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PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY AND THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

John Wesley and the Birth of Methodism

John Wesley (1703-91).

- The premier church reformer of the 1700s and the founder of Methodism.
- A spiritual renewal movement within the Anglican Church.
- Along with his brother, Charles, John Wesley transformed the history of Christianity.

Family Life.

- Samuel (1662-1735) and Susanna (1669-1742) Wesley.

The Young Wesley.

- A classical education and a calling to ministry.
- The “Holy Club” and George Whitefield.

Sojourn to Georgia.

- Georgia as a “model Christian community.”
- A failed ministry.
- John Wesley: “What have I learned [about myself]?... I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.”
- The Moravian influence.
- A phenomenal conversion.

Evangelistic Career.

- Wesley, Whitefield, and the doctrine of the “new birth.”

The Radical Wesley.

- Wesley’s “General Rules.”
- Two priorities:
 - (1) Encourage Christians to conscientiously practice the spiritual disciplines; and
 - (2) Organize *koinonia*-style cell groups to foster accountability and discipleship.
- Ministry innovations.
 - ▶ Methodist “societies,” “classes” and “band meetings.”
- The Ffoundry Church (est. 1739): the “cradle of Methodism.”
- Wesley eventually broke with the Church of England and established one of the major denominations in Protestant Christianity.

Social Reforms.

- Wesleyan humanitarianism and social ministry.
- *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (1774).
- A friend and ally of William Wilberforce (1759-1833).

Wesleyan Theology

Wesley the Theologian.

- Since the late 1800s, liberal Methodists have contended, “*We are not a doctrinal church.*”
- Wesleyan doctrines.
- Wesley as an evangelist, church reformer and organizer.
- Wesleyan theology – the major influences.
 - (1) The Arminian theology of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609); and
 - (2) Life experiences – including his own personal conversion.
- Wesley the apologist:
 - ▶ “This Book [i.e., the Bible] had to be written by one of three people; good men, bad men, or God. It couldn’t have been written by good men because they said it was inspired by the revelation of God. Good men don’t lie and deceive. It couldn’t have been written by bad men because bad men would not write something that would condemn themselves. It leaves only one conclusion: It was given by divine inspiration of God.”

Divine Sovereignty, Human Free Will, and Redemption.

- Two Biblical truths.
 - (1) God is sovereign, and salvation depends upon his initiative and power.
 - (2) Human beings, although sinful, have a measure of free will.
- The doctrine of prevenient grace.
 - ▶ “Cooperating grace.”
- God is sovereign and man is free.
- A dynamic rather than a static view of redemption.
 - ▶ Wesleyan synergism v. Calvinistic monergism.
- Faith and works:
 - ▶ Salvation is by grace, not works.
 - ▶ Faith without works is dead (James 2:14-24).

The Wesleyan (or Methodist) Quadrilateral.

- The influence of Richard Hooker (1554-1600).
- Albert C. Outler (1908-89) and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.
 - (1) Scripture.
 - (2) Reason.
 - (3) Tradition.
 - (4) Experience.
 - Orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Perfectionism.

- Matt. 5:48 – “Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
- “Sinless perfection” v. “Christian perfection.”

The “Trust Clause.”

- The original purpose.
- The corruption of the principle.

Early American Methodism

Origins and Growth.

- The first Methodist missionaries arrived in America in the early 1770s, but their efforts were thwarted once the Revolution broke out.
- Francis Asbury (1745-1816).
- In 1784, John Wesley commissioned Thomas Coke (1747-1814) to organize an independent Methodist Episcopal Church in America.
 - Coke and Asbury were appointed co-bishops of the church.

1776	Pct. of Pop.	1850	Pct. of Pop.
1. Congregationalists	20.5%	1. Methodists	34.2
2. Presbyterians	19	2. Baptists	20.5
3. Baptists	17	3. Roman Catholics	14
4. Episcopalians	15.7	4. Presbyterians	11.5
5. Methodists	2.5	5. Congregationalists	4
6. Roman Catholics	1.8	6. Episcopalians	3.5
		7. Lutherans	3
		8. German and Dutch Reformed	1.9
		Unitarians/Universalists	1.9
		10. Restorationists	1.8
		11. Quakers	1.6

Source: Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, p. 153.

- The remarkable growth of American Methodism.
 - 1775: Less than 5,000 Methodists in the Thirteen Colonies.
 - 1784-91: Methodism grew from about 15,000 to nearly 80,000 members.
 - 1815: 200,000 Methodists – the largest denomination in the U.S.
 - 1850: More than 1/3 of all American church members were Methodists.
- Nathan Hatch: Early Methodism was “the most powerful religious movement in American history, [and] its growth [was] a central feature in the emergence of the United States as a republic.”
- The factors:
 - (1) After the Revolution, American Methodism made a clean break with the Church of England.
 - (2) The First Amendment guarantee of “religious liberty” and the disestablishment of older state churches opened up opportunities for Methodists.
 - (3) A true spiritual movement – not just a religious denomination.
 - (4) An emphasis on evangelism.
 - (5) An emphasis on social justice and humanitarian concerns.
 - (6) A unique and innovative church planting strategy.
- Jeffrey Breshears: “With its emphases on evangelism, discipleship and humanitarianism, early Methodism – more than any other denomination – came closest to honoring what Jesus called the ‘Greatest Commandment’ – to love [and serve] God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves.”

Methodist Circuit Riders.

- Francis Asbury, Peter Cartwright, et al.
- A large and frontier nation.
- Circuit-riding multi-taskers.
- A physically demanding ministry.

Francis Asbury (1745-1816).

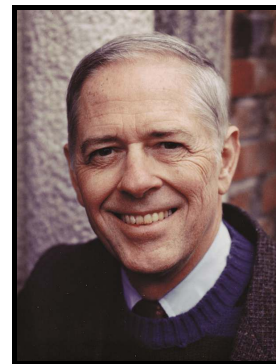
- One of the most gifted, dedicated and successful Christian leaders in American history.
- John Wesley challenge in 1771: “Our brethren in America call aloud for help. Who are willing to go over and help them?”
- A co-bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church.
- A passionate preacher and a gifted organizer and supervisor.
- Combining evangelism, social concern, and personal holiness, Methodism transformed the Christian landscape of early America.
- Asbury’s support for gifted black ministers.
 - Richard Allen and Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia.

[NOTE: In the early decades, Methodism was a movement more than an institutionalized denomination, and it flourished so long as it was aggressively evangelistic, passionately devoted to holiness, and on the cutting edge of social change. When it became another religious denomination with a settled clergy, a centralized bureaucracy, buildings, budgets and a corporate organization, it lost its fervor and distinctiveness.]

Progressivism and the UMC

A Preface: Thomas C. Oden (1931-2016).

- Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University (1980-2004) and one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century.
 - James Heidinger II: “Dr. Oden... was a theologian without peer within United Methodism. [*The Rise of Theological Liberalism and the Decline of American Methodism* (Seedbed, 2017), p. 154.]
- Originally a political and theological liberal, Oden was thoroughly indoctrinated in secular humanistic ideals.
 - Oden: “I left seminary having learned to treat scripture selectively, according to how well it might serve my political idealism. I adapted the Bible to my ideology – an ideology of social and political change largely shaped by soft Marxist premises about history and romanticized visions of the emerging power and virtue of the underclass.”
 - An advocate for biblical “higher criticism,” globalistic socialism, abortion “rights”, pop psychology, and New Age spirituality.
 - A devotee of Marxist economics, psycho-sexual Freudian psychology, and the “power dynamics” of Friedrich Nietzsche.
 - Oden: “I was uncritically accommodating to the very modernity that pretended to be prophetic, yet I did not recognize modernity’s captivity to secular humanistic assumptions.
- A radical intellectual and spiritual conversion.
 - Oden: “What changed the course of my life? A simple reversal that hung on a single pivot: attentiveness to the text of scripture....”
 - “Now I revel in the very premises I once carefully learned to set aside” – the foundational premises of the historic Christian faith.... At last I learned to recover the uncomplicated truth that God precisely becomes human in the flesh, dies for me, rises



again and saves me from my sins. All these are viewed by consensual Christianity as historical events.”

- In *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (2009), he set forth a comprehensive summary of Arminian (and Wesleyan) theology.
 - In *The Transforming Power of Grace* (1993), he emphasized “evangelical synergism” – the symbiotic relationship between free will and prevenient grace.
 - An active member in the Confessing Movement in America and a board member of the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD).
 - An assessment of the UMC seminary education: “After a lifetime of teaching... I am very nearly convinced that the present system is practically irreformable.”
 - ▶ Seminaries are “tradition-deprived,” obsessed with the latest intellectual fads and trends, and the academic tenure system fails to hold irresponsible faculty members accountable for what they teach and write.
 - ▶ A spirit of latitudinarianism negates any traditional standards for heresy.
 - Under the guise of “academic freedom,” the only real “heresy” is for one to challenge the sacred tenets of tolerance and inclusivism – or the failure to use politically correct language for God!
 - “If the ‘liberated’ have the freedom to teach apostasy,” traditional Christians and churches should have “the freedom to withhold its consent.... The church has no moral obligation to give [heretics] support or to bless their follies.”
 - ▶ Most professors and administrators are out-of-touch with the realities of ministry.
 - ▶ Most faculty members are “left-leaning” ideologues who loath evangelicals.
- [NOTE: Edmund Robb (1975): “If we have a sick church it is largely because we have sick seminaries.... I know of no United Methodist seminary where the historical Wesleyan Biblical perspective is presented seriously, even as an option.”
- Oden: Orthodox evangelicals are a “resistance movement” within the UMC.

The Current Crisis.

- As of 2023, the United Methodist Church in America had experienced 49 consecutive years of membership decline with losses totaling some 3-1/2 million members.
- All the liberal mainline denomination in North America are facing similar decline.
 - ▶ All these denominations have been racked by disputes over doctrinal and biblical controversies, and moral issues such as abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and now even “transgenderism”!
- James Heidinger, *The Rise of Theological Liberalism and Decline of United Methodism* (2017):
 - ▶ “It is patently clear that we now stand at a crossroads as far as the future of United Methodism is concerned.... The United Methodist Church in America is in the midst of a struggle to recover its vitality and relevance.... We have lost touch with the substance of our rich Methodist doctrinal heritage.”
- Primary causes for decline:
 - (1) Modernistic (“Progressive”) theological heresy.
 - ▶ Doctrinal confusion on essential tenets of historic Christianity.
 - (2) Controversial social, political and moral issues.
 - ▶ UMC support for radical left-wing causes.
 - ▶ “Progressive” support of the radical LGBTQ+ agenda.
 - (3) Bureaucratic mismanagement and interference.
 - ▶ UMC bishops and bureaucrats interring in local churches to push a liberal theological, political and immoral agenda.

- What is needed:
 - Doctrinal and spiritual revitalization as well as ecclesial reform.
 - Christianity is an exclusive religion that distinguishes between truth and error.
 - Although contemporary “progressive Christianity” purports to promote tolerance, diversity, equity and inclusion – in fact it is hostile toward traditional doctrinal and moral absolutes.
 - Heidinger: United Methodism has lost its “theological identity.”
 - “If things don’t improve, many conservatives will either leave the UMC or else entire churches will attempt to disaffiliate.
 - Heidinger: “Thankfully, that has not happened yet.”[!]
- The problem of “theological pluralism.”
 - Heidinger: “For a numbers of years, we tried to conceal our theological differences under the cloak of ‘diversity’ United Methodism was seen as the denomination in which one could believe about anything one wanted to believe theologically. We were told repeatedly that we were not a doctrinal church.”
 - Christianity is all about distinguishing between theological (and moral) truth and error.

Liberal Historical Trends.

- In recent generations American Protestantism has generally become less biblically-literate and more theologically shallow.
- The Fundamentalist/Modernist controversies and the emergence of the Social Gospel.
- Traditionalists and progressives (or “accommodationists”) divided over basic theological and cultural issues:
 - (1) How to deal with the challenges of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and ethnic and religious diversity.
 - (2) The challenges of radical new political ideologies – socialism and communism.
 - (3) Theological differences related to biblical authority.
 - (4) The influence of new religions and alternative “spiritualities” such as Unitarianism, Universalism, Transcendentalism, the Occult, atheism, agnosticism, etc.
 - (5) Controversies over biblical authority and new scientific theories.
- Theological liberalism and its affects on denominational seminaries and colleges, professors and administrators, denominational bureaucrats and leaders, and church publishing.
- James Heidinger, *The Rise of Theological Liberalism and the Decline of United Methodism*:
 - “It is the thesis of this book that the era of the early 1900s in American Methodism was the critical period in which Methodism experienced major doctrinal transition, revision, defection, and even denial of her Wesleyan doctrinal heritage. It was this era that saw the rise of theological liberalism accompanied by the emergence of the social gospel....
 “It was a period of enormous upheaval and change for the Methodist churches in America, as well as for all of the historic mainline Protestant denominations....
 “Methodist history before 1900 is usually focused primarily on revivalism, personal morality, and the rapid growth of the denomination. However, after 1900 the historical accent fell on the church’s involvement in social ministry, liberal theology, and ecumenical impulses.”
- John Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923): Theological liberalism is a different religion than historic Christianity.
 - For progressives, everything associated with traditional Christianity needs to be questioned and revised.

- The liberal position:
 - ▶ The choice is between dead, sterile “orthodoxy” and exciting new trends in philosophy, anthropology, psychology, sociology, evolutionary science, Social Gospel humanitarianism, and biblical “higher criticism.”

[NOTE: Most progressives did not consider that they were “corrupting” Christianity but preserving the best of the Christian faith (i.e., Christian humanitarianism) by modernizing Christianity to make it more “relevant” and attractive to modern people and modern intellectual trends.

But in reality, God doesn’t need our help! Just teach the truth about the character and nature of God, the nature of mankind, and God’s purpose for creating mankind as revealed in God’s revelation, the Bible.]
- Theological liberalism and the Social Gospel were promoted by an influential minority within Methodism.
 - ▶ All of the defining and distinctive beliefs of traditional Wesleyanism eventually became negotiable.
 - ▶ Riley Case: There had always those who criticized American Methodism for its supposed anti-intellectualism, its hyper-emotional revivals and camp meetings, its Holiness influences, and its preaching against “worldliness”. But in the early 1900s, “It was the core of the faith itself – the Bible as the written revelation of God, original sin, the supernatural intervention of a transcendent God into human affairs, the Atonement, and the Resurrection” – that was being challenged and attacked....

“By 1920, modernism basically controlled Methodism.”
- The liberal rejection of core Christian doctrines.
- Standards for church membership were lowered.
 - ▶ The traditional Articles of Religion (est. 1864).
 - ▶ The traditional baptism liturgy (1884).
 - ▶ Abandoning the Apostles Creed (1932).

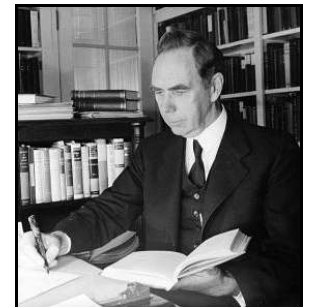
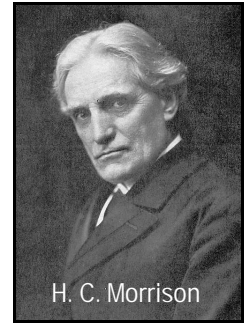
The Traditional Resistance.

- Major challenges in the late 19th century.
 - ▶ The Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy.
 - ▶ The Holiness movement.
 - The Church of the Nazarene and the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana).
 - ▶ Progressive’ “new theology.”
- Conservative “traditionalists” and liberal “progressives”.
- George W. Wilson, *Methodist Theology vs. Methodist Theologians* (1904).
 - ▶ Borden Parker Bowne and Wilbur Fisk Tillett.
 - ▶ Bowne’s “personal theism.”
 - ▶ Wilson: “Everything distinctively Methodistic is negated or denied in these pages [including] sin, repentance, [and] regeneration.”
 - ▶ Bowne’s heresy trial in 1904.
 - Riley Case: “If Bowne could not be convicted of denying the doctrines of the Church, then no one could be convicted. After Bowne, there was nothing that could be taught or denied by seminary professors that would make them unacceptable as teachers in Methodist seminaries. Heresy trials would cease to exist not because of an absence of heresy, but because of the lack of will to take doctrine seriously.”



George W. Wilson

- John Alfred Faulkner, *Modernism and the Christian Faith* (1921).
 - ▶ The influence of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89).
- H. C. (Henry Clay) Morrison and the founding of Asbury Theological Seminary (1923).
 - ▶ William Jennings Bryan: Morrison was “the greatest pulpit orator on the American continent.”
 - Morrison on the liberal trends in early-20th century Methodism.
 - Morrison in the *Pentecostal Herald* (1920): “We have many pastors today who have practically given up the orthodox faith; they do not hesitate to deny the inspiration of a very large portion of the Holy Scripture. They deny... the fall of man, the existence of original sin, the depravity of the [human] race, the need of regeneration, [and] the future punishment of the wicked.”
- Harold Paul Sloan and the founding of the Methodist League for Faith and Life (1925).
 - ▶ The liberal “new theology” threatens traditional Methodism just as “insipid Unitarianism” corrupted the Congregational Church a hundred years earlier.
 - ▶ Liberal influences in the Course of Study for Methodist Clergy.
 - ▶ Challenging the General Conference to uphold traditional Methodist beliefs.
 - The response: “We exhort ourselves and all of our brethren to avoid controversial agitation.”
- Edwin Lewis, *A Christian Manifesto* (1934) and “The Fatal Apostasy of the Modern Church.”
 - ▶ “What does the modern church believe? The church is becoming creedless.”
 - ▶ Liberals equate supernaturalism with superstition, and they want to reduce Christianity to spiritualized humanitarianism and the “Golden Rule”.
 - ▶ The church has essentially replaced the historic Apostles’ Creed with the modern “Social Creed of the Churches.” [NOTE: The Social Creed of the Churches and Harry F. Ward.]
 - ▶ The church is allowing the world to dictate the terms of what Christians should say and believe.
- The establishment reaction.
 - ▶ Most bishops and other leaders valued “Unity” over Truth, and feared that theological battles would cause division in the denomination.
 - ▶ A popular slogan: “We must not get involved in doctrinal controversy. We have more important tasks to be done.”
- The traditionalist response:
 - ▶ Ernest Fremont Tittle: “It is a matter of considerable importance what a man’s creed is.... For what a man believes will eventually influence what he does.”



Theological Controversies and Reactions: The Past 50 Years

Good News!

- Charles Keyser: Five foundational doctrines of biblically-based Christianity.
- The founding of *Good News* magazine (1967).
- A prophetic voice in the UMC.



Seminary Miseducation.

- Claude Thompson of Candler School of Theology (1970): Theological seminaries may be doing more harm than good.
 - ▶ “What can we expect from our pulpits when men are trained under teachers who profess no faith in God; who doubt His existence; who regard Jesus as only a good man – not a Savior; who have no place for prayer; who minimize the authority of the Bible; who have dismissed any idea of spiritually transformed lives under the Holy Spirit; who do not believe in life after death; and have long since come to regard our Wesleyan heritage – both theologically and evangelically – as out of date.”
- John Lawson, *An Evangelical Faith for Today* (1972).
 - ▶ The crisis in mainline Protestant theological education.
 - ▶ Seminaries were “selling out the gospel.”
 - ▶ Much of the indoctrination in these seminaries is “contrary to scripture, and to the [basic tenets] of historic Christian faith.”
 - ▶ For many students, seminary is “a devastating experience.”
 - ▶ “Someday there will have to be a great awakening, a far-reaching repentance, and a painful reappraisal” because young clergy are going out into Christian ministry confused about what their own personal faith and what their mission truly is.

Theological Miseducation in the Local Church.

- *United Methodist Teacher I and II*, the Teacher’s Manual (Spring 1969):
 - ▶ “The drama of Jesus would be far stronger and make a far greater appeal to this post-Christian age without all this supernatural claptrap brought in at the end with a dead man suddenly brought back to life again.... Wouldn’t the story of Jesus be more powerful and truer to itself in being less self-centered if his life had ended in death?”
- The assault on traditional theology by bureaucratic fascists.

Corrupting the *Book of Discipline*.

- A new UMC doctrinal statement, “Our Theological Task” (1972).
 - ▶ The principle of “theological pluralism.”
- A revision at the 1988 General Conference: “the primacy of Scripture.”

Ministerial Malpractice.

- James Heidinger: “Those of us who are clergy promised at our ordinations that we would “faithfully proclaim the Word of God and defend the church against all doctrine contrary to God’s Word.... May God give us the courage “to present ourselves to God as those approved, workers who do not need to be ashamed, who correctly handle the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15).

Conservative Declarations of Faith.

- The Houston Declaration of 1987.
- The Louisville Declaration of 1990.
- The Memphis Declaration of 1992.

The Confessing Movement.

- The example of the German Confessing Church movement of the 1930s.
- The 1994 statement:
 - ▶ “The United Methodist Church is at the crossroads. We face the peril of abandoning the Christian faith, thereby becoming unfaithful disciples of Jesus Christ...
 - “The causes of the crisis are complex and multiple. However, we believe that the central cause is our abandonment of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture and asserted in the classic Christian tradition and historic ecumenical creeds.... Specifically, we have equivocated regarding the person of Jesus Christ and his atoning work as the unique Savior of the world.”
- The 1995 Confessional Statement:
 - ▶ “The United Methodist Church is now incapable of confessing with one voice the orthodox Trinitarian faith, particularly Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and the Lord of history and the Church.”

The Summa: Reimagining Christianity.

- Over the past 20 years or more, secularists and leftists have wanted to “reimagine” every aspect of reality in keeping with their personal preferences: education, law and order, policing, morality, sexuality – and even human nature itself.
- They want to “Re-Imagine” Christianity in keeping with current humanistic social, cultural and moral trends.
- The origins of “progressive Christianity” and how it distorts and perverts the true faith.
- Basic biblical doctrines – and even basic biblical morality – have been subjectivized and relativized in the United Methodist Church over the past 120 years.
 - ▶ James Heidinger: “We have, in fact, seen the *trivialization* of the role of doctrine and theology in the church” by liberals who declare, “*We are not a creedal denomination*” and “*Let us celebrate our diversity.*”
- Alister McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine: Its Relevance and Purpose for Today* (1990):
 - ▶ “Inattention to doctrine robs a church of her reason for existence, and opens the way to enslavement and oppression by the world.”
- The “Re-Imagining” conference” (1993).
 - ▶ Celebrating feminism, “womanism” and lesbianism.
 - ▶ The Good News assessment: “This was without a doubt the most bizarre, theologically aberrant event we had ever read about.”
- Failure of the UMC Council of Bishops to condemn the “Re-Imagining” conference.
 - ▶ “Doctrinal matters only cause division within our denomination and divert attention away from things that really matter.”
 - ▶ James Heidinger: “Many wondered at the time: If our bishops will not address the many egregious denials of Christian doctrine expressed at the Re-Imagining event, is there any aberration or doctrinal denial they would speak out against in defense of our United Methodist doctrinal standards?... Bishops are charged with being the guardians of the church’s doctrine.”
- In retrospect: The “Re-Imagining” conference was the ultimate expression and legacy of “progressive” theological liberalism – a Satanic trend that has been building momentum and perverting American Christianity for over 300 years.