

“CHRISTIANITY THE WESLEYAN WAY (#4):
PRACTICAL DIVINITY”
 (1 Timothy 4:6-11, 15-16)
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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 1-29-23]

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1. **[Combined Service...]** Read CEB text: 1 Timothy 4:6-11, 15-16 and Pray.
2. Today we’re continuing our sermon series “Christianity the Wesleyan Way,” in which we’re talking about what it means to be a Wesleyan/Methodist Christian in today’s world.

A--Again, as I've said the last few weeks, my goal is not to make us into “good little United Methodists,” but instead to help us become *great* Christians who just *happen* to live out our Christianity in a uniquely *Wesleyan/Methodist* way.

B--So far we’ve looked at where we came from historically, talked about the beliefs that we share in *common* with other Christians, and a few which are *unique* to us.

3. And in Verses 6-11 of today’s scripture from 1 Timothy 4, we heard Paul describing the value of knowing and understanding our *beliefs* -- that they are *important*!

A--But in Verse 15 he goes on to write these words: "*Practice these things, and live by them so that your progress will be visible to all.*"

1--In other words, as important as *beliefs* are, he says it's *equally* important that we know how to *live out* those beliefs (i.e., "practice" them) in our daily life.

2--In the words of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, our Christianity should be a kind of “*Practical Divinity*”¹ (today's title).

B--So with that in mind, I want to highlight at least **three distinctive/unique practices of Wesleyan / Methodist Christianity.**²

--II--

4. The first of these is our claim as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians that a biblical practice of faith should be *balanced* between religion of our “**HEAD**” **AND** that of our “**HEART.**”

A--John Wesley was himself highly educated: he spoke numerous languages, and could easily converse with and debate the most knowledgeable people of his day.

1--No wonder, then, that education was a hallmark of early Methodism.

2--In the late 18th and early 19th-centuries, Methodists established the forerunners of what became the Sunday School and Public School movements, and went on to found some of the most well-known colleges and universities in America: ...Duke, Emory, Drew, SMU, LaGrange College, and others.

B--At the same time, though, Wesley recognized that “*religion of the head*” (as he called it) did a person absolutely no good *unless* it was *also* felt in the “heart.”

1--For him, there was nothing wrong with using reason and intellect to help us *understand* or articulate our Christian faith and experience, but it could never *take the place of* a personal, heart-felt trust in, and relationship with, God.

2--So, for Wesley, *passion of the heart* was as important as *intellect of the mind* -- the two always went together, hand in hand.

3--And when we as Methodist Christians have been at our most authentically Wesleyan, we've balanced these two in our practice of faith, as well. ³

C--You see, if we take away either *passion* or *intellect* from our Christianity, we end up with Christianity that is "out of balance" ...either a faith that's all “wind & smoke and emotion” (because it lacks intellect); or a faith that's “crusty, dry, and emotionless” (because it lacks heart).

D--We believe, you see, that "head" and "heart" are meant to be *partners* in faith. ⁴

5. In addition to this, though, we Wesleyan/Methodist Christians believe that our faith practice should also be balanced between **EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL ACTION**.

A--That is, according to scripture, our Christian witness should be shown both through word *and* deed -- a *personal* faith (which connects us to *God*) AND a *social* faith (which connects us to *others & our world* itself) -- I refer to this as the “cross of faith.”

1--On the one hand, at our best, we Methodists have always had a passion for “seekers” (i.e., those who do not yet know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord) -- and so we talk about the importance of giving out hearts and lives to Jesus. ⁵

2--On the other hand, though, we believe faith must have an *equal* emphasis on *behaviors & deeds* which help others and God’s world -- which is why we here at Cornerstone support ministries like Operation Christmas Child, O'Rourke and One-Roof Ministries, and take mission trips to El Salvador. ⁶

B--As Methodist evangelist Alan Walker once put it, “*There is no greater menace in the church than a born-again Christian without a social conscience.*” ⁷

C--And it's true! Social action is just as important in our Christian witness as verbally sharing our faith-story, or leading someone in a "sinner's prayer", because evangelism and social action are, in fact, just two sides to the same coin = partners with each other

D--I was reminded of this back in 2017 on a mission trip to El Salvador I took with a former church:

- 1--Each day we would travel with our local Salvadoran Methodist pastor to visit homes of people living in a community near our mission house;
- 2--We would share the gospel verbally with them, of course (she would translate);
- 3--But we would also always take along a bag of staple food items as a gift for them -- practicing, in a way, the words of St. Francis of Assisi, who supposedly once said "*Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.*"

6. Yet, if we're to achieve balance in these first two practices (head & heart/evangelism & social action), we Methodists also believe that God has given us various tools (what we call) "**MEANS OF GRACE**" to use first to *encounter*, and then to *grow*, in God.

A--In Wesley's day, these were expressed through the early Methodists' practice of regular attendance at the Methodist "Society" and "class" meetings (small groups for worship, service & accountability *required* of every Methodist),...

1--...And in their keeping of what was called the Methodist "*Discipline*," which to this very day consists of three "general rules": "*(1) Do no harm; (2) Do good; & (3) attend the ordinances of God*" (prayer, bible study, fasting, Holy Communion, worship, and fellowship with others) -- each Methodist was held accountable *every* week to how well they did these three things.

2--Today, we United Methodists add to these three another sort of "discipline" which helps us grow in faith, too... by committing to serve God through our "*prayers, our regular presence in worship & a small group, our financial gifts, our volunteer service, & our witness*" (these are our U.M. membership vows).

B--My point is that we Methodists have always believed that Christians should use the spiritual "tools" God gave us both to encounter & grow in our relationship w/Him.

1--In other words, we believe the Bible teaches that there's a "*method*" for growing as Christians -- which is one reason we're called "*Method*"-ists...

2--...Because we believe that if we're going to pursue a life with God -- if we're going to discover the great adventure of the Christian life -- then it requires *more* than just hoping that it will happen on its own.

3--No, it requires an *intentionality* on our part to seek God in those places (those "Means of Grace") where the Bible says that God *most often* shows up.

C--So let me ask each of you today: ...

- 1--What's your prayer and devotional life like today?
- 2--How regularly are you present for Sunday worship (in-person or online)?
- 3--Do you receive Holy Communion when it's offered? How often do you Fast?
- 4--Are you active in a Sunday School class, bible study, or other small group?
- 5--Do the finances that you give to God through this church *really* reflect how much you love Him? (or do you just give the "left overs" of what you have?)
- 6--Are you serving God by volunteering in some ministry here at Cornerstone?
- 7--Are you sharing your faith with others by your words and your deeds?

D--You see, these are some of the “means of grace” we believe the Bible challenges *all* Christians to practice, and so they're things that should be *especially* important in the life and practice of any *Wesleyan / Methodist* Christian. ⁸

–III--

7. So, I've shared today a few distinctive *practices* of Wesleyan / Methodist Christianity...

A--...A balance between “*Head & Heart*,” between “*Evangelism & Social Action*”, and an intentional use of various “*Means of Grace*” given to us by God.

B--And Verse 16 in today's scripture urges us to “...*continue in them* [meaning these *practices* of faith], *for in doing them you shall save yourself and those who hear you.*”

1--Now, Paul is not saying here that we're “saved” *because* of the doing of these things, but that the doing of them *in faith* brings our salvation *to life!*

2--For him, you see, Christianity is not just a set of rational *beliefs* that we *think about/contemplate*, but also a lifestyle of *actions & behaviors* for us to *live by*.

C--And *this* is why we Wesleyan/Methodist Christians say that we are called to live a uniquely “*Practical Divinity*” -- to *practice* our faith each and every day of our lives.

8. [PRAY]

9. [11am Closing HYMN: #395, “Take Time to Be Holy”]

ENDNOTES:

¹ This is opposite a Christian faith which is what Wesley called merely “*speculative*”/intellectual/rational in nature.

² The first two of these highlight our understanding of the Bible as teaching that the Christian life should be *balanced*, and the last one highlights our claim that various *tools* are needed to achieve this balance.

³ This is why one of most important things I do as your pastor is to take time to carefully prepare and write out my sermon for you each week. I've had Pentecostal friends say that if I was led by the Spirit I wouldn't need to write out my sermon. I would submit to you that if they were led by the Spirit, they'd *be able to*, because they'd understand that the Holy Spirit has never yet rejected good, solid, biblical planning or preparation, in addition to prayerful discernment about what to preach. In the movie "[A River Runs Through It](#)" there is a scene (1:03:18-1:03:39) where one of the characters describes Methodists as "*Baptists who could read*" – I'm not sure whether that's more of a put down to Baptists or us Methodists, but at least the movie writer felt that Baptists had a great deal of enthusiasm and passion about their faith (and still do), but that (at least back in the 1920s) they generally weren't very well educated. And his take on Methodists was that we were equally passionate about faith, but also brought along intellect and reason, as well

⁴ Whether consciously or not, somewhere along about the middle of the 20th-century, we Methodists as a whole began to lay aside our passion and feelings as being something for "unsophisticated people," and we began to pursue only the intellectual side of faith. So there came a point after the 1930s where you could go into our churches and we were very staid, formal, pious and reverent. But like the Church of England that Wesley sought to reform, you couldn't tell if we had a pulse (there are, unfortunately, some UM churches like this today). Thankfully, that's started to change -- over the last 35+ years, I've noticed Methodists start to recapture our passion of faith again.

But the opposite of this is just as bad: passion/feeling *without* intellectual grounding can send us off base, chasing the "buzz" of all kinds of emotional "highs." That's precisely what's unfortunately happened in a lot of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches – there's a lot of emotional "hype," but quite often very little theological *depth*. Interestingly enough, one trend we're seeing more of across the country today is that increasing numbers of Christians who've been Pentecostal are leaving and joining traditions like United Methodist, because at our best we offer a religion of *both* the heart *and* the head.

⁵ And when we're true to our Wesleyan heritage, this means that we value evangelism and personal faith-sharing as *vital* parts of our own walk with God, and recognize the absolute importance of this in the life of our local church. However, even our evangelism/faith-sharing is unique in *how* we go about it. For instance, in our Methodist tradition, we feel that the very *best* and most biblical method of evangelism is our very lifestyle. This *doesn't* mean we don't also tell our faith story, but we believe our evangelism should have more to do with how God uses our *life* to impart faith rather than walking people through a rational, intellectual exercise just so we can add another person to our "saved souls" belt. An excellent book summarizing this understanding of evangelism is Rodney E. Wilmoth's [How United Methodists Share Their Faith](#) (available from www.amazon.com).

⁶ And it's why for us as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians, social issues aren't "progressive/liberal" or "traditionalist/conservative," but are simply at the very heart of what Jesus taught his disciples to do and be about.

⁷ Alan Walker, speaking in South Africa in 1980, cited in Ron Sider's [One-Sided Christianity?](#), p. 137.

⁸ There are actually at least two more “balances” which are unique to the United Methodist practice of Christianity that time did not allow us to address.

First, there is the balance between **THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY**. In a day and time (at the beginning of the English Industrial Revolution) where people were often used as objects, Wesley and the early Methodists on the one hand emphasized the importance and value of each and every *Individual*. They visited the condemned in prison and prayed for and led many to salvation. For that matter Wesley’s preaching in general was first directed at touching the hearts of individuals. He believed that only by transforming the individual *first* could society as a whole be changed. This is, in fact, exactly what happened: many Methodist converts grew and matured and became prominent leaders in their society and government in both England and early America – so much so that by the 19th and early 20th-centuries, it was Methodists that led social reforms such as the banning of the slave trade in England, and in America the establishment of public schools, fair and equitable child labor laws, women’s right to vote, prohibition, and even the genesis of what became the Social Security system.

On the other hand, this emphasis on the individual (even in early Methodism) was always lived out within the context of Christian *Community* – for each individual to grow and mature in holiness and sanctification, each Methodist was required to be a part of a small group for prayer, service, fellowship, and accountability. In the early days, if you weren’t active in a small group, you were no longer considered a “Methodist.” It was this network of Christian small groups, you see, that formed the backbone of the early Methodist “connection.” And even though we lost most of this emphasis in the late 20th-century, today small group ministry is making a radical comeback in dynamic churches. The bottom line, you see, is that we as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians don’t believe we can practice a biblically effective faith *alone or apart from* our being connected to/with other Christians. This is precisely why you hear me stress over and over the importance of the local church, of every Christian being a part of a small group, and of our larger United Methodist “Connection” (that I’ll talk about next week).

Finally, we Wesleyan/Methodists also claim that a biblical practice of Christian faith should be balanced between **“TRADITIONAL” AND “CONTEMPORARY” MINISTRY PRACTICES** (“old ways” vs. “new ways”). Throughout our history, Wesleyan/Methodist Christianity has also sought to balance out *both* of these – maintaining the best of the traditions, rituals, and emphases from the *past* while *at the same time* utilizing new technologies, new ministry models, new worship and/or music styles, etc. to maintain cultural relevance in moving forward into the *future*.