



Dr. James C. Howell eBest Ideas Of Methodism

eBestIdeasOfMethodism – dying

At age 87, having lived a full, vigorous life, Wesley fell into ill health. He travelled to preach in mid-February of 1791, but then caught a severe cold. Trying to recover, he wrote a letter to William Wilberforce, encouraging him in his quest to banish slavery: “Go on in the name of God till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away.”

His fever mounted, and gradually his housekeeper and closest friends gathered by his bed for the death watch. Unresponsive for days, he suddenly gathered his strength and broke out into a hymn: “I’ll praise my Maker while I have breath, and when my soul is lost in death, praise shall employ my nobler powers; my days of praise shall never be past...” Then he sank into a feeble state, and could say nothing, until late in the day he spoke his final words: “The best of all is, God is with us.” The next morning, March 2, he was dead.

Wesley’s last will and testament stipulated that six poor people should be paid one pound each to carry his coffin, so they would have money to live on for a while. The chapel was draped in black for the funeral service, and his will mandated that the fabric be taken down afterwards and remade into dresses to be distributed to poor women. He had given away all of his money to the poor, and had kept back precisely what was needed to pay the pallbearers and to provide the dresses.

Imagine this kind of end-of-life planning! In my death, will the poor be lifted up in some practical way? How much will I have given away, and what will be left? What will be the manner of my death? Panicked anxiety? Or words of praise and faith passing my lips with my last breaths?

Wesley knew why he had been placed on earth, and his reason for being provided his message to thousands, and this sustained him: “I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen – I drop into an unchangeable eternity! 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.”

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – how to worship

In recent years, Methodists have found themselves caught up in a swirling debate about how to worship God. Traditionalists, shrinking in number, cling to hymnals, robes, litanies and acolytes. A much larger “contemporary” wave seems to be overwhelming churches, as pastors and laity feel we aren’t making a connection with people, especially the young, and so we turn to screens, bands, shirtsleeves and film clips.

The first Methodists were Episcopalians, and their worship was formal, with elegant prayers read in unison from The Book of Common Prayer, music sung from hymnals used not only in worship but in the home, vestments were worn, candles lit, the Sacraments observed carefully, the liturgical year followed punctiliously.

But the Methodist movement fanned out into the impoverished countryside, and thrived on the colonial frontier, where there were no buildings, vestments or books, and an intensity of emotion that overflowed the banks of form; a heightened expectation that the Spirit might move in unanticipated ways led Methodists to dispense with formalism.

And yet churches were still being built, liturgies were followed, side by side with the revivalistic informality of camp meetings. The peril of disorder was feared, and yet the potentially dull conformity of order was despised.

Methodism's ambivalence, our "split personality" about worship, our commitment to order and form, and our openness to the Spirit's stirrings, may serve as a lesson to us. Order matters. A printed prayer that has been good enough to be published for centuries will remind me to pray for more than simply my latest whims and self-indulgent gimmes. A litany or a hymn that uses the word we calls me out of my lonely narcissism into a fellowship, into the Body of Christ.

And yet we dare not let the ordering of worship become a straitjacket. We catch ourselves going through the motions and plead for God's mercy, we engage in worship with an eye to God, we expect the unexpected. The living God may be sought through form and order, but explodes the silly boxes in which we think God can be contained.

Robert Frost once said "I gave up fire for form until I was cold." We want fire in the form – and most importantly, we Methodists remember that worship is not about entertainment, or what "suits" me and my tastes. It is content, not style, that gives worship substance. Worship is about God, and true worship always challenges, transporting you out of a familiar world that is pleasing into a world where you are uncomfortable, smitten, catapulted into mission, buoyed with hope.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – how to sing

In the opening pages of every Methodist hymnal ever published we find Wesley's adamant (and humorous) advice on how to sing. "Learn these tunes before you learn any others. Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep. Do not bawl. Sing in time, do not run before or behind. Sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself..."

A chorus of Methodism's best ideas resonate in his words! Singing in Church is about God, it is for God; the question is not What music do I like? The tunes are different from tunes we fancy outside Church – and they should be learned first! and become a regular feature of our lives outside Church. "Aim at pleasing God more than yourself."

Charles Wesley, John's brother, may be history's greatest hymn writer. His purpose in concocting 6,500 hymns? "To arouse sinners, encourage saints, and to educate all in the mysteries of the Christian faith." The function of singing together in worship is to be educational: we learn our theology from what we sing, we give voice to profound notions about God, and by singing them in harmony with others we are tutored in the things of God. I do not believe many Christians in the year 2008 expect to be taught when they open a hymnal or follow lyrics on a screen.

Methodist singing has always been corporate, not individualistic. We sing, not about me and Jesus, or my spirituality; one of Methodism's best ideas is that when we sing, we use plural pronouns, like we and our. We are a Church, a body knit together by God, not solo Christians, a jumble of individuals who happen to be in the same building. Our faith is something we engage in together; we need each other to be the people of God. The way we sing either lures us into deeper community, or oddly isolates us even in the act of singing!

It would be fun to reflect further on Wesley's insight that we should sing "with good courage." What might it be to sing with some bravery? Or is it that to sing a hymn or spiritual chorus on Sunday and even during the drive home from work might build courage in the soul?

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – perfection

"You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). What could Jesus have meant? John Wesley, unwilling simply to say "Hey, we're only human, of course we're not in the vicinity of 'perfect,'" devised one of his loveliest and stimulating doctrines, that is "perfection."

While we may have extremely modest, even lackluster expectations of ourselves spiritually, Wesley was passionately

serious about the life of faith – and more importantly he stood in constant awe of the power of God. His unqualified belief in what God could achieve in us (and in spite of us!) led him to hope that God could in fact bring mere mortals like you and me to a state of perfect love and service. He had known some stellar Christians who exhibited something like Christian perfection.

Wesley thought a lot about perfection. He wrote that we will never have perfect knowledge (1 Corinthians 13:9); the most devout, brilliant mind can never totally comprehend the glorious depths of the being of God. We also will never be free from making mistakes (1 John 1:8); we will err and stand constantly in need of forgiveness. We will have our infirmities, and temptation will constantly assail us.

But by the grace of God we might come to have a perfect love for God, a pure heart, a focused determination to live in devotion to God at all times. In 1 John 3:9 we read “Whoever is born of God does not sin” – and Methodists have taken this to mean that God can grant us “the power not to sin willfully.”

As a bare minimum, we imagine perfection, we dream of perfection, we pray for perfection, perhaps using these words from Charles Wesley’s hymn: “Refining fire, go through my heart; illuminate my soul; sanctify the whole. Give me a new, perfect heart, free from doubt, fear and sorrow. The mind which was in Christ impart, and let my spirit cleave to thee.”

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism-money

Some of Wesley’s most stinging sermons dealt with money. We may feel some affection toward him when he speaks of his heart being “strangely warmed”; but when he speaks about finances and the Gospel, we shrink back in humility – or we muster lame arguments for why he must be misguided.

Wesley was never keen on ignoring the plain words of Jesus, who said dozens of things like “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13), and “Do not lay up treasure on earth” (Matthew 6:19). Sizing up pious Churchgoers, Wesley declared “They never even tried to obey this; from their youth up, it never entered their minds to obey. They were bred by their parents to break it as soon and as often as they could.”

Ouch. We argue that money is good, money enables us to support the Church. But Wesley was concerned only about our salvation: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for those that have riches not to trust in them.” Wealth destroys humility, and makes you “wise in your own eyes.” Wealth destroys patience, and produces vices like pride and sloth – and fuels idolatry, our devotion to what is not God. As riches increase, so does conformity to the world, and an unwillingness to be taught anything. Parents raise their children, “to see how they may get the most money, not how they might get the most holiness.”

God wills for us to have enough to live on; but whatever we keep and spend on ourselves above that bare minimum is “theft, stealing from God, and stealing from the poor.” How could Wesley say such a thing? His theology taught him that there is only one true Owner: “No longer speak of your goods; they are not yours but God’s. ‘The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof’ (Psalm 24:1).”

One of Methodism’s best ideas must be that we need to learn to think theologically about our money, not some percentage we might give to the Church, but all of our money, all of our resources, everything we have – and if indeed it all belongs to God, what kinds of daily decisions do we then make about spending, purchasing, investing, donating? What are the risks to our souls when we dole out what we have in ways the world recognizes but are out of sync with what Jesus taught quite plainly?

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – quadrilateral

One of the 20th century’s great teachers of Methodism, [Albert Outler](#), brilliantly captured the essence of the way Methodists think theologically. In his classroom, he drew a quadrilateral on the board, and declared that we think through four dimensions when we sort out our beliefs: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience.

Scripture is the foundation of all reflection about God. Anything we might say about God that would rank as reliable is derived from a close reading of the Bible, which is the story of God's great acts in history, the revelation of God's heart, the accounts of how God's people learned about God, the profound experiences of those who lived with Moses, David, Isaiah, Mary, Paul and Jesus himself.

We need help in understanding the Bible: **Tradition**. Great thinkers and believers, heroes of the faith and martyrs, have studied its pages and taught. As they said in the Middle Ages, if we can see far it is because we stand on the shoulders of giants. John Wesley himself, along with Martin Luther, Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, Augustine, perhaps a preacher you knew as a teenager, and great authors today guide us to read the Bible not in a wooden, flat-footed way, but to get to the inner substance, to grasp the deep logic of Scripture.

God also has given us brains, and we never fear what **Reason** teaches us, both in terms of the logic we apply to our reading of the Bible, and in all we learn from science, archaeology, and even other religions. For Wesley, reason is tricky, because we can elevate our rational thinking above the simple, humble truths of Scripture, thinking we are smarter than God's own expression of the truth; "for the Word of the Cross is folly... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Corinthians 1:18). So we employ reason and all knowledge we can round up, but we are vigilant to avoid the ways our minds can deceive us and be self-serving instead of servants of God.

Finally, the final test of belief is **Experience**. Theology that gets stuck in intellectual banter is invalid; the reality of God is to be experienced, it is to become a vital force in life. Here, Wesley risked misunderstanding. There are always those who elevate feeling to the pinnacle of the Christian life, as if God came so we could take an emotional ride, and if you don't have rich feelings about God you must not believe at all. The truth of God is above all emotion, and is true whatever you may or may not feel. And the experience of faith may feel like a surge in the soul; but experience also means you put the pragmatic aspects of faith into practice – like being generous, serving the poor, being disciplined about Bible reading and prayer, never missing worship.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – prevenient grace

In our series on Methodist ideas we have spoken often of Grace. John Wesley's solution to various theological problems (like How could God save some but shut out others? or Why does anybody at all believe in God?) was his doctrine of "prevenient grace." The word pre-veni-ent simply means "to come before." God's Grace comes before we believe, before we think about God, before we even are born. The Bible teaches us that "The true light, which enlightens everyone, came into the world" (1 John 1:9); everyone has some measure of God's light, even if merely a faint, glimmering ray.

God loves too much to leave God's heart hidden: "For what can be known about God is plain, God has shown it to everyone since creation" (Romans 1:19). The fact that life exists on this planet (or that there is a planet at all) can be chalked up entirely to the Grace of God.

You are alive: you need Grace, you seek and perhaps accept Grace – but you were never really away from Grace. For Methodists there is no such thing as "natural" humanity apart from God; there is oddly no such thing as the "secular" as opposed to the "sacred." Everything, the trees and wind, the rivers and owls, you, me, the odd neighbor or the villain in a foreign land: God's Grace superintends all of creation, no one is devoid of Grace.

So Wesley successfully overturns the idea of the Calvinists that some people simply are not chosen by God, that they are always destined to be on the outside. But why then does sin happen? and so much enmity and sorrow? Grace is irresistible in that everybody gets it if they like it or not; but Grace is resistible, in that you can encase yourself in a cocoon of hardness and make your own life miserable as if there were no Grace at all.

Wesley wrote, "No man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath... God works in you; therefore you can work. God works in you, therefore you must work."

Again, Wesley is willing to risk the appearance of inconsistency; is it all Grace? or is it up to us? Wesley would

probably chuckle at the witticism of Winston Churchill: "I'd rather be right than consistent." Because of Grace, because there is no such thing as me or my life apart from God, then God has made me able to respond to God's Grace, I must use the Grace given or I plunge headlong into the tragic, pointless life of attempted flight from God. Yet even there, wherever I think I can hide from God, Grace is prevenient, it arrives before me...

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – against the Presbyterians

Is it enough merely to believe in God, to have spiritual inclinations, to believe in a way that feels right? Are there true, less true, and downright false beliefs? John Wesley, and Methodist theologians over the centuries, have wanted to get their theology right. We do not typically get up in the morning and say "We're right, everybody else is wrong" – but there is such a thing as wrong belief.

One of Wesley's most ferocious theological debates came with the Calvinists (the ancestors of today's Presbyterians). Their theology was sometimes distilled into an acronym: TULIP. Total depravity (we human beings are totally, irrevocably sinners with no ability to reach God), Unconditional election (we cannot earn God's favor), Limited atonement (not all are saved), Irresistible grace (if God is determined to save you there is no effective resistance to God), and the Perseverance of the saints (something akin to "once saved, always saved").

Presbyterians today (and outsiders who think they understand Presbyterians) get confused about "predestination," thinking it means God manipulates every event that goes on. But that is not right: predestination, for John Calvin, focused only on salvation. Calvin stood so profoundly in awe of the power and sovereignty of God that he could not imagine God's will being thwarted. So the fact that some are not saved must be explained by God's will: if God wanted to save anybody, nothing could stop such a powerful God.

Wesley felt this teaching was logically sound but out of kilter with Scripture and the way we experience our lives with God. He plucked and pulled the petals off Calvin's TULIP: yes, we are Totally depraved, we are sinners with nothing but a prayer, and God Unconditionally chooses to love us; grace is free, unearnable, or it is a sham. But is God's saving work in Christ Limited? It seems to be that some do not believe, some are not saved; but the Limitation is not on God's side, but ours. From God's side, the wonder of salvation is Unlimited, offered to all; on our side, grace apparently is Resistible, not Irresistible. Every person receives God's grace whether they ask for it or not, so in this sense Grace is Irresistible. But God is not a divine manipulator; God wants us to love, and love is a choice, love can be Resisted. Maybe we aren't Totally depraved after all, since God gives light and hope, some hint of the possibility of faith, to all of us.

For the Methodists then, we are not at all fatalistic about salvation, and we do not presume we are saved because we happen to have a pulse. Grace is lavishly bestowed on everyone at every moment; Christ died for everyone, God yearns for the salvation of every person; we need never fret that anything could ever separate us from the love of God. But we can shove God away and grieve God's heart – and in discovering this, we hear God calling us to be zealous about offering the Gospel of God's Unconditional but Resistible Grace to others.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – organized religion

Methodism succeeded, partly because of its ideas, largely because of its fiery passion for God, but indispensably because John Wesley was a genius at organization. He had the strategic sense to take a handful of smart people who loved God and deploy them across continents, not merely to stir up temporary religious highs, but to establish lasting institutions that would solidify the labor and appeal of the Body of Christ.

In our culture, which despises organized religion, we might recall the old adage that the only thing worse than organized religion is disorganized religion. Be a solo Christian, or a spiritual person with two other people just like you, and what do you get? Spiritual narcissism – and what possible impact can you have on the world?

Large church bodies can easily become plodding behemoths, and Methodism is at risk like every other institution. Wesley himself warned us: “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.”

We can be organized in ways that block the Spirit, that merely mirror the habits by which an agnostic society does business. But can't we organize ourselves purposefully and effectively? Something mundane like a church budget speaks volumes about our faith and whether we dare to do what God calls us to do. Theologically our goal isn't “to meet the budget,” but to induce people to see that their money is God's, and together we glorify God (or fail to!) by our giving (or lack thereof); the budget is a means to an end, not the end!

Church committees meet, and maybe they have little prayer bookends to begin and end the meeting – but does what goes on in between feel like Isaiah in the temple, brushing up against the Almighty, his only possible response being “Here I am Lord, send me”? Denominations wrangle about structures and political agendas, but can we recover the buoyant, not-to-be-denied drive that we exist to save a lost world?

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – enthusiasm

Polite, cultured citizens in 18th century England rolled their eyes and mocked the Methodists for being “enthusiastic.” In those days, religion was regarded as respectable enough, but to get deeply involved, to let some emotion show, to step out of society's expected routines and do something radical for God? “Enthusiasm” was thought of as bad form.

The word “enthusiasm” derives from Greek origins, and once meant quite simply that God (thus-) had gotten in (en-) to you. Back in the Bronze Age, “God gave Saul another heart, and the spirit of God came mightily upon him” (1 Samuel 10:9). The first Christians were so vigorously energized by the Spirit that they were accused of being drunk (Acts 2:15). Indeed, Jesus' followers were not bland citizens who fit in cozily to society, but were puzzling and incited consternation: “These people who have turned the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6).

Methodism at its best offers and trusts in the power of God's Word to jolt, discombobulate, and radically alter human existence. Wesley preached to poor people with daunting problems, and they became better workers, stopped drinking, and actually made more money (which Wesley then urged them to disburse to others who were poor). Wesley preached to rich people at ease, and many fled their comfortable lives and got serious enough about God and the labors of the Church that colleagues and friends in their network poked fun at them – for they had inexplicably become “enthusiastic.” God indeed had gotten in to them.

Wesley worried, as we might too, about craziness masquerading as faith; while he was cautious about bizarre behavior, he preferred the risks of religious excitement to the paralysis of religious indifference. As the historian [David Hempton](#) tells us, “Wherever Methodism took root in the 18th century, there are stories of special providences and unusual events. Methodists believed God was with them, not in a general sense, but in real encounters, with no other explanation than that of a proactive divine presence.”

One of our best ideas is that if God is real, if God “gets into us,” we exhibit some evidence of enthusiasm, we notice special providences, and even some unusual events, explainable only by the active presence of God.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – women in ministry

John Wesley's mother, Susannah, exerted a powerful influence on him; her personal spiritual was buoyant, and she insured that her children took a disciplined approach to the things of God. Interestingly, during Wesley's childhood, the siblings ahead of him by age were all girls – so he was reared in a world of capable, admirable females, serious about the life of faith. [Richard Heitzenrater](#), the brilliant scholar of Methodism's history, believes this led to Wesley's

eagerness to see women in leadership.

And women did lead in early Methodism. By the 1770's, the Methodist movement featured enough female preachers as to appear scandalous to polite English society. Women were encouraged to speak, to exercise leadership – and today we see many women as pastors and even as bishops leading the denomination.

We understand the rationales for why some other Christian bodies (such as the Roman Catholics or many Baptists) look only to males for leadership. The Bible is replete with notions that women should stay in their place, that “the men should lift holy hands while the women should adorn themselves modestly and learn in silence with all submissiveness” (1 Timothy 2:9), that “women are not permitted to speak in church but should be subordinate” (1 Corinthians 14:34).

Methodists are not wooden literalists when it comes to Bible reading, though. A nuanced understanding recognizes the ways the Bible participated in its own culture, and we can weed through what is jaded by ancient cultural underpinning to expose timeless, essential truths. In many ways, the Bible was radically pro-feminine in its day! Paul said “There is neither male nor female, but you are all one in Christ” (Galatians 3:28). Jesus upbraided Martha and explained that a woman's place is not in the kitchen but at his feet (Luke 10:42); indeed, among Jesus' disciples were women who wielded considerable power (Luke 8:1-3).

One of our best ideas is that God has called women into leadership – so we can draw on both halves of God's people for leadership. Perhaps women are better suited or more susceptible to the workings of God's grace in ways we might explore some other day...

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – the salvation of liberals

As a young man, John Wesley boarded a ship, crossed the Atlantic, and inaugurated his mission work among the colonists and native inhabitants of Georgia. Why did he go? Was it a cocky “I've got God figured out and am going to bestow my religion on others”? Hardly. As keenly devout as he had always been, he admitted in his journal why he ventured to America: “My chief motive is the hope of saving my own soul.”

Aren't we supposed to be sufficiently saved ourselves before trying to convey God to somebody else? Methodism's brilliant idea is that you heighten the chances of a deep meeting with God if you are actually doing the things God wants people to do; you stand a better chance at a friendship with Jesus if you know well the people who, like Jesus, are poor; you never confront your own poverty of soul until you see real poverty up close.

Jesus said as much in Matthew 25:31-46: the saved are those who have fed the hungry – and in person! Wesley's best adage was that “it is better to carry relief to the poor than to send it.” We prefer to send aid: I'll mail in a check, or even earn frequent flyer miles by using my credit card! But Methodists carry relief: they go, they meet, they discover their common humanity with the stranger, and save their souls.

Wesley and the early Methodists did not unroll a welcome mat and wait for people to come to their church buildings. They took the Gospel, and tangible assistance, into the street, to coal mines, sweat shops – annoying 18th century conservatives who blamed people for their own troubles and sanctimoniously lived in comfort instead of doing something.

Frankly, in every century, Christians who get out on the cutting edge, who look at society and say “We must do something to help the destitute,” earn the tag of “liberal.” Methodism, conservative as we are in things theological, are frequently framed as “liberal” – and if that means opening our hands to the needy, laboring zealously to change social woes, advocating for the downtrodden, then we accept the tag with immense pride. Why do so many Christians seem to loathe anything remotely “liberal”? Isn't it hard to look at the words and actions of Jesus and his followers through the centuries (like Wesley and the Methodists) and not shrug and admit a very close match between the classic Christian program for the poor and what is dismissed today as “liberal”? There is plenty in Jesus that appears to be “conservative,” but Jesus eludes our oversimplified categories every time.

Wesley's care for the poor was comprehensive, and empowering. He begged (nagged!) wealthy Methodists to supply major funding to provide loans to the poor to lift them out of poverty, start businesses, purchase a decent home. Wesley personally studied medicine, and trained disease-riddled people how to be healthier. He established churches in rural places to push religion but also welfare programs to change people's lives spiritually and physically. We follow suit today – in order to save our own souls!

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – inward and outward

Grace has two aspects (God's favor, God's transformative power). God does two works (justification, what God does for us; and sanctification, what God does in us). Why should we be surprised that one of Methodism's best ideas is that holiness has two aspects?

For John Wesley, there was the more familiar inward holiness, but also an outward holiness. Inward holiness happens in the hidden recesses of your mind and heart. Are my thoughts pure? Are my attitudes in sync with how God sees things? What seductive demons lurk in the shadows of my soul where I think no one is looking? What do I do when I am alone?

Jesus spoke of inward holiness when he said "You have heard it said 'Thou shalt not kill,' but I say if you are angry in your heart you are guilty of murder," or when he said "You have heard it said 'Thou shalt not commit adultery,' but I say if you have harbored lust in your heart you are guilty" (Matthew 5:21-28). Jesus wasn't in a police crackdown mode, but he did want us to be liberated from thoughts and perverse desires that ruin our souls and relationships. Inward holiness is the joy of being clean, the simplicity of purity, the wholeness of a heart not bogged down with excess weight or lurid distractions, a heart that can embody God's love in this world.

But holiness isn't just inside my head, and holiness isn't merely invisible to others. True holiness takes on flesh, it moves into action. Outward holiness is when my actions mimic the actions of Christ. I connect with someone who is poor. I reach in my pocket and give generously. I know I have talents and I sign up to work for God on some project. I go to Church, I treat the person nobody else cares about with genuine kindness, I march in advocacy for those who have no voice.

Paul declared your body is to be a "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). Only by Grace can your body become this temple, and so we pray for the inward holiness and the outward holiness so the interior and the exterior of the building can be a fitting place for God to dwell.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – works 'meet'

Just as Grace has two aspects (the marvelous, free kindness of God toward us; and also the life-altering power of God laboring to reshape us), there are twin doctrines of the work of God. Justification (which has gotten most of the press in theological debates over the centuries) is what God does for us: the love of God in the Cross of Christ saves us, gives us the dizzyingly grand gift of eternal life, reconciles us to God, achieves salvation. Sanctification isn't what God does for us, but what God does in us: God the Holy Spirit makes us holy, purges what is unclean, plants new thoughts and desires in us, brings our out of kilter lives into rhythm with God's ways.

But many Christians nowadays seem to think the Holy Spirit is a rush of emotion, evidenced by unforgettable feelings. The Holy Spirit does get involved with our emotional life, although wise teachers like Martin Luther and C.S. Lewis have warned us that the devil loves it when we are swept up on a tide of religious emotion – because the tide always subsides and then we are more firmly in the grip of disbelief than we were before we felt the emotional surge. The Holy Spirit labors to make us like itself: holy.

If our goal is closeness to the heart of God, seeing the world with the mind of Christ, then we practice for that, we strive to heighten our skill at every opportunity. Even at the very outset of the life of faith: to the unconverted only beginning to think about God and faith, Wesley encouraged “works meet for repentance.” “Meet” in 18th century English meant something like “appropriate to” or “fitting.” While we go out of our way not to make demands on people who are merely visiting a Church, whose faith is iffy, who might be put off if we get pushy and ask for too much (and so we pamper, we cajole, we are sweet, we make Christianity sound easy and ever so comfy), Wesley saw no reason to beat around the bush, or to pretend the life of faith is a breeze when the truth is “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

So when people inquired about how to become a Christian, he told them to get busy doing Christian things. To faith's strangers, Wesley said “Visit in the prison, empty your pockets for the poor, do without food for a few days, get up at 5 am to pray” – and amazingly it worked.

Could it be that as we make Christianity easier, user-friendly, and palatable we not only falsify our religion but actually give people more reason to stay away from something that's just too trivial? We should nail signs outside the Church saying “Danger! Sanctification happens here: your life will be melted down and reconstructed in here.”

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – porch, door, house

Keeping his message simple, Wesley explained that we should imagine our life with God in three successive stages, along which we pass repeatedly: repentance is the porch, faith is the door, holiness is the house.

Repentance is the porch. Modern people do not think much about sin, or our remorse before God; but Methodists are to be keenly aware that we put ourselves at odds with God, that we grieve God and hurt each other, that in little and big ways we rebel against God. But there is hope for us: we can repent, which means to turn back toward God, to have a change of mind, to plead in genuine sorrow to God for mercy, to declare our intention to trash our old decadent (or even self-righteous!) habits and cast ourselves on the mercy of God, to expect God's power to work a radical metamorphosis on our lives.

Then the door opens: faith. How surprising: for many Christians, faith would be the house itself. We believe, and that is enough; we are saved, and Christianity has fulfilled its reason to exist. But for Methodists, faith is our steady stepping up out of repentance and into a new life; we are no longer on the outside looking in. We are now home.

That home is holiness, the new life in Christ. This holiness is not life as we know it out in the world with a little package of religiosity strapped on the back. Holiness is not the dessert after the meal of what the world has to offer us. Holiness is not a slightly improved version of all that we value and hold dear. The Hebrew word “holy” means “set apart.” The holy are different, they keep away from much the world fawns over, they care about being clean and pure, their obsession is to have nothing to hide from people or from God. The holy know they will be misunderstood and probably ridiculed; but they do not mind, since they live for God, their home is God, they have stepped onto the porch, through the door, and now they rest in the house of the Lord.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – holy synergy

One of Methodism's best ideas seems self-contradictory. Critics did not know what to make of John Wesley. Some saw him as freely offering grace to ill-mannered folk, lawbreakers, the shiftless and tawdry, as if Grace is something God showers about indiscriminately, as if God doesn't mind wasting some of his grace on fools instead of parceling it out to the fine people of good intentions who know how to appreciate a good thing.

Others thought Wesley was downright legalistic, as if God is impatient until we are in serious reform of our lifestyles, until holiness is our obsession, that God is unflinchingly serious about our total obedience, and the consequences of

living out of sync with God would be dire.

Wesley would raise an eyebrow, nod, and say “You’re both right.” What had Paul written? “For by grace you are saved through faith, not works” (Ephesians 2:8) – yet also “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, knowing God is at work in you” (Philippians 2:12). For Paul, and for Wesley and the Methodists, there is a holy synergy that feels like a tension between grace freely bestowed and the demand of holy living. Don’t forget: for Wesley, grace has a twofold aspect, God’s unmerited love, and God’s transformative power. If your life is unchanged, then you never really let grace become a reality; if grace is palpable for you, then alterations to your life come to be clearly on exhibit.

For the final 57 years of his life, Wesley kept an “exacter diary,” in which every hour of every day he jotted down little notations of how he had lived during that past hour with respect to the grace of God. Have I been faithful? or grateful? Did I harbor dark thoughts? or pass up an opportunity to do good? Imagine this kind of stellar devotion to God, working as diligently as possible to live a life that in some way was appropriate to the immense glory of God’s grace!

How far Wesley had come since his early years when he presumed religion was nothing more than (as he put it) “the mere saying of a few prayers, something superadded now and then to a careless or worldly life”! He came to see, and taught us, that religion is “a constant habit of soul, the renewal of our minds in the image of God.”

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – means of grace

If Grace is God’s generous favor toward us, and if Grace is God’s power remaking us from the inside out, then how do we come to have this Grace? We believe it, we receive it by faith, we open ourselves to it, we let our defensive shields down and stop shoving God away.

John Wesley taught the Methodists to avail themselves of the “means of grace.” Christians had always believed that Grace was conveyed to us through the [Sacraments](#), [Baptism](#) and [Holy Communion](#). But Wesley taught that God provides conveyances of Grace outside the walls of the Church and its services of worship. Grace is something we want increased in us; we want to heighten our availability to and awareness of Grace.

The regular “means of grace” are obvious habits (although an embarrassing number of Methodists have poor habits), like Bible reading and prayer (and not just the mini-prayer you quickly insert before a meal or a big decision, but daily, regularly throughout the day, an ongoing conversational union with God).

Bible student and Church historian that we was, Wesley strongly commended [fasting](#) as a means of grace. Intriguing, isn’t it? We want Grace to fill the gnawing hunger we feel in our soul, and the way to do that is to refuse to fill the hole with food or drink for a time, so we can feel our hollowness, and sharpen our craving for God.

Essential to the lively reception of Grace in our lives is what Wesley called “conferencing.” Sounds like a meeting – and it is! To be close to God, to live into the Grace of God, we need friends, not to divert us or flatter us, but to bolster each other in the quest for God. Wesley demanded that every Methodist be in a small group, where members not only prayed, sang and studied; they also quizzed each other about their sin and holiness, held each other accountable, encouraged and valued each other in striving after God.

Methodists cling to this fantastic notion that we experience God through other people; if you want an experience of God, sit close to somebody who has experienced God. God’s Grace is enfleshed in the fellowship of other Christians who aren’t perfect, they don’t have all the answers, but they are asking the right questions, looking in the right direction, beggars (as Martin Luther thought of it) excitedly showing each other where they have found a little bread. The stunning miracle of God’s Grace is that you and I get to be its vehicles, together its manifestation among people. “What a fellowship... leaning on the everlasting arms!”

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – grace twofold

When Methodists think theologically, when we are truest to our charter in how we function in the world, our center of gravity is the English's language's most beautiful word: Grace. We sing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound" – and Grace is the sound that takes on flesh and becomes reality. Grace is not a vague warm-heartedness that says "I'm OK, you're OK," or Voltaire's cynical quip, "God will forgive me, that's his job." Grace is God's extraordinary love, mercy, unmerited favor, unearnable friendship, the overwhelming determination of God to be with us even when we ignore God or behave badly.

The secret delight in Grace is that we Americans (who love to be in control, to make things happen, to get what we deserve) get to become like little children, no matter our age. We can just be. God loves us, achievement means nothing, and the whole idea that I can manage my life strikes me as laughable. Grace is everything: so can I learn to see it all around me, to rest in its strength, to soar joyfully in its wake?

Too often we focus on faith more than Grace. We think about my faith, my spirituality. But faith is a mere echo of Grace which speaks first. Faith is a reflex (the way your knee kicks when the doctor plunks you with a gray hammer) to Grace. Faith replies, faith notices it has been grasped by God, drawn toward God and into the family of God. It's about God, not us; without Grace faith would be mere human fantasy.

All the great theologians through history understood the wonder of Grace, but John Wesley gave us a mind-boggling twist to consider: there is a twofold aspect to Grace. Not only is Grace God's free love lavished on us. Grace also is a power, the transforming invasion of God's might to change us into the people God wants us to be, that God made us to be. How lovely: it isn't that God simply accepts us, or forgives us, or loves us no matter what and then just leaves us wallowing in our grimy existence. God's Grace loves enough to work in us, not so we can feel different but so we can be different.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – it's personal

One of Methodism's best ideas is that religion is personal. Not that Methodists are the only ones who conceive of our relationship with God as just that – a relationship! But it was a bit unusual in the 18th century for someone like Wesley to think of the life of faith as something so intensely personal. Most people in England believed in God – but for most this meant "I believe there is a God, although God isn't featured prominently in my life, God made the world and has pretty much left it to run on its own, religion is a factor during a crisis, Church is a nice activity, and God wants me to be nice too."

For Wesley and us Methodists, God is not the proverbial watchmaker who built the contraption and leaves it ticking. God is not "the Force" in Star Wars that invisibly gives us a boost. God is not a stern drill sergeant or a faceless bureaucrat. God is love. God is a companion, closer than any friend, more constant than the best spouse. The miracle of the universe is God is quite literally dying to be in a vital, personal relationship with each one of us.

Read what Wesley wrote about that dramatic evening of May 24, 1738: "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a meeting in Aldersgate Street. About a quarter before nine... I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

As a boy I was taught that to be self-centered was bad form, bordering on immoral. But when the realization dawned on Wesley that Christ "had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me," was he being self-absorbed? In a peculiar twist that must make God chuckle, God wants you to do the best conceivable thing for yourself – which is to discover that the Love that fashioned the galaxies, the eternal, ineffable Love of God Almighty is focused on you.

To get passionate about what God has done "for me" need not be self-absorption, but the grandest truth of your life. Do you feel turned in on yourself? or wish you were not so self-obsessed? Do something even better for yourself: trust God. You don't have to be God any more, you don't have to hoist the world on your shoulders, you no longer

must bear the burden of a life littered with missteps. Christ died for you, Christ loves you – even you. It’s personal.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – heart strangely warmed

If the average Methodist knows one fact about John Wesley, it is that his heart was “strangely warmed.” We may know little to nothing about his labors for disadvantaged children, his insistence that we give the vast majority of our money away, or his diligent attention to God’s presence in the minutiae of daily life, but we are fond of the idea of a “heart strangely warmed.”

But why? Wesley himself rarely mentioned this experience, focusing instead on the work at hand. Perhaps our selective memory of Wesley says a lot about us: we want to feel, we want an experience – and there is nothing wrong with this, unless we forget that Jesus came, not so we could feel different, but so we could be different. Isn’t our whole culture’s obsession with feeling the ruin of relationships, rendering us unable to make and keep commitments and strive for the common good? Wesley knew religious feeling matters, but he found it to be an unreliable guide to the things of God – and if anything, our feelings are what stand in need of conversion!

Methodism is a religion of the heart. God is keenly interested in our desires and passions, as everything we do grows out of what is in the heart. Wesley’s heart was “warmed” on May 24, 1738 – but you may ask “How did that happen? Can my heart be strangely warmed too?”

God moved dramatically in Wesley’s heart because Wesley had put himself in the position for his heart to be warmed. That morning he read his Bible; he prayed for an hour or more. He attended a worship service at St. Paul’s cathedral, he went to a small Christian fellowship group on Aldersgate Street – and he did these things on that day after many years of daily Bible study, prayer, fasting, visiting the prisons, and traipsing off on a mission junket to another continent.

Americans tend to wait until the heart is warmed... and then I will serve, then I will pray, then I will go out in mission. But this is as if I wish to converse comfortably in a language I have never studied, as if I want to propose to a woman never I’ve met, as if I’d like to make a hole in one without ever swinging a club on the driving range.

For Wesley there was a “method” to his approach to God (hence, “Method-ist!”), a discipline, a patience, a long-range strategy. For years he felt he wasn’t good enough for God (which implied he was certainly trying diligently to be good enough!), he fretted that his devoted service to God wasn’t sufficient. But he had built a structured life that was prepared for the rush of God’s Spirit when it came – although Methodists never linger too long over the feeling, but get back to the work at hand in service to God.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – plundering the Egyptians

Most of us have heard about the day the Israelites exited slavery in Egypt, with God parting the sea. Few readers have noticed the curious twist that God told the Israelites to ask the Egyptians for their jewelry – and the Egyptians complied (Exodus 12:35)! We call this “plundering the Egyptians.”

John Wesley used this as an image for how we think about non-Christian knowledge. Should Christians be wary of science, archaeology, current music and culture? Wesley encouraged Methodists to know all they can know, to grab jewels of truth from any quarter. [Albert Outler](#) captured Wesley’s thoughts: “The richer one’s ‘Egyptian plunder’ (that is, one’s secular culture) the richer one’s understanding of God’s wisdom and power in Christ, who – as the Word and Light of the world – is the true illumination for all seekers after truth and wisdom.”

Of course, Wesley assumed Methodists were spending sufficient time studying Bible and other Christian resources! So – while Methodists have no fear of secular knowledge, while we delight in new discoveries (even if they seem to

threaten the faith!), and while we learn to notice God's hand in the story line of a novel, or the sad wrinkle in a country song, or the hints of life on another planet in another solar system, or a symphony, painting, or poem, these are no substitute for more direct study of God and the faith. The Israelites carried their Egyptian plunder to their true destination, Mt. Sinai, to receive God's Word.

If we retrace the steps of Wesley's growing awareness of God, we stumble upon books everywhere. Wesley was a voracious reader – and he would say you should be too. He read [The Imitation of Christ](#), the classic by Thomas á Kempis; immersed in its pages he learned that religion is giving your whole heart to God, that faith is the conversion of our desires to higher things. The night of Wesley's most dramatic spiritual experience featured a reading from Martin Luther on the meaning of the book of [Romans](#).

A staple of the Methodist life is a discipline of reading – and not fluffy page-turners, but the kinds [Mark Helprin](#) spoke of: "The shelf was filled with books that were hard to read, that devastate and remake one's soul, and that, when they were finished, had a kick like a mule." Wesley rode a donkey, and he always carried books wherever he went. We insist that children read every day; Wesley would insist that Methodists also read constantly.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – form of religion without its power

Methodism would probably never have happened were it not for the profound faith of Susannah Wesley, who made faith, prayer, Bible reading and holiness as essential as any other household routine. She held church for the family in her kitchen at night, and one of her regular prayers was "Help me, Lord, to remember that religion is not to be confined to the church, or closet, nor exercised only in prayer and meditation, but that everywhere I am in thy presence. So may my every word and action have a moral content. May all the happenings of my life prove useful to me. May all things instruct me and afford me an opportunity of exercising some virtue and daily learning and growing toward thy likeness... Amen."

Why is it that children can grow up around faith but not have it themselves? or does it lie dormant for a season but then possibly awaken years later? John Wesley left for college and recalled that he thought religion was merely a matter of "being saved, not being so bad as other people, going to church, saying my prayers." He wasn't un-religious or decadent; but what left him feeling hollow and restless was that he had "the form of religion without its power."

Those were the words he used near the end of his life to characterize his greatest fear for Methodism. "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."

The peril a denomination faces (or that a congregation faces) is the same one every individual faces: that religion will be a few motions we go through, something that we value in our brains but gets shortcircuited on the way to the heart or to our actual tangible behavior, and we never live into what Susannah prayed – that "everywhere I am in thy presence." We may have heard of the "power," but is it a rumor? or reality for us?

Mind you, in 2008 plenty of people want and think they can access the power without the form – but we will learn how the power of God requires the form, the habits and motions, but then also how the power actually comes to fruition through the form.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – a brand plucked from the fire

The godfather of Methodism, John Wesley, nearly died when he was five. He was the 15th of 19 children born to his mother Susannah; so there was a crowd of children the night the house caught on fire. Everyone was out safely – except John (nicknamed "Jacky"). In despair, his father Samuel knelt and commended his son's soul to God. But then a neighbor climbed onto another man's shoulders and rescued little Jacky from the upstairs [window](#).

After this brush with death, Mrs. Wesley resolved to be “more particularly careful of the soul of this child, whom God has mercifully provided.” She had a Bible verse to explain his destiny: quoting Zechariah 3:2 she called this son “a brand plucked from the fire.”

Methodists have a keen sense of why our personal stories matter, and a sharp awareness that we are not here by accident, that God has some purpose for each of us. Every day, if you drive a car or cross the street, or if your heart still beats when it might not, we have narrow brushes with death. You can't dwell on this or you can drive yourself insane. But to reflect on the fragility of life, and how precious it is to exist for another day, is at the heart of faith. Daily we are plucked from disaster, and so we have good reason to be “particularly careful” about our souls, and the souls of others, family, friends, coworkers, strangers. God has a purpose for every person.

A clue to discovering that purpose may be hidden in the fact that Mrs. Wesley was familiar enough with an obscure Bible verse to be able to use it to explain a crucial moment in life. [Allan Bloom](#) portrays an ideal that need not be relegated to the dustbin of once-upon-a-time: “My grandparents were ignorant people by our standards, and my grandfather held only lowly jobs. But their home was spiritually rich because all the things done in it found their explanations in the Bible's stories. I do not believe that my generation, my cousins who have been educated in the American way, all of whom are M.D.s or Ph.D.s, have any comparable learning. When they talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, the human condition, I hear nothing but cliches, superficialities, the material of satire.”

In their charter, Methodists imagine themselves to be the kind of people who locate the meaning of their lives in what God has done and is doing, who know that “Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.” You survived another day: but why? The answer is God's grace found in Zechariah 3:2 and many other verses.

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – “catholic” spirit

While Methodists may take immense pride in their angle on the faith, it is hard to find many Methodists who arrogantly assume we have a corner on truth. We delight in our friendships with Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Baptists, and Catholics, and we are eager in the diverse world in which we find ourselves to build on our strong relationships with Judaism and other faiths, and to learn from each other.

In the Apostles' Creed (maybe without thinking, or understanding) we say we believe in “the holy, [catholic](#) church.” The word “catholic” (with a small c) does not mean the Roman Catholic denomination, but rather is a synonym for something like “universal,” and highlights our pursuit of unity among Christians. John Wesley wrote of the “[catholic spirit](#)” in Methodism, where we seek common ground, the high ground, in theology: “There are many doctrines of a less essential nature, with regard to which even the sincere children of God are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think, we may ‘agree to disagree.’ But meantime, let us hold fast the essentials of the faith once delivered to the saints... insisted on at all times and in all places.” He asks, “Can we not be of one heart even if we are not of the same opinion?”

I believe the vast majority of Christians are impatient with division, and are eager to embrace ways we can emphasize what we share. We are enriched by friendships with each other: my closest friends among the clergy are Catholic or Pentecostal! We also recognize that the Church becomes an embarrassment to itself when we wrangle over subtleties that are lost on a cynical world. [Tom Langford](#) reminded us that Wesley “was adamant about central truths. Yet he also exhibited an unusual graciousness of spirit toward theological rivals and attempted to establish unity among diverse groups.”

What is more important? To be right on this or that issue? Or to maintain the unity of the Church? We will explore this later in our series – but for the Church to make any sort of meaningful, effective witness in today's skeptical culture, isn't the burden on us to discover what unites us and to decide that we Christians will love each other and work together? Isn't “an unusual graciousness of spirit” truer to the heart of God than rancor or the passing of haughty judgment on others who follow Christ a bit differently?

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eBestIdeasOfMethodism – we begin

Happy Easter! I hope you have found our recent [eThingsChristiansDo](#) series, and then the daily installments of [eHolyWeek](#) to be beneficial in some way. It is a privilege for me to share ideas with you in this way.

Speaking of shared ideas: I would like, over the next month, to share with you what I will call “the best ideas” of Methodism. Many of you readers are Methodist, many are not – and I am not trying to convert anyone. The beauty of my denomination, I think, is that we befriend other Christian traditions easily. We delight in every opportunity to join hands with others and work together for God. It is not in the Methodist DNA to get up in the morning and say “We are right and everybody else is wrong.” Yet we have our passion and insights that are exciting for Methodists and our non-Methodist friends to talk about.

So my plan is to share with you some ideas Methodists treasure, and I believe all of us will learn, be inspired and stretched. Conversation is welcome, as always – and if you reply I will try to find ways to incorporate our conversation into subsequent emails!

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