

1. United We Stand  
United in the Essentials of the Faith  
2 Kings 10:15-16

The week after next the United Methodist Church will hold its General Conference. A thousand delegates from all over the world will come together to revise and update our Book of Discipline and our Book of Social Resolutions. We do this every four years. They meet in a different city each time. This time, as it happens, the General Conference will be held in Fort Worth.

The Book of Discipline is guidelines as to how to conduct the business of the church. The Book of Resolutions describes the official position of the United Methodist Church on various social issues.

Nowhere in either of these books is anything about what you must believe in order to be a member of the United Methodist Church.

This is in line with John Wesley's teachings. One of his standard sermons which John Wesley insisted that all his preachers study is entitled, "The Catholic Spirit." In this sermon John Wesley uses as his text the passage from 2 Kings, "If your heart is to my heart as my heart is to yours...then give me your hand." In that sermon John Wesley says that as Methodists we are to offer the hand of fellowship to all who share our love for Christ, even if we don't agree on all points of our understanding of the gospel.

John Wesley was fond of quoting these words: "In essentials, unity; in opinions, liberty; in all things, charity." He was saying that Christians should be united in the essentials of our faith. But in everything else we should give one another the freedom to think and let think. And, as Christians, we should love all people, even those who reject the basic beliefs of Christianity.

What are the essentials of the faith? The Son of God came into the world to sacrifice his life to show us the depth of God's love for us and to call us to love God and love one another.

The essentials of the faith are John 3:16 and the Great Commandment. If people can agree that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life," and if we can agree that the proper response to God's gift of life in Christ is to seek to "Love the Lord your God with all the heart and soul and mind and strength," and to "Love your neighbor as yourself," that is enough to join together in Christian fellowship.

That's it. For us, those are the fundamentals of the faith. Methodists are really more fundamental than the fundamentalists. Many years ago, when I was a pastor of a little rural church in East Texas, I attended a revival at the other little church in the community. On the wall of the church it had a wooden plaque with the title, "The Fundamentals of the Church" on top. It then went on to list what they considered the fundamentals of the Christian faith. There were about twenty of them. They believed that you violated the fundamentals beliefs of Christianity if you didn't believe in a certain way of interpreting the Bible, if you didn't hold a certain understanding of end times, if you didn't have a certain understanding of the roles of men and women in the church and

in the home, if you didn't have a certain understanding of how Christ's death on the cross saves us.

That church called themselves fundamentalists. Well, I believe that United Methodists are more fundamental than the fundamentalists. We only have two fundamental beliefs: First, God loves us so much that in Christ God died so that we might have life. Second, the proper response to this gift of sacrificial love is to love God and to love God's children.

We have opinions about a lot of other things. We have opinions about free will. We have opinions about what baptism means. We have opinions about the doctrine of the Trinity. We have opinions about how love for our neighbors is best expressed.

We Methodists don't even agree with each other, much less with the members of other denominations about these and many other issues.

Back in 1984 Dr. Albert Outler was given the task of trying to summarize what United Methodists believe. He and his task force went to work to try to summarize the beliefs of United Methodists. They soon realized that what they were trying to do was impossible. There's too wide a diversity of beliefs among United Methodists. Instead, they described how United Methodists come to their beliefs. They described what has become known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Dr. Outler recognized that Methodists, starting from John Wesley, come to their opinions by turning to four authorities: Scriptures, tradition, reason and experience. If you ask a Methodist why he believes what he believes, he will say, "Because it's taught in the Scriptures, it's what I was taught by the church, my family and my teachers, it seems reasonable and logical, and it fits what I have experienced." That explanation of how Methodists arrive at their beliefs was placed in the Book of Discipline and lifted up as the proper way for us to grow in our understanding of the gospel. We are to grow in our understanding of what is taught in the Bible. We are to study what the church has taught over these two thousand years. We are to think about our beliefs and try to be reasonable and logical in our beliefs. And we are to be testing what we believe against what we actually experience. If your beliefs don't agree with your experiences, you need to take a closer look at your beliefs.

Well, people interpret the Scriptures differently. They come from different traditions. They reason differently and come to different conclusions. They have different experiences. As a result, they have different opinions. And that's all right. We are still willing to recognize and appreciate one another as fellow disciples of Christ.

We don't have to agree. That's why we say that the United Methodist Church has "Open hearts, open minds and open doors." As long as you love and serve Christ and you are seeking to grow in love for God and for your neighbors, the door is open to you to come into the United Methodist Church.

What do we do when we encounter someone with different opinions than ours? As United Methodists, we want to talk about it, not to convince everyone else to believe as we do, but so that we can learn from one another. Because we love one another, we can talk about different beliefs without getting angry or upset. We want to hear what others believe and why. We believe we have something to learn from one another. We enjoy sharing with others what we believe and why.

What do we do when we encounter someone whose opinion is that they are absolutely right and if we disagree with them we are heretics?

One time I was in a prayer group with pastors from several different denominations. We met every Wednesday morning to pray for our community and our churches and one another. We began that prayer group because we all felt a dark cloud hovering over that community. There was a spiritual oppression that seemed to permeate the town. So, we began praying. We prayed together for a couple of years, and, slowly but surely, the cloud lifted.

One morning one of the pastors asked me my opinion about one of the more controversial social issues of the time. I knew that he would not agree with my opinion, but I felt that after spending two years praying together, we had the kind of fellowship that would allow us to disagree in love. So, I told him my opinion. A few weeks later, he announced to the group that he could no longer fellowship with me, because I held a heretical belief. He offered to withdraw from the group. I felt that he needed the group more than I did, so I withdrew. I had grown to love those guys. I will always love them. I was sad for them. I was sad for the community. We were having a powerful impact through our prayers. I was sad for myself.

But I also understood. He was a good man. But he came from a denomination that was rigid in its beliefs. However, rigid beliefs are eventually broken on the realities of life. People who love their beliefs more than they love people eventually drive the people in their lives away. This man's daughter filed for a divorce from an abusive husband. His church demanded that he denounce his daughter. He couldn't do it. I was able to go to him and support him and love him through that experience.

What do we do when someone refuses to dialogue with us? We respectfully listen to their opinions. Then we wait. Sooner or later life will throw something at them for which they have no answer. When they are looking for answers, we will be there to love them and maybe to share the answers we have found.

I used to say that the only thing Methodists cannot tolerate is intolerance. Now I go further than that. If we don't tolerate the intolerant, we have become intolerant. Methodists must even tolerate intolerance.

Do you want to know the truth? This is it: The Son of God came into the world to tell us that God loves us and wants us to love one another. We believe that is the essential message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When we are united in love, we are a powerful force, transforming the world. When we are more in love with our opinions than we are with one another, we become part of the problem, not the solution.

Let us be united in love.

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