

This We Believe:

A Summary of United Methodist Doctrine and Teaching



TO KNOW, TO GROW IN, TO SERVE, AND TO SHARE CHRIST

Taken from *The Book of Discipline*, 1992 Edition, and prepared and edited by William J. Humes, First United Methodist Church, Tamaqua, April 1995

The United Methodist Church OUR DOCTRINAL HERITAGE¹

United Methodists profess the historic Christian faith in God, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ for our salvation and is ever at work in human history through the Holy Spirit. Living in a covenant of grace under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we participate in the first fruits of God's coming reign and pray in hope for its full realization on earth as in heaven.

Our forebears in the faith reaffirmed the ancient Christian message as found in the apostolic witness, even as they applied it anew in their own circumstances. Their preaching and teaching were grounded in Scripture, informed by Christian tradition, enlivened in experience, and tested by reason. Their labors inspire and inform our attempts to convey the saving gospel in our own time.

Our Common Heritage as Christians

United Methodists share a common heritage with Christians of every age and nation, a heritage grounded in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, which is the source and measure of all valid Christian teaching.

Faced with diverse interpretations of the apostolic message, leaders of the early church sought to specify the core of Christian belief in order to ensure the soundness of Christian teaching. They did this through the formation of the canon of Christian Scripture and the adoption of ecumenical creeds, such as those of Nicaea and Chalcedon, which helped preserve the integrity of the Church's witness, set boundaries for acceptable Christian doctrine, and proclaimed the basic elements of the enduring Christian message. These statements of faith, along with the Apostles Creed, contain the most prominent features of our ecumenical heritage.

The Protestant reformers of the 16th and 17th centuries devised new confessional statements that reiterated classical Christian teaching in an attempt to recover the authentic biblical witness. These documents affirmed the primacy of Scripture and provided formal doctrinal standards through their statements of essential

¹Condensed and edited from Paragraph 65, Sec. 1, *The Book of Discipline*, 1992, Pages 40-47.

beliefs on matters such as the way of salvation, the Christian life, and the nature of the Church. Many distinctively Protestant teachings were transmitted into United Methodist understandings through doctrinal formulations such as the Articles of Religion of the Church of England and the Heidelberg Catechism of the Reformed tradition.

Various doctrinal statements in the form of creeds, confessions of belief, and articles of faith were officially adopted by churches as standards of Christian teaching. Some of these statements, as well as certain sermons, writings, liturgies, and hymns gained considerable practical authority in the life and thought of the Church by virtue of their wide and continuing acceptance as faithful expositions of Christian teaching. But in every case, the basic measure of their authenticity has been their faithfulness to the apostolic witness grounded in Scripture and evidenced in the life of the Church through the centuries.

Basic Christian Affirmations

With Christians of other communions we confess belief in the triune God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This confession embraces the biblical witness to God's activity in creation, encompasses God's gracious involvement in history, and anticipates the fulfillment of God's reign.

Creation is designed for the well-being of all creatures and as the place of human dwelling in covenant with God. As sinful creatures, however, we have broken that covenant, become estranged from God, wounded ourselves and one another, and wreaked havoc throughout the natural order. We stand in need of redemption.

We hold in common with all Christians a faith in the mystery of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. At the heart of the gospel of salvation is God's incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth. Scripture witnesses to the redeeming love of God in Jesus life and teachings, his atoning death, his resurrection, his sovereign presence in history, his triumph over the powers of evil and death, and his promised return. Because God truly loves us in spite of our willful sin, God judges us, summons us to repentance, pardons us, receives us by that grace given to us in Jesus Christ, and gives us hope of life eternal.

We share the Christian belief that God's redemptive love is realized in human life by the activity of the Holy Spirit, both in personal experience and in the community of believers.

Through faith in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, reconciled to God, and transformed as people of the new covenant. The community of believers is the Church, which the Spirit has brought into existence for the healing of the nations. As individual believers in Christ, as well as a Christian community, we are called to "Life in the Spirit." This "Life" involves the diligent use of the means of grace such as praying, fasting, attending upon the Sacraments, and inward searching in solitude. It also encompasses the communal life of the Church in worship, mission, evangelism, service, and social witness.

We understand ourselves to be part of Christ's universal Church when by praise, proclamation, and service we become conformed to Christ. We are initiated and incorporated into the community of faith by Baptism, receiving the promise of the Spirit that re-creates and transforms us. Through the regular celebration of Holy Communion, we participate in the risen presence of Jesus Christ and are nourished for faithful discipleship. Further, we pray and work for the coming of God's realm and reign to the world and rejoice in the promise of everlasting life that overcomes death and the forces of evil.

With other Christians we recognize that the reign of God is both a present and future reality. The Church is called to be that place where the first signs of God's reign are identified and acknowledged in the world. Wherever persons are being made new creatures in Christ, wherever the insights and resources of the gospel are brought to bear on the life of the world, God's reign is already effective in its healing and renewing power. We also look to the end time in which God's work will be fulfilled. This prospect gives us hope in our present actions, as individuals and as the Church. This expectation saves us from resignation and motivates our continuing witness and service.

We share with many Christian communions a recognition of the authority of Scripture in matters of faith, the confession that our justification as sinners is by grace through faith, and the sober realization that the Church is in need of continual reformation and renewal. We also affirm the general ministry of all baptized Christians who share responsibility for building up the Church and reaching out in mission and service to the world.

With other Christians, we declare the essential oneness of the Church in Christ Jesus. This rich heritage of shared Christian belief finds expression in our hymns and liturgies. Our unity is affirmed in the historic creeds as we confess "one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." It is also experienced in joint ventures of ministry and in various forms of ecumenical cooperation.

Nourished by the common roots of shared Christian heritage and understanding, the branches of Christ's Church have developed diverse traditions that enrich the Church universal. This is especially true of United Methodism, and if we are to offer our best gifts to the common Christian treasury, we must make a deliberate effort as a church to strive for critical self-understanding. It is as Christians involved in ecumenical partnership that we examine and embrace our distinctive heritage.

Our Distinctive Heritage as Methodists

The energy of Wesleyan theology stems from an emphasis upon practical divinity, the day-to-day practice of genuine Christianity in the lives of believers. Methodism did not arise in response to a specific doctrinal dispute, even though there was no lack of theological controversy.

Early Methodists claimed to preach the scriptural doctrines of the Church of England as contained in the Articles of Religion, the Homilies, and the Book of Common Prayer. Their task was not to create new doctrine, but to call people to experience the justifying and sanctifying grace of God and to encourage them to grow in the knowledge and love of God through the personal and corporate disciplines of the Christian life. The thrust of the Wesleyan movement and of the United Brethren and Evangelical Association was to reform the nation, particularly the Church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.

John Wesley's orientation toward the practical is evident in his focus upon the scripture way of salvation. He considered doctrinal matters primarily in terms of their significance for Christian discipleship. The Wesleyan emphasis upon the Christian life -- through faith and love put into practice -- has been the hallmark of those traditions now incorporated into The United Methodist Church. The distinctive shape of Wesleyan theology is seen in its emphases upon the creating, redeeming, and sanctifying activity of God.

Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases

Although Wesley shared with many other Christians a belief in grace, justification, assurance, and sanctification, he combined them in a powerful manner to create distinctive emphases for living the full Christian life. The Evangelical United Brethren tradition, particularly as expressed by Philip William Otterbein, from a Reformed background, gave similar distinctive emphases.

Grace pervades our understanding of Christian faith and life. By grace we mean the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit. While the grace of God is undivided, it precedes salvation as *prevenient grace*, continues in *justifying grace*, and is brought to fruition in *sanctifying grace*.

We assert that God's grace is manifest in all creation even though suffering, violence, and evil are also everywhere present. The goodness of creation is fulfilled in human beings, who are called to covenant partnership with God. God has given dignity and freedom and has summoned us to responsibility for our lives and the life of the world.

In God's self-revelation, Jesus Christ, we see the splendor of our true humanity. Even our sin, with its destructive consequences for all creation, does not alter God's intention for us, which is holiness and happiness of heart. Nor does it diminish our accountability for the way we live. Despite our brokenness, we remain creatures brought into being by a just and merciful God. The restoration of God's image in our lives requires divine grace to renew our fallen nature.

Prevenient Grace. -We acknowledge God's prevenient grace, the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will, and our first slight transient conviction of having sinned against God. God's grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith.

Justification and Assurance. -We believe God reaches out to the repentant believer in justifying grace with accepting and pardoning

love. Wesleyan theology stresses that a decisive change in the human heart can and does occur under the prompting of grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In justification through faith, we are forgiven our sin and restored to God's favor. This righting of relationships by God through Christ calls forth our faith and trust as we experience regeneration, by which we are made new creatures in Christ. This process of justification and new birth is often referred to as conversion. Such a change may be sudden and dramatic, or gradual and cumulative; yet it marks a new beginning and is part of an ongoing process. Christian experience as personal transformation always expresses itself as faith working by love.

Our Wesleyan theology also embraces the scriptural promise that we can expect to receive assurance of our present salvation, as the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

Sanctification and Perfection. -We hold that the wonder of God's acceptance and pardon does not end God's saving work, which continues to nurture our growth in grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we can increase in the knowledge and love of God and our neighbor.

New birth is the first step in this process of sanctification. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor and as having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked. This gracious gift of God's power and love, the hope and expectation of the faithful, is neither warranted by our efforts nor limited by our frailties.

Faith and Good Works. -We see God's grace and human activity working together in the relationship of faith and good works. God's grace calls forth human response and discipline. While faith is the only response essential for salvation, the Christian life itself requires more.

The General Rules remind us that our salvation is made evident through our good works. For Wesley, even repentance should be accompanied by fruits meet for repentance, or works of piety and mercy. Both faith and good works belong within an all-encompassing theology of grace, since they stem from God's gracious love shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Mission and Service. -We insist that personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world. By joining heart and hand we assert that personal religion, evangelical witness, and Christian social action are mutually reinforcing.

Scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor and a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world. The General Rules are one expression of the relationship between Christian life and thought as understood within the Wesleyan tradition.

The Nature and Mission of the Church. -Finally, we emphasize the nurturing and serving function of Christian fellowship in the Church. The personal experience of faith is nourished by the worshiping community. For Wesley there was no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness. Communal faith in the Wesleyan tradition not only promotes personal growth, but also equips and mobilizes us for mission and service to the world.

The outreach of the Church springs from the working of the Spirit. As United Methodists, we respond to that working through a connectional Church based upon mutual responsiveness and accountability. Connectional ties bind us together in faith and service in our global witness, enabling faith to become active in love and intensifying our desire for peace and justice in the world.

OUR DOCTRINAL STANDARDS AND GENERAL RULES²

The doctrinal standards of the United Methodist Church are built upon four pillars: “The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church” (1808), “The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church” (1963), *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley*, and *Wesley's Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*.

The Standard Sermons and *Explanatory Notes* are books and are thus too lengthy to reprint here. “The Articles of Religion” and “The Confession of Faith” are much briefer, and lend themselves to reprinting. However, the language used in these summaries of

²²This section written by Will Humes.

our faith can, at times, be archaic and difficult to understand. This is particularly true of “The Articles of Religion,” which were developed by John Wesley from “The Articles of Religion” of the Church of England in the 18th Century. For this reason only “The Confession of Faith” is reprinted in its entirety.

While “The Confession of Faith” is easier to read and comprehend by the 20th century mind, it’s language can still be difficult. For instance, the language about humankind is not gender neutral. Therefore all references to man and mankind should be read and understood to include both men and women. Also, in order to clarify difficult sections, I have added additional personal commentary and applicable portions of the Articles of Religion when I felt it necessary.

Doctrine is important for the Church Universal and for the United Methodist Church in particular. We have a rich and solid theological foundation. As the 1992 *Book of Discipline* states, “The heart of our task is to reclaim and renew the distinctive United Methodist doctrinal heritage, which rightly belongs to our common heritage as Christians, for the life and mission of the whole Church” (p. 54). I hope that you will examine the doctrine of our Church, meditate upon it in your heart, and appropriate it in your life.

The Confession of Faith³

Article I.-God

We believe in the one true, holy and living God, Eternal Spirit, who is Creator, Sovereign and Preserver of all things visible and invisible. He is infinite in power, wisdom, justice, goodness and love, and rules with gracious regard for the well-being and salvation of men, to the glory of his name. We believe the one God reveals himself as the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct but inseparable, eternally one in essence and power.

Commentary - God has revealed God’s self to us in three unique ways and persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As Father, we know God as our loving Creator. We also see God in Jesus Christ, who came to free us from sin and death. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God and Christ with us today.

Article II.-Jesus Christ

We believe in Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, in whom the divine and human natures are perfectly and inseparably united. He is the eternal Word made flesh, the only begotten Son of the Father, born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. As ministering Servant he lived, suffered and died on the cross. He was buried, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to be with the Father, from whence he shall return. He is eternal Savior and Mediator, who intercedes for us, and by him all men will be judged.

“The Articles of Religion” also state that Jesus Christ “truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of men.” *Commentary - While the details of how it was accomplished remains a mystery, Christians affirm that Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine. And it is the unique nature of Christ as both God and human that enables him to be our Savior. Through the life, death and work of Christ we are reconciled with God, reborn as new creations, and made whole.*

Article III.-The Holy Spirit

We believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from and is one in being with the Father and the Son. He convinces the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment. He leads men through faithful response to the gospel into the fellowship of the Church. He comforts, sustains and empowers the faithful and guides them into all truth.

Commentary - As stated above, the Holy Spirit is the presence of God and Christ with us now. It is the Holy Spirit that leads us to acknowledge our sins and to repent of them. The Holy Spirit works within us to recreate us, to cleanse us and sanctify us, and the Spirit sustains and keeps us throughout our Christian journey.

Article IV.-The Holy Bible

We believe the Holy Bible, Old and New Testaments, reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation. It is to be received through the Holy Spirit as the true rule and guide for faith and practice. Whatever is not revealed in or established by the Holy Scriptures is not to be made an article of faith nor is it to be taught as essential to salvation.

“The Articles of Religion” also adds this concerning The Old Testament: “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and Man.” It also states that “no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.”

Article V.-The Church

We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.

Commentary - The Church consists of both local congregations and the Church Universal. Its sole purpose, as elaborated upon above, is to proclaim the gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ, so that the world may be brought into a right relationship with God. As the Church, we offer Christ to the world, through our words and deeds.

Article VI.-The Sacraments

We believe the sacraments, ordained by Christ, are symbols and pledges of the Christian's profession and of God's love toward us. They are means of grace by which God works invisibly in us, quickening, strengthening and confirming our faith in him. Two sacraments are ordained by Christ our Lord, namely Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

We believe Baptism signifies entrance into the household of faith, and is a symbol of repentance and inner cleansing from sin, a representation of the new birth in Christ Jesus and a mark of Christian discipleship. We believe children are under the atonement of Christ and as heirs of the Kingdom of God are acceptable subjects for Christian baptism. Children of believing parents through baptism become the special responsibility of the Church. They should be nurtured and led to personal acceptance of Christ, and by profession of faith confirm their baptism.

We believe the Lord's Supper is a representation of our redemption, a memorial of the sufferings and death of Christ, and a token of love and union which Christians have with Christ and with one another. Those who rightly, worthily and in faith eat the broken bread and drink the blessed cup partake of the body and blood of Christ in a spiritual manner until he comes.

Concerning sacraments, "The Articles of Religion" add the "sacraments ordained of Christ are not only badges or tokens of Christian profession, but rather they are certain signs of grace, and God's good will toward us, by which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm, our faith in him."

"The Articles of Religion" also state that "Baptism is not only a sign of profession and mark of difference whereby Christians are distinguished from others that are not baptized; but it is also a sign of regeneration or

the new birth. The baptism of young children is to be retained in the church."

And concerning the Lord's Supper, "The Articles" add that "The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another, but rather is a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death; insomuch that, to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the bread which we break is a partaking of the body of Christ; and likewise the cup of blessing is a partaking of the blood of Christ.

Commentary - Baptism and Holy Communion (The Lord's Supper or the Eucharist) are central acts of the church. They set us apart from the world and they become for us channels for God's grace to enter into our lives. Baptism is always into a community of faith, and those being baptized are to become active participants in the life of the church (if this is not the case, then baptism should not be performed). Holy Communion offers us the opportunity to both remember the love of Jesus Christ and his actions for us, and to experience the real presence and communion of Christ with us today. It is a sacrament that the entire community needs to participate in, and that frequently, even as often as we gather together in Jesus' name.

Article VII.-Sin and Free Will

We believe man is fallen from righteousness and, apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, is destitute of holiness and inclined to evil. Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. In his own strength, without divine grace, man cannot do good works pleasing and acceptable to God. We believe, however, man influenced and empowered by the Holy Spirit is responsible in freedom to exercise his will for good.

Concerning the concept of Original Sin, The Articles of Religion tells us that "Original sin is the corruption of the nature of every man, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually."

Commentary - We are by nature sinful, and we cannot through our own efforts save ourselves. We need a savior, a redeemer, and God has provided us with one in Jesus Christ (See next article).

Article VIII.-Reconciliation Through Christ

We believe God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The offering Christ freely made on the cross is the perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, redeeming man from all sin, so that no other satisfaction is required.

Article IX.-Justification and Regeneration

We believe we are never accounted righteous before God through our works or merit, but that penitent sinners are justified or accounted righteous before God only by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We believe regeneration is the renewal of man in righteousness through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, whereby we are made partakers of the divine nature and experience newness of life. By this new birth the believer becomes reconciled to God and is enabled to serve him with the will and the affections.

We believe, although we have experienced regeneration, it is possible to depart from grace and fall into sin; and we may even then, by the grace of God, be renewed in righteousness.

“The Articles of Religion” has this to say about the doctrine of justification by faith: “We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith, only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort.”

Commentary - All that is required of us is faith in God's grace in Christ. This is how we are saved; this is how we enter into a new and right relationship with God. Nothing else can or will justify us in God's sight. It is also important to remember that none of us are worthy of God's grace. In fact, we all deserve the judgement of God for our sinfulness. What we receive instead, if we are willing, is God's grace in Christ.

Article X.-Good Works

We believe good works are the necessary fruits of faith and follow regeneration but they do not have the virtue to remove our sins or to avert divine judgment. We believe good works, pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, spring from a true and living faith, for through and by them faith is made evident.

Commentary - Of course once we have, through faith, received the grace of God, we will want to do the good works that we have been created to do. So while good works do not save us, they are by-products of our salvation.

Article XI.-Sanctification & Christian Perfection

We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been born again are cleansed

from sin in their thoughts, words and acts, and are enabled to live in accordance with God's will, and to strive for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God.

We believe this experience does not deliver us from the infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes common to man, nor from the possibilities of further sin. The Christian must continue on guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin. He must respond wholly to the will of God so that sin will lose its power over him; and the world, the flesh, and the devil are put under his feet. Thus he rules over these enemies with watchfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Commentary - The Christian life should be one of continual growth and maturation in our relationship with God and Christ. Yes, there will be times when we fail and stumble, but we should always strive toward the goal of what Wesley called “Christian perfection,” the state of being perfect in our love of God and each other. We can work toward this goal through the power of the Holy Spirit within our lives.

Article XII.-The Judgment and the Future State

We believe all men stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation.

Article XIII.-Public Worship

We believe divine worship is the duty and privilege of man who, in the presence of God, bows in adoration, humility and dedication. We believe divine worship is essential to the life of the Church, and that the assembling of the people of God for such worship is necessary to Christian fellowship and spiritual growth.

We believe the order of public worship need not be the same in all places but may be modified by the Church according to circumstances and the needs of men. It should be in a language and form understood by the people, consistent with the Holy Scriptures to the edification of all, and in accordance with the order and Discipline of the Church.

Commentary - There is no such thing as a solitary Christianity. We are Christians in community and communion, both with God and each other.

Article XIV.-The Lord's Day

We believe the Lord's Day is divinely ordained for private and public worship, for rest from unnecessary work, and should be devoted to spiritual improvement, Christian fellowship and service. It is commemorative of our Lord's resurrection and is an emblem of our eternal rest. It is essential to the permanence and growth of the Christian Church, and important to the welfare of the civil community.

Article XV.-The Christian and Property

We believe God is the owner of all things and that the individual holding of property is lawful and is a sacred trust under God. Private property is to be used for the manifestation of Christian love and liberality, and to support the Church's mission in the world. All forms of property, whether private, corporate or public, are to be held in solemn trust and used responsibly for human good under the sovereignty of God.

Article XVI.-Civil Government

We believe civil government derives its just powers from the sovereign God. As Christians we recognize the governments under whose protection we reside and believe such governments should be based on, and be responsible for, the recognition of human rights under God. We believe war and bloodshed are contrary to the gospel and spirit of Christ.

We believe it is the duty of Christian citizens to give moral strength and purpose to their respective governments through sober, righteous and godly living.

The General Rules Of the Methodist Church⁴

The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies

Near the end of 1739 eight to ten persons came to John Wesley in London. They were deeply convinced of their sin and were earnestly seeking redemption and salvation. They wanted Wesley to spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to “flee from the wrath to come, which they saw continually hanging over their heads.” In order for him to have more time for this work, Wesley appointed a day when they might all come together, which they did from that time every

Thursday evening. To these, and as many more as desired to join with them (for their number increased daily), Wesley gave advice which he judged most needful for them, and they always concluded their meeting with prayer suited to their needs.

This was the beginning of Methodist Society, first in Europe, and then in America. Such a society is no other than a company of people “having the form and seeking the power of godliness,” united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation. In time, these Societies became the foundation for the Methodist Church.

In order to discern if individuals were indeed working out their own salvation, each society was divided into smaller groups, called classes, with about twelve persons in a class, one of whom served as the leader. It is the leader's duty:

1. To see each person in the class once a week at least, in order:
 - , to inquire how their souls prosper;
 - , to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort, as occasion may require;
 - , to receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the preachers, church, and poor.
2. To meet the ministers and the stewards of the society once a week, in order:
 - , to inform the minister of any that are sick, or of any that walk disorderly and will not be reprov'd;
 - , to pay the stewards what they have received of their several classes in the week preceding.

There was only one condition required of those who desire admission into these societies: a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins. But Wesley knew that wherever this desire was really fixed in a person's soul it will be shown by his or her fruit.

It was therefore expected of all who continued in the Societies that they should show evidence of their desire of salvation,

First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced, such as:

- C The taking of the name of God in vain.
- C The profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or by buying or selling.
- C Drunkenness: buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity.
- C Slaveholding; buying or selling slaves.

- C Fighting, quarreling, brawling, brother going to law with brother; returning evil for evil, or railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling.
- C The buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty.
- C The giving or taking things on usury-i.e., unlawful interest.
- C Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation; particularly speaking evil of magistrates or of ministers.
- C Doing to others as we would not they should do unto us.
- C Doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as:
 - The putting on of gold and costly apparel.
 - The taking such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus.
 - The singing those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God.
 - Softness and needless self-indulgence.
 - Laying up treasure upon earth.
 - Borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.

It was also expected of all who continued in the societies that they should show evidence of their desire of salvation,

Second: By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all people:

- C To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison.
- C To their souls, by instructing, reproofing, or exhorting all we have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine that we are not to do good unless our hearts be free to it.
- C By doing good, especially to them that are of the household of faith or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others; buying one of another, helping each other in business, and so much the more because the world will love its own and them only.
- C By all possible diligence and frugality, that the gospel be not blamed.
- C By running with patience the race which is set before them, denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily; submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should say all manner of evil of them falsely, for the Lord's sake.

It was further expected of all who desired to continue in the societies

that they should to evidence their desire of salvation, Thirdly: By attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are:

- C The public worship of God.
- C The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.
- C The Supper of the Lord.
- C Family and private prayer.
- C Searching the Scriptures.
- C Fasting or abstinence.

These were and are the General Rules of the societies; all of which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written Word, which is the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these we know the Holy Spirit writes on truly awakened hearts. If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be known unto them who watch over that soul as they who must give an account. We will admonish persons of the error of their ways. We will bear with them for a season. But then, if they do not repent, they will have no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.