



# Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



## Unit 1: God's Grace Goes Before Us

# Session 4: Free Will vs. Determinism

### Do We Mean What We Say About God?

We have all heard God get credit for an awful lot of outcomes during Football season. It seems that God is a HUGE football fan and sometimes even has a favorite team. The other day I heard one player say, "God made nearly every play and made us the victors." I wanted to say, "Wow! It's great that God chose your team and orchestrated all of the moves!" But do we believe that God really does that? This kind of deterministic thinking sees God as one who orchestrates our lives and decides even relatively small things like what we eat for breakfast or the flow of traffic as we drive to work on a given day. Popular phrases like "it was God's plan" and "everything happens for a reason" come from this kind of deterministic thinking. As comforting and celebratory as some of these phrases can be, it is important to understand their implications about who God is and how God acts. United Methodist Christians usually follow with an AMEN when football players talk about God-given gifts and talents, teamwork, admiration, honor, and sacrifice. We understand that being the best we can be is the will of God and a response to "free will."

### Does God Cause Harm?

To further make this point, I would like to share a painful experience. There I was, standing by a tiny, closed casket in the viewing area of a local funeral home. It has been my practice to stand close to the casket during what we in the southern part of the United States call "viewing" time whenever there has been a particularly sad or tragic death, and the recent death of a couple's only child by Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) was no exception. As I tried to keep myself as emotionally contained as possible, I found myself dealing with an emotion that was neither sadness nor grief. It was anger! This was because I counted 10 individuals approaching the couple and making remarks like this:

"Your baby was an angel on Earth, and God wanted her to be in heaven with the rest of the angels."

"Someday you will understand why God decided to take your daughter."

"God just wanted another cherub in the heavenly children's choir."

These statements and others like them do not line up with our United Methodist understanding of how God acts in the world. Remember, we know God through the presence of Jesus who comforted and wept with his friends. There are tragic events that happen that are simply beyond our understanding. What we do know is that God is with us, comforts us, and points to resurrected life for us.

Wesleyan Christians like United Methodists do not believe that God "takes" children away from their parents by death or accident. We do not believe that God willingly afflicts a person with cancer, or with a disabling condition, or any other bad thing. We do not believe God causes accidents or disasters, and we do not believe God manipulates human beings through illness, injury, or misfortune into becoming Christian. God came to us, enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth, and suffered a horrendous death on our behalf; therefore, God knows about suffering. In fact, we believe that God cries with us, grieves with us, and suffers with us when we face times of suffering and tragedy, once again as a good parent would do.

### God's Sovereignty and Human Free Will

The issue here has to do with the power of God working in the world. This is called **God's sovereignty**, and it is an important concept for all people of faith. We believe God exercises power in creation. For example, with a word God brought forth the stars and planets and all that is. That is a tremendous amount of power, and Wesleyan Christians agree with most other Christians on this point.

Our understanding of human free will is an important distinction that makes United Methodists different. We believe God chooses to exercise sovereignty in such a way as to allow humans to have genuine free will. Some Christian traditions believe that God determines, or has predetermined, the details of our lives and deaths, sort of like pawns being moved around on a cosmic chess board. United Methodists believe that God gave human beings

## Wesleyan Roots Session 4: Free Will vs. Determinism

the gift of choosing for ourselves. Along with the concept of grace being foundational to God's very nature, one of the greatest distinctions of United Methodism is our understanding of free will. This is a point of Wesleyan Christianity that has tremendous repercussions throughout our faith and practice.

John Wesley knew deeply that he and his colleagues needed accountability to grow in faith. They knew that when they exercised free will, they could make good or bad choices. They created "bands" or small groups to help them live faithful lives. They looked at the social ills around them and brought education to children on Sundays – the only day they did not have to work in the factories. They brought a message of hope to the miners who were living in rural areas of England, and they fought against enslaving people. United Methodists believe strongly in "social holiness." We believe that we are called to live out our free will by being the hands and feet of Christ in the world. That kind of responsibility was taken up when we said yes to God and made our baptism and confirmation covenants with God and one another.

### **"Thy Will be Done..."**

When we speak of "God's will done on earth as it is in heaven," I absolutely believe that God longs for us to live into God's ways and gracious will! Determinism can sometimes look like God generally wills the minutiae of life. I have heard some say that God has determined what they ate for breakfast and the color of shirt they happened to wear on any given day. If we are going to speak of God's will, we can look at what Christ asks of his followers. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We are asked to freely do what is righteous and holy.

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison, and you visited me." (Matt. 25:34-36)

### **Determinism and Predestination**

Finally, some of our brothers and sisters in other Christian traditions believe God has predetermined which humans would receive salvation and which ones would not, and that this happened long before our births. In this scenario, if God has chosen me to be saved, I will be saved. It does not matter whether I believe in God, have a relationship with Jesus Christ, or try to live a Christ-like life. The only

thing that determines my salvation is God's decision, made way before I was ever born. Likewise, if God has chosen for me to not be saved – if God has chosen for me to be damned – I can believe in God, seek a relationship with Jesus Christ, and try to live a Christ-like life. But the only thing that will determine my lack of ultimate salvation is God's decision, again made way before I was ever born. I see no justice in the idea of a deity that makes such arbitrary choices. This element is not present in Wesleyan Christianity.

There are far-reaching implications of what we believe about the dichotomy of free will and determinism, and the Wesleyan understanding of genuine free will as a gift of God is tremendously important.

*Marsha Engle Middleton*

### United Methodist Identity Points:

- We believe God chooses to exercise power in such a way as to allow humans to have genuine free will.
  - Free will is a gift given by God so that we might have real relationships with God and one another.
  - United Methodists do not believe that God has predetermined our salvation or the details of our lives.
  - We believe that Jesus lived, died, and rose again for every human being, and we have an opportunity to respond to Jesus' offer of a real relationship by virtue of our free will.
  - We believe that free will requires faithful responsibility.
- 

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- Do you think God has ever influenced you as you made an important life decision? When? Do you think there is a difference between God influencing you by the power of the Holy Spirit and God coercing you into behaving in a certain way?
  - One of the most powerful images of God is that of a divine Parent. Just like a good parent, God wants a loving relationship with us, but God will not force it upon us. Do you think there is anything we could do that could cause God, our divine Parent, to stop loving us? Why or why not?
  - Sometimes parents set strong boundaries with their children, and this can mean that a young person has to face the consequences of his or her actions. Do you think God as our Divine Parent might allow us to face the consequences of our actions? Why or why not?
-