


REVIEW ARTICLE

# United Methodist Doctrine and Challenges for the United Methodist Church

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## Abstract

This report addresses the primary challenges confronting the United Methodist Church. In doing so attention will be on United Methodist doctrine and the Wesleyan theological heritage. This analysis is framed in such a way that would be appropriate for orienting new members to the United Methodist Church but it can also serve as a stand-alone report regarding the current situation within the church. What is presented is both an overview and a concentrated focus on domains relevant to church life. The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church is recognized as a fundamental document within this analysis.

**Keywords:** United Methodist Church, United Methodist Doctrine, Wesleyan Theological Heritage, Spiritual Salvation, Inclusion, Social Justice.

## Introduction

This report will address United Methodist doctrine, the Wesleyan theological heritage and primary challenges confronting the United Methodist Church. It is framed in such a way that would be appropriate for orienting new members to the church but it can also serve as a stand-alone report regarding the current situation within the church. What I am presenting is both an overview and a concentrated focus on domains that are relevant to church life.

United Methodist Church doctrine is addressed in competent detail in *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*[10]. It overviews the concept of doctrine in relation to the Methodists and then proceeds to explain doctrines about religious authority and doctrines about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Then, foundational doctrines about human nature and salvation are covered. Distinctively Wesleyan doctrines about salvation are addressed in the “Way of Salvation.” The aforementioned then serves as the foundation for the presentation of doctrines about church, ministry and sacraments followed by doctrines about judgment, eternal life and the reign of God. Methodist doctrine as it relates to Methodist ethos is then given focus followed by emphasis on the Apostles’ Creed, the 25 Articles of Religion and the General Rules. The aforementioned provides a general understanding that would hold relevance for those who are new and getting oriented to the United Methodist Church.

A fundamental publication that one can access regarding the

United Methodist Church is the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church[1]. It provides an overview of what constitutes the United Methodist Church and how governance is practised. It is a lengthy document at 898 pages. The most recent version was published in 2016. It covers a wide range of governance factors, including the UMC constitution, doctrine, doctrinal statements, general rules, the ministry of all Christians, social principles, the local church, the ministry of the ordained, the superintendency, the conferences, administrative order, church property and judicial administration.

What I have presented thus far emphasizes an overview listing of topics that I would stress to incoming United Methodist Church members. I will now address topic areas in a more thorough manner rather than just make this report a listing of topics without explanation. However, I offer the aforementioned listings with the goal of providing a general context for the United Methodist Church. There are a variety of concerns for such a large organization.

There are issues confronting the United Methodist Church (UMC) that have a linkage with UMC doctrinal roots. These issues reveal applications having to do with doctrine and are useful for learning more about the contemporary church. Human sexuality and the ongoing disaffiliations linked with human sexuality present a particularly potent controversy in the UMC at present. This most specifically has to do with the inclusion of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender, queer) individuals as members and clergy.

The aforementioned disaffiliations are part of a larger consideration having to do with unity and ideas associated with separation. At what point is it counterproductive to continually seek common ground versus acknowledgement of existential differences that can legitimately lead to separation? If there is a chance of the latter prevailing then there should be some attention focused on the means for such separation. Otherwise, this lack of separation protocol can be a breeding ground for distrust.

The issue of gender equality in leadership roles within the UMC poses ongoing debate. There are differing views within the church regarding women in the ministry. Social justice issues pose similar degrees of concern. There is not a consistent view having to do with how the church should involve itself with such matters, if at all. The linkage with mission illustrates how such involvement could occur.

Social justice controversies are front and center in American culture. The UMC finds itself part of the debates. Church membership varies with regard to how much the church should be part of such controversies. Thus, we can see how the differences of opinion regarding the topics are at play, but the role of the church with such things is part of the dialog and there are differing views about how the church should participate in the dialog. In a word it is "messy" and new church members should be forewarned about these kinds of challenges that are confronting the church.

In a more fundamental vein regarding theological processes the interpretation and authority of scripture is being weighed in different ways across the UMC membership. Conservative versus progressive interpretations of scripture percolate via ongoing venues. Comparatively speaking—such matters regarding the authority of scripture pose less immediate challenges in that the historical context of the church is accustomed to addressing these kinds of theological questions.

Similarly, there are ongoing dialogs about doctrines having to do with salvation and atonement. These kinds of interpretations often have to do with how one approaches salvation through Christ. Indeed, as a preface to such exchanges, church members can often be at odds regarding how Christ is to be conceptualized. Hence, there can be disagreement regarding the salvation and atonement topics but there can also be even more fundamental disagreement having to do with how the basic topics are conceptualized.

On a more macro level, the UMC is challenged by the varied cultural contexts that come together via the auspices of globalization. The blending of cultural contexts is something of a blessing and it does present opportunities but it also presents challenges having to do with seeking to work from common meanings and frameworks. Each entity has local orientations it is working to blend with the larger global frame of reference. This can be enriching but it can also be confusing and a source of conflict.

This assignment is arranged in such a way that we are expressing what we have learned in the course via a format tied to how we would introduce new church members to membership in the UMC. During my process of studying relevant documents associated with this assignment, I have come across fundamental ideas that are at times boldly pronounced in chapter titles and at other times simply mentioned in the text of a chapter. The next point I address illustrates the latter in that it is part of the textual presentation but it could also stand alone as a primary point for consideration.

In his discussion of doctrine and the ordained ministry, Ted Campbell presents the following statement. "Methodists may believe any number of things as individuals, but doctrinal statements adopted by communities can alone speak on behalf of those communities."<sup>[2]</sup> I find this statement to be straight forward and easy to comprehend but think it is rich with nuance regarding what it means to be a member of the UMC. It frames the idea that a UMC member can have her/his perspective concerning a matter under consideration but that she/he must also operate under the auspices of the larger church membership. It can be something of a balancing act.

I am retired from the military. My career allowed me to focus on seeking peaceful means to pursue U.S. foreign policy objectives in Southeast Asia. Use of force always loomed as a possibility but those of us working in the diplomatic domain continually sought to develop creative ways to avoid the use of force and to seek out common ground. We aimed at olive branches instead of guns. I was personally invested in this intention. It often worked well when we identified peaceful means for resolution. At times it did not. During the times it did not I had to proceed with the awareness that, in the final analysis, I was an employee of the U.S. government. To paraphrase the quote from the previous paragraph I was free to believe any number of things as an individual but foreign policy objectives stressed by the U.S. government alone spoke for the organization I worked for. This reality could be a source of dissonance at times.

The new member of the UMC should be mindful of this reality. In the U.S., we highly value our individual rights and freedom of expression. The new member of the UMC will do well to remember she/he is free to have her/his views about matters confronting the larger church but that such views are just that—the views of the individual. Being part of a larger organization comes with inherent strength because of the numbers represented in organizational membership, but it is also yoked with the reality we do not always get our way and that we do not always prevail with our points of view. I think the new member may find this disconcerting at first but can be able to become more comfortable with it over time while acclimating to new membership.

In a similar vein, one can find meaning by being part of a global organization that represents global interests via global affiliations. This reality has multiple results that can be concurrently affirming and challenging. The UMC recognizes 25 Articles of Religion that cover a range of issues. The seventh and eighth articles have to do with free will. "These articles together make clear the belief that our salvation is the result of God's grace, not our work or effort."<sup>[5]</sup> This kind of position can run counter to how we live our lives in the United States in a capitalist system.

Under capitalism, we find that most goods and services can be obtained through labour that produces capital. It is something that we earn. Hence, we are raised to believe we can earn what we want. A corollary with this is that we need to earn what we want. The idea that something as precious and relevant as God's grace is not something we earn—but that is a gift—can be difficult to comprehend. It raises the question that if it is provided at no charge then why bother living in accordance with Christian principles? This issue reveals how the framework of capitalism, which has benefitted us individually and collectively in the U.S. with a wide range of material goods, is not always commensurate with interpretations associated with the Christian faith.

What I have presented in the preceding two paragraphs is a fundamental tenet in the UMC perspective and should be embraced as such by those who are new to UMC membership. "The understanding of the 'way of salvation,' then, is one of Methodism's spiritual treasures: a distinct vision of the Christian life that seeks comprehensive transformation by God's grace."<sup>[7]</sup> To be a United Methodist is to live with acceptance of this gift. It also poses a question having to do with how can I (as a United Methodist) seek comprehensive transformation. What is the path? How do I get from where I am to that path? How do I know when I have arrived there? How can I work to stay on that path once I have arrived? What are the distracting forces that might lead me astray? How do I combat those distracting forces? What does all this mean for me? Is it worth it?

If a person is to be fully invested in their faith, then these questions have relevance. The power of prayer as a variable having an impact on religious well-being would be a significant consideration. The parameters of prayer would serve to frame our understanding of prayer. This is illustrated in the contrast between the UMC and Catholic orientations. "The Methodist Articles of Religion, following the teachings of the Reformation, rejected the medieval Catholic idea of purgatory as a place where the souls of those who have died

in Christ could be aided by the prayers of the living.”[8]

The aforementioned exemplifies a limitation regarding the power of prayer. This distinction is not necessarily good or bad, but it is a distinction. It illustrates a distinction that a newcomer to Methodism would need to reflect upon regarding her/his association with Methodism. It would merit further inquiry having to do with other limitations that a person would need to consider as an adherent to Methodism. This also serves as a relevant illustration of how Christian faiths in the United States are practiced differently. Such awareness will serve a Christian of any denomination well as she/he seeks to place oneself within the larger Christian church.

The doctrinal heritage of the UMC is effectively laid out in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. “Our heritage in doctrine and our present theological task focus upon a renewed grasp of the sovereignty of God. . . . Their preaching and teaching were grounded in Scripture, informed by Christian tradition, enlivened in experience, and tested by reason.”[9] This says a lot about the Methodist historical perspective that serves as the foundation for the present day. “Grounded in Scripture” highlights a fundamental embrace of scriptural interpretation. “Enlivened in experience” stresses practical application in our daily lives. “Tested by reason” allows room for emphasis on the scientific method and related logic and then being able to reassess the direction one is going in relation to an issue. It further allows for changing course if the prescribed course does not stand to reason.

I find the latter point (“tested by reason”) to be particularly relevant in that it evidences a living church that is not only open to changing times but also prescribes being mindful of not clinging to past practices simply because it reflects the status quo. Change can be difficult in any circumstance. Methodism stresses the need to change when reason dictates change and reflects a progressive mindset that is especially relevant in an ever-changing social order. This is particularly relevant in the United States, given the amount of continual change we experience with each passing decade.

I can offer a personal observation of this addressing change in practical terms via my association with the Lakeside Chautauqua Community on Lake Erie. Lakeside was created in 1873 by Methodists and celebrated their 150th anniversary this past summer. I delivered an educational seminar at Lakeside in 1996 based on my past work as a university social scientist and have returned at least one week each summer since then. I have consistently noted how the organizational culture of Lakeside is attuned to the need to be open to change, but I have also observed how the implementation of change is well thought out and often rooted in a well-grounded rationale. It is not change for the sake of change. It is this spirit of embracing change that has kept Lakeside relevant in the lives of many. I have been continually impressed to learn how many of the new directions they proceed toward are grounded in Methodist applications of the past but appreciated today in a renewed sense.

This practical nature of Methodism receives repeated emphasis in *The Book of Discipline*. The section titled “Our Distinctive Heritage as United Methodists” conveys “The underlying energy of the Wesleyan theological heritage stems from an emphasis upon practical divinity, the implementation of genuine Christianity in the lives of believers.”[3] This practical focus takes time and effort but the benefit to Methodists seems to speak for itself. The UMC has managed to not only survive but thrive. It is more a tribute to the future than a present-day relic of the past.

For as practical as Methodism is there is also a more abstract dimension to be appreciated. Such is the case with the concept of prevenient grace. Focus on it can be found in *The Book of Discipline* section that addresses “Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases.” It offers much to ponder. “We acknowledge God’s prevenient grace, the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses.”[4] There is a beauty to be recognized in this kind of abstraction. I admire the aforementioned well-grounded practical nature of Methodism but I think there should be room for less clearly delineated phenomena and the conceptual framework

offered through prevenient grace illustrates such a venue.

The concept of God draws from the imagination to a degree. I have a 24-year-old son, and when he was about five, I remember being challenged as I tried to explain the concept of a loving God to him. Meanings associated with prevenient grace were helpful with that objective. When we speak of divine love there is an unconditional nature to it. It seems to concurrently acknowledge human fallibility and human potential. Much of my work as a social scientist focuses on China and I recognize a similar kind of acknowledgement of human fallibility and human potential in their focus on the yin and the yang. We are concurrently coming and going with our envisioning.

The UMC doctrinal history allows for drawing a bridge between the practical nature of Methodism and the more abstract meanings that are embraced. In Wesley’s description of the “spiritual pilgrimage” we live he describes a “model for experiential Christianity. They insisted upon the integrity of basic Christian truth and emphasized its practical application in the lives of believers.”[6] This is an appropriate venue for closing this report in that it brings us back to the idea of an experiential Christianity. A Christianity that has practical applications and provision for our full participation. It is a Christianity where we play a contact sport rather than merely sit on the sidelines and observe.

Within this participation comes an implied responsibility. This involves a responsibility to ourselves, our families, our communities and our nation and—most importantly—our God. It is not some end point. Rather it is the path we live our lives on and this requires continual monitoring to ensure we are on course and are enabled to make adjustments as needed. Such judgements require wisdom and this essential wisdom can come to us through our lived experiences that Methodism provide. These kinds of realizations can benefit the newcomer to Methodism and can be affirming to the lifelong Methodist.

## Author notes

Jim Schnell, Ph.D. is a cultural analyst associated with the Fulbright Scholar Association. He retired from the U.S. Air Force, at the rank of Colonel, with his final 14 years serving as an Assistant Air Force Attache at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China. Schnell is a three-time Fulbright Scholar to Cambodia, Myanmar & Kosovo, has completed three visiting fellowships at the East-West Center (Honolulu) and has taught at Ohio State University, Cleveland State University, University of Cincinnati, Miami University, Beijing Jiaotong University, Fudan University (Shanghai), Royal University of Phnom Penh and Duy Tan University (Vietnam).

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