United Methodist Identity Points:

- United Methodists share a great deal in common with Christians of other denominations, such as belief in the Holy Trinity, salvation as a gift of God rather than a result of human effort, one universal Church, the biblical witness as core of our faith, justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and sanctification, among others.
- United Methodists have some distinctive emphases that are rooted in our Wesleyan tradition, such as an emphasis on grace, our understanding of scripture, an emphasis on social holiness, the concept of entire sanctification, and more. Wesleyan Roots will cover a number of these over the next eleven sessions.
- Grace is the undeserved, unreserved, all-encompassing love that God has for humanity and all creation, both collectively and individually.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- In what ways does the United Methodist Church seem like other Christian denominations? In what ways does it seem different?
- If you are United Methodist, has anyone from another Christian tradition ever “called you out” for your Methodist beliefs and practices? How did you respond, or how might you respond if this happened to you?
- Describe a time when God’s grace was evident to you. What did you learn about God from this experience? What did you learn about yourself?