

Sermon Title: Not Marks of a Methodist
 Primary Text(s): Galatians 3:23-27
 Other Texts: Ephesians 2:8-10
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 Series: The Distinguishing Marks of a Methodist

Main Point: Wesley's *Character of a Methodist* treatise starts with the marks that are not characteristic of a Disciple (Methodist).

 The scripture passages we will use refer to
 1. The law was our disciplinarian until Christ came
 2. Salvation by grace alone

 One of the central things that I have used to help churches discover their unity is exploring their history. That meant researching how they began and how they grew. It meant asking questions about old and new history that brought the church to where they are currently. And it also meant re-connecting them with their historic spiritual roots.

(Tell a story from one of the churches where I was interim. What did I discover?)

For the next few weeks, I will focus our worship on "Marks of a Methodist" to describe the distinctive characteristics of a Methodist. The foundational document that I will be referring to is a tract that John Wesley wrote in 1742, *The Characteristics of a Methodist*.

Most of you are sitting here thinking "I am not really a Methodist and I certainly don't worship somebody named John Wesley." Who grew up Baptist? Catholic? Episcopal? Presbyterian? I have often said that there are many paths that lead to the top of the mountain of God. Some of them are named Methodist or Baptist or Roman Catholic. The important thing in the journey is to stay on the path.

Wesley did not start out to make a new denomination. In his search to discover God's path, he had discovered a way of living that was consistent with his deep knowledge of the Bible. His followers who came to be called "Methodist" were from Anglican, Presbyterian, Catholic churches and more. But they came together to study and make themselves accountable to each other for growth as disciples of Christ.

We call ourselves United Methodist, but that does not make us "Methodists" from Wesley's reckoning. His "Methodists" worked to live as disciples.

Wesley wrote *The Character of a Methodist* for three reasons:

- (1) to demonstrate that Methodism is simply genuine Christianity, nothing more.
- (2) to interpret the works of Clement of Alexandria (150-215) which described a perfect Christian.
- (3) to give the proper meaning of the term "Methodist."

Reading from my notes about the name "Methodist."

Wesley writes:

Since the word Methodist emerged, many have wondered what a Methodist is. What are the principles and practices of this group "which is everywhere spoken against"?

Those who are called Methodists have not chosen the name. But it has been given them without their consent as a ridicule. It was first given to 3 or 4 young men at Oxford who exercised a more regular method of study and behavior than was usual for people their age.

"I would rejoice if the name "Methodist" might never be mentioned again, but be buried in eternal oblivion."

"But if it cannot be, at least let those who will use it know the meaning of the word they use."

To our detractors, "perhaps some of you who hate what I am *called*, may love what I *am* by the grace of God."

Wesley introduces the Character of a Methodist by saying: ***"The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort."*** Have you ever heard the remark that since United Methodists are so accepting of different views that they really don't believe anything? What they are usually referring to is the fact that we do not position ourselves over and against other Christians by our theology.

The distinction between central articles of faith and opinions is brought out in this work (possibly read from pg 2 of my notes). **Opinions are convictions on matters of faith which do not affect fundamental matters of faith.** Wesley argues that opinions should not separate Christians from one another. [You will find intensive use of Scripture in this tract (104 references for 4,000 words). **Wesley wanted to leave no doubt that the Methodists were living Scriptural Christianity.**

According to Wesley, what makes us different from other denominations is precisely the fact that we do not claim to have the only truth. In addition, Methodists are not distinguished by the particular religious jargon we use. We do not set ourselves apart from others by how we dress, by what we eat, or by our peculiar customs. We are not distinguished by insisting that one part of the Christian faith is more important than any other. (read from pg 4)

We do not marginalize or alienate those who think differently or accuse others (as well as our Methodist brothers and sisters) of heretical theology. **"But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think."**

But what does this all have to do with our church today – with our faith on a daily basis?

Have we changed that much in 277 years? Well, yes we have. And no we haven't. Our clothes are different. Our work is more complicated. Our culture is more diverse. Our government is more democratic. We have more power over our decisions. All the inventions that have been made so life would be easier have actually made it more complex.

But God has not changed. And God's hope for humanity has not changed. And the essence of salvation has not changed.

The United Methodist Church is a "big tent" denomination. We have foundational articles of faith but there is room for many opinions about how to live out our faith. There are people on both ends of every spectrum of opinion, but the majority of us are somewhere in the middle and, frankly, confused by all the fuss.

The thing that joins our little congregation together is our love for God and our love for one another. We all have opinions too. But will we let those opinions separate us? True Methodists sit down, study scripture and discuss opinions. We don't try to force opinions.

Sometimes we find that we must agree to disagree on some of our opinions. My wife and I often have differences of opinion. Our discussions can become quite heated before we decide that we cannot agree. But we continue to be married after all these years because of the love we share and the abundance of things that we agree upon.

Methodists are like that. Disciples are like that.

As we journey the next few weeks together, I want each of us to reconsider the difference between things that are opinions and the things that are foundations of our faith. What is essential and what is negotiable?

When we come together next week and begin to discover what the marks of a Methodist really are, I think that we will also discover our identity as a healthy, loving Methodist church together.