

Operative Theology through the Years⁺

“Have you ever watched a sand castle begin its crumble as the tide advances? It’s a study in erosion. First, the foundation is undermined. Then the walls begin to sag. Finally the entire structure comes crashing down. Erosion is like that...even in the Christian life. A habit that you once considered unthinkable is grudgingly tolerated. And what you tolerate is all too soon condoned...then endorsed...then openly promoted as acceptable in God’s eyes.”¹ – The Navigators

This exemplifies one of the fundamental problems in the United Methodist Church: the spiritual erosion of many members in our denomination – and of life within the denomination itself.

Our Spiritual Heritage

“The centerpiece of the faith of United Methodists is the teaching of John Wesley’s Twenty-five Articles of Religion on the nature of God.”² These Articles of the Methodist Church were deemed to be “permanent” and not subject to revision by the General Conference or any other body. What Methodists believe are defined in the various Articles: I – the Trinity of “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost”; III- the Resurrection of Christ; V – Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation; VII – Of Original...Sin; IX – Of the Justification of Man; X – Of Good Works; and XX – the finished work of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross as a forgiveness of our sins; among others. These were some of the fixed parts of Methodist doctrine when the first “Restrictive Rule” took effect in 1808 and collated with Wesley’s original text of “The Sunday Service of the Methodists” (1784).³ Dr. Thomas Oden explains, “We believe in and worship the living, triune God as the Source of all and Creator of all things....The story of God’s acts of creation, redemption and consummation on our behalf are made known in the Bible.”⁴

The early history of Methodism demonstrated obedience to those Articles. Two pillars of John Wesley’s theology were the Bible and the person and work of Jesus Christ. His view of the Bible is described when he wrote, “In the year 1729, I began not only to read, but to study, the Bible as the one, the only standard of truth....”⁵ In 1730 he stated (again) that he was homo unus libri, “a man of one book” in his emphasis on the truth and applicability of the Bible to everyday life.⁶

A top Wesleyan priority was evangelism as defined in John’s instruction to his preachers, “You have nothing to do but to save Souls.”⁷ This instruction was indicative of the Wesley brothers’ determination to let nothing stand in the way of offering Christ to the unconverted, and was coupled, yet again with “doing good works” – two priorities joined in Wesleyan doctrine. They viewed anyone who did not have Christ as “sheep without a shepherd, lost people who were...bound in sin.”⁸

Coupled with evangelism was the transforming work of Christ, Wesley’s belief in an “experience” of conversion. John explained his view of “The New Birth” in his writing:

“Before a child is born into the world, he has eyes but sees not; he has ears but does not hear. As soon as he is born, he begins to see the light; his ears are then opened, and he hears; and all the other organs of sense begin to be exercised upon their proper objects. How exactly does the parallel hold! While a man is in a mere natural state, before he is born of God, he has, in a spiritual sense, eyes and sees not; he has ears but hears not. His other spiritual senses are locked up; he is in the same condition as if he had them not. But as soon as he is born of God, there is a total change. The “eyes of his understanding are opened”; he sees the light of the glory of God. His ears being opened, he is now capable of hearing the inward voice of God....”⁹

In John Wesley’s treatise “The Character of a Methodist” he delineated traits and duties that should characterize those of us called “Methodists” with just some of the key points repeated here (“The Character of a Methodist” is contained in its entirety in Chapter 3):

+ THE distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another,

are all quite wide of the point. Whosoever, therefore, imagines that a Methodist is a man of such or such an opinion is grossly ignorant of the whole affair; he mistakes the truth totally. We believe, indeed, that “all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God” and herein we are distinguished from [non-Christians]. We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice; and herein we are fundamentally distinguished from those of the Roman [Catholic] Church. We believe Christ to be the eternal, supreme God; and herein we are distinguished from the Socinians and Arians [i.e., those who consider Jesus to be less than divine].¹⁰

+ But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.¹¹ + The greatest good work a Methodist can do is to help somebody get into right relationship with God. For this is the only way a man can have peace with God.¹²

+ All the commandments of God he accordingly keeps, and that with all his might.¹³

+ Lastly, as he has time, he “does good unto neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies: And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies, by “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison,” but much more does he labour to do good to their souls...”¹⁴

Up until the beginning of the last century these precepts were normative for those called “Methodist.”

When John was criticized for preaching in the parish of an Anglican priest, he responded, “I look upon all the world as my parish...to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation.”¹⁵ Not hesitant to speak out on perceived problems, he once told the Anglican bishop of London that his priests in America “knew something of Greek and Latin; but knew no more of saving souls than of catching whales.”¹⁶

Is it any wonder that Methodism spread like a prairie wildfire westward across America?

But toward the end of the 1800s William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, observed, “I am of the opinion that the coming [twentieth] century will be religion without the Holy Spirit, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God, and heaven without hell.” He was so right.

Liberal Theology

The advent of the “age of reason” and the ideas of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and Albert Einstein, plus the increased popularity of German-inspired “higher criticism” of the Bible that swept Europe in the 1800s affected theological study in America. “Higher” or “historical criticism” questioned many of the scriptural foundations on which many of the orthodox Christian beliefs were founded: Old Testament stories such as the Garden of Eden, Noah and the flood, and Jonah and the fish, were discarded as myths, as were the reality of miracles that contravened physical laws – and the person and work of Jesus Christ. Scholars believed that theological belief needed to be changed to reflect a more “realistic” – and humanistic view of the world.¹⁷ This in principle limits Christian theology to a human rationale, relegating the idea of God supernaturally intervening in the affairs of humanity to “superstitious” or “out dated” ideas.

The concept of “relativity” developed by Einstein between 1905 and 1916 in the realm of Physics to explain the interchangeability of matter and energy also influenced religious thinkers to apply it to theology as well in the idea of “theological relativism”; Einstein himself decried this misapplication of his concept – but the idea stayed.

Dr. James Heidinger summarizes its beliefs in his *Basic Tenets of Liberalism* described as:

1. God’s character is one of pure benevolence – without wrath. All persons are His children, and sin separates no one from His love.
2. There is a divine spark in every man and woman. All persons, therefore, are good at heart and need only encouragement and nurture to allow their natural goodness to express itself.

3. Jesus Christ is Savior only in the sense that He is our perfect teacher and example. He was not divine in any unique sense. He was not born of a virgin, did not work miracles, and did not rise from the dead.
4. Just as Christ differs from other men only comparatively, not absolutely, neither does Christianity differ from other religions. It is just most prevalent among the world religions, all of which stem from the same basic source. Thus, missions should not aim to convert but rather to promote a cross-fertilization of ideas for mutual enrichment.
5. The Bible is not a divine record of revelation, but a human record of the religious experiences of a nation. Thus few doctrinal statements or creeds are essential to Christianity. The only things unchanging about the Christian message are its moral and ethical teachings.

Then Dr. Heidinger goes on to state that liberalism (i.e., liberal theology) is a negation of orthodoxy. In other words, it is almost always defined over against historic Christianity¹⁸ and our orthodox faith. Liberal theology is manifested in two very key areas.

The first is our understanding of Jesus Christ. A good characterization of liberal doctrine in this area is given by C. S. Lewis, the brilliant Cambridge University professor and former atheist who was eventually won over by the evidence for Jesus Christ:

“I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”¹⁹

The second is our understanding of the Bible. When we have lost the authority of the Bible as God’s Word, we do not have a basis for firm belief. We are like a ship on the high seas that has lost its bearings, on a course but not knowing where we are headed. We have nothing on which to build a theological foundation.²⁰

When pastors, bishops, or seminary professors sit in judgment on the Bible, they have lost their doctrinal anchor and are without a spiritual and moral compass. At that juncture, whatever they believe is “true and right” for them. Those who believe this have devolved into humanistic relativism and subjective morality with no absolute truth.

Concerning this core basis of liberal theology – no absolute truths – G. K. Chesterton decried this belief in the time-sensitivity of creedal values as the “imbecile habit” when he wrote,

“You might as well say that a certain philosophy can be believed Mondays, but cannot be believed on Tuesdays. You might as well say of a view on the cosmos that it was suitable to half-past three, but not suitable to half-past four. What a man can believe depends on his philosophy, not on the clock or the century. If a man believes in an unalterable natural law, he cannot believe in any miracle in any age....Therefore in dealing with any historical answer, the point is not whether it was given in our time, but whether it was given in answer to our question.”²¹

Perhaps the best perspective on this disbelieving absolute truths and the Bible can be offered by Dr. R. A. Torrey:

“Man’s hatred of the Bible has been of the most persistent, determined, relentless, and bitter character. It has led to 18 centuries of repeated attempts to undermine faith in the Bible, and to consign the Bible itself to oblivion....Every engine of destruction that human philosophy, human science, human reason, human art, human cunning, human force, and human brutality could bring to bear against [a] book has been brought to

bear against this Book, and yet the Bible stands absolutely unshaken today. At times almost all the wise and great of the earth have been pitted against the Bible, and only an obscure few for it. Yet, it has stood.”²²

This humanistic belief of the Bible contravenes Wesley’s admonition on one essential point when he wrote, “In all cases, the Church is to be judged by the scripture, and not the scripture by the Church.”²³

The common idea held by those who subscribe to the “Higher Critical” or “Historical Critical” method of viewing the Bible, or those who engage in “literary criticism” is to sit in judgment on what they believe is and is not true, trying to pick it apart and find fault with it, rather than letting the Bible instruct them and serve as a guide for their lives. In the process they miss the greatest value of God’s Word in letting its timeless truths, wisdom, and transformational effect shape their lives as they read it in faith. The contention of “liberals” is that it is a book, written by multiple human authors with all of its attendant limitations, errors and no supernatural inspiration – that is time and culture-bound.

In other words, because it was written so long ago and is riddled with errors, it is not applicable today. This means that one can adopt a “pick-and-choose” attitude toward the Bible, saying which parts are true and which are not. If one makes him uncomfortable, he can simply discard it as being inapplicable for his world-view. They themselves have become an authority unto themselves. They have crossed the line into subjective, humanistic relativism.

This perspective has transitioned over into the Sunday School and other educational material. For instance treatment of the book of Daniel is that it was written in 165 B.C., although orthodox theologians date it at 603 B.C.²⁴ This same idea was expressed in the *Disciple I* text on page 118. Yet for this one particular example, the authenticity of Daniel was verified by no less than eight other sources to include Jesus Christ himself in Matthew 24:15.²⁵ More recently literary criticism is exemplified by theorizing that the book of Isaiah had multiple authors, and that the first five books of the Bible were written by multiple authors (not Moses) at a much later date than originally believed. This latter example is demonstrated in the *Adult Bible Studies* as put out by Cokesbury and more recently the *Covenant Bible Study* published by Abingdon. It theorizes that Bible “scholars” designated the “authors” of these books as individuals with the letters “JEDP.” They wrote during a time of political crisis, when the kingdom of David and Solomon was divided into the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah.³⁶ The *Covenant Bible Study* carries on in the same vein.³⁷ Space here does not allow a reasoned analysis of the defective tenets of this literary criticism but suffice it to say that writing such as this casts doubt on the theological integrity of the scholarship offered by those United Methodist publishing entities.

Period of Transition

Shortly after the turn of the century theological liberalism replaced the traditional orthodox belief that had been the UMC’s compass and re-oriented it toward social works and an aggressive ecumenism.²⁶ Despite the efforts by some of the orthodox bishops such as Horace M. DuBose, liberalism, or “modernism” as it was termed, gained ground in the UMC. The seminaries were affected and became agents of increased change as they cranked out young pastors and theologians espousing that doctrine. John Wesley Hughes, of the Southern Methodist Church and a great believer in education, was concerned about the growing occurrences of young men and women who went to seminary and “had their faith destroyed, lost their religious experience and the call of God to the ministry...” and left the ministry. He founded Asbury Theological Seminary to provide an orthodox Christian education for those wishing to enter the Methodist ministry.²⁷

The Methodist Federation for Social Service (later “The Methodist Federation for Social Action”) was formed in 1907 by Illinois preacher Harry F. Ward, who succeeded in getting the “Social Creed” adopted at the 1908 General Conference.²⁸ Dr. Spann goes on to cite the liberals’ greater preparation and organization coupled with adept parliamentary maneuvers as reasons for their continuing success in expanding their influence by overcoming the efforts of the more evangelical wing of the church during the 1924 General Conference.

Some preachers in liberal conferences who preached the “holiness” aspect of the orthodox faith were sent to “hard-scrabble” circuits in rural areas where their influence would be minimized.²⁹ It should be noted that this is

a tactic used today. The talk among pastors is that if you offend the bishop, you will “be sent to a charge where the parsonage has a dirt floor” – the term for ecclesial exile.³⁰ Harold Paul Sloan complained that the liberals spoke earnestly of “freedom of thought and liberty of discussion” but that as a group they did their utmost to “suppress the opinions of their opponents...”³¹

Dr. Spann further reported that as early as 1926, “a young pastor was told that he had ‘no business belonging to the Methodist Church’ because he would not fully embrace liberal theology. He further claimed to have been intimidated by his district superintendent who reportedly told him what he could and could not preach.”³² This practice has not died. Several years ago, one pastor informed us in confidence that a colleague had been told by his then-district superintendent Helen Crotwell that she “had better never hear the words ‘born again’ from his pulpit!”

By 1933, the problem in Methodism was so obvious that theologian Edwin Lewis expressed serious concern about Methodists who were abandoning their beliefs in the Apostles’ Creed, notably that of the “Virgin birth” and the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some bishops went along with this thinking. The resulting “watered-down” theology led H. Richard Niebuhr to describe this theology as, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”³³

Liberal theology has had a corrupting effect in our church. Two examples show this in a very real way. The headline read, *Churches Embrace Growing Religious Diversity*. The story tells about breaking ground for a shared facility housing St. Paul United Methodist Church and Islamic Center and Masjid in Stockton, California.³⁴ The second is entitled, *Christians, Buddhists unite in worship*. It goes on to describe a mixed-worship Christian-Buddhist service with no preaching at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in Denver. The services are overseen by Rev. Toni Cook of St. Paul’s UMC, Sister Mary Luke Tobin, a Catholic nun, and Jose Cabezon, a Buddhist.³⁵ Another example is the inclusion in the book “Strength for Service” – a Christian devotional book from the United Methodist Men containing two prayers to Allah.

I remember attending Methodist Youth Fellowship church camp at Mt. Wesley near Kerrville, Texas as a teenager. During one summer session we studied the works of Paul Tillich, a theologian whose paradigm or world-view was affected by his belief that “Sin” was relegated to “separation from God.” As a teenager, I’m not too sure I understood all of the nuances of this and was not prepared to deal with it. I don’t remember studying too much about the Bible – but I do remember listening to classes on abstract ideas such as this and not having the foggiest idea as to what I could do with that information.

Joe Pennel, Jr., former bishop of the Virginia Conference, has stated, “The principal threat to United Methodism at the present time is not doctrinal rigidity or narrowness, but theological confusion and fragmentation.” Well said.

+ + +

End notes:

Chapter 5 – Operative Theology

Some material previously printed in the book *At the Crossroads* by Allen O. Morris. Permission Granted.

1. *The Daily Walk*, published by The Navigators, P. O. Box 6000, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80934; August 1, 1993.
2. “Our Doctrinal Standards on God” – paper by Dr. Thomas C. Oden, p. 3.
3. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church – 2000*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House), pp 59-66.
4. Doctrinal Standards, *ibid*.
5. John Wesley, "Conformity to the Master" in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; reprint, Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City; J. Fred Parker, editor, 1996) p.11.
6. *Ibid*, p. 21.
7. *The Heritage of American Methodism* by Kenneth Cain Kinghorn.
8. *Ibid*, p 151.
9. John Wesley, "The New Birth" in *Devotions and Prayers of John Wesley*, edited by Donald E. Demaray (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1959), p. 6.

10. Item 1. The text of Wesley's message can be found on The Unofficial Confessing Movement Internet website: <http://ucmpage.org/> The Reverend John Warrener.
11. The modern summary is contained in booklet form; p. 2. Reprinted by permission of Ms. Sara Anderson, Bristol House Publishers, Anderson, Indiana. Copies of the booklet "The Character of a Methodist" are available from Bristol House, P.O. Box 4020, Anderson, Indiana 46013. Telephone: 1-800/451-READ (7323).
12. Bristol, p. 14.
13. The Unofficial Confessing Movement website, item 13.
14. Ibid, item 16.
15. *The Heritage of American Methodism*, 151, 152.
16. Ibid, p 152.
17. *Evangelicalism in Modern American Methodism: Theological Conservatives in the "Great Deep" of the Church, 1900-1980*; doctoral dissertation submitted by Dr. Glenn Spann to The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland; 1984, pp. ii and 4. Published by UMI Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan; p. 29. A copy may be ordered by calling 800/521-0600 or 734/761-4700 and asking for UMI dissertation number: 9523868.
18. "The Devastating Legacy of Liberalism" by Dr. James Heidinger, Good News Magazine (Wilmore, Kentucky: The Forum for More Spiritual Christianity).
19. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan-Collier, 1960), pp. 55-56.
20. *Bondage*, ibid.
21. G. K. Chesterton, as quoted in "Who Broke the Baby?" by Dr. Jean Garton (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers), 1998,
p. 124.
22. *What the Bible is All About*, Foreword.
23. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1980), Vol. 10, p. 141. As quoted in "How Wesleyans Do Theology" by Dr. Allan Coppedge, p. 10; from *Doing Theology in Today's World* by John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House), 1991, pp. 267-289.
24. *The Adult Bible Studies* August 24, 2003, p. 86.
25. *Daily Walk*, Walk Through the Bible Ministries, August 31, 1996; *Matthew Henry Commentary*; *Thompson-Chain Reference Bible*, p. 902; *Life Application Study Bible*; *Wesley Study Notes on the Bible*; and *What the Bible is All About*.
26. *Evangelicalism in Modern American Methodism*.
27. John Wesley Hughes, D.D.; *The Autobiography of John Wesley Hughes*, 1923, p. 110. As quoted in Dr. Spann's dissertation,
p. 93.
28. Albert M. Pennewell, *The Methodist Movement in Northern Illinois* (Sycamore, IL: *The Sycamore Tribune*, 1942), p. 211. Dr. Spann's dissertation, p. 165.
29. Ibid, p. 80.
30. Personal interviews with pastors.
31. Harold Paul Sloan, "Fundamentalism in History," p. 957. As quoted in Dr. Spann's dissertation, p. 167.
32. "A Young Minister's Letter," *The Call* 1.12 (April 1926): 199. As quoted in Dr. Spann's dissertation, p. 167.
33. "The Passing of the Liberal Consensus" by Dr. James V. Heidinger III, as published in *Good News* magazine, January/February 1995, editorial.
34. *The Interpreter*, May-June 1995, pp. 24, 25.
35. *The Fayetteville Observer-Times* (Fayetteville, NC), May 18, 1996.

+ "Operative Theology through the Years" as reproduced from chapter 5 of the book *The Issues @ Hand*, by Allen Morris. Permission granted.