

“Methodists: Reasonable Enthusiasts”

Acts 26:15-25

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If you lived through the 1960's in California, you would have heard this, *“If it feels good, do it.”* This represents Hippie's culture. They pursued human pleasure, peace and love, feeling good rejecting social values and against materialism. In our contemporary world, many people use a similar spirit in making their own decisions, for saying, “I am going to do what makes me feel good, what gives me pleasure.” Some people adopt this as their spiritual experience of God “if you feel the spirit, you are saved.” This is hedonism. In other words, it is not divine spirituality but emotional satisfaction and fulfillment. Simply divine spirituality is different from the pursuit of pleasure. The true religious or spiritual experience is not rooted in our own human pleasure, but it derives from the external divine power which warms and moves our hearts deeply and completely. Once you experience it, it starts to change your world view, attitude and eventually it transforms you into a new being. This is not a scary experience, but it is still a joyful and wondrous life changing event! How do we experience *that*? The Methodist spirit grew within John Wesley through his personal experiences. John Wesley was the founder of Methodism and we are called Methodists. However, many people might not know where Methodism spirituality was based and what our spiritual identity claims as Christians. This morning, I challenge all of us to be a John Wesley and claim his spirituality as ours. For sure, his spirituality isn't emotional ecstasy that will drive you crazy, rather it will give you clarity, enthusiasm, and stronger faith of assurance. Above all, it brings you courage to be a new person. Let us explore more together.

In early 1736, two years before John Wesley's Aldersgate conversion, John Wesley had his first significant encounter and spiritual inspirational experience that would have an enormous influence on his ministry and the Methodist movement. John Wesley was on board a ship bound for Georgia hoping to preach the gospel in America. When a ferocious storm shredded the main sail and flooded the decks. Many of the English passengers screamed in terror that they would be swallowed by the deep. John Wesley was terrified, too. He was afraid to die. When the storm was particularly severe, he noticed that a group of Moravian missionaries from Germany calmly sang throughout the squall. He wrote in his journal:

A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, “Were you not afraid?” He answered, “I thank God, no.” I asked “But were your women and children afraid?” He replied mildly, “No; our women and children are not afraid to die.”¹

His other personal experience was on May 24 1738. He wrote in his journal about the now-famous account of his conversion:

“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society on Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, *I felt my heart strangely warmed.*”²

After these personal and warming experiences, John Wesley began to found Methodism. But John Wesley never intended to start a new denomination. He deeply desired to reform the Church of England in his day. As an Anglican priest, John Wesley committed himself to renew the Anglican Church. As a matter of fact, Methodism began as a renewal movement within the Anglican Church. I want to tell you a little bit more about the Anglican Church.

In the early 1700’s, rationality was an essential and superior spiritual element in the Church of England. The Anglican Church emphasized three important spiritual disciplines: Scripture, tradition, and reason, but they didn’t put a great emphasis on personal holiness, passion and experience. John Wesley deeply grieved that the Anglican Church lost spiritual vitality and passion. So John Wesley and his brother Charles, both Anglican priests, began to seek more from their faith. In 1738 Wesley brothers had personal and profound yet spiritual experiences. And they came to have an assurance of their salvation through the experience of “The God within them”. They incorporated their God experience into their beliefs and need for the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives. John Wesley embraced “experience” as part of holiness.

The most important and unique theological contribution in both Wesley and our Methodism’s spirituality is that reason and experience are equally important. The combination of the intellectual pursuit of God with spiritual passion is part of the basic foundation of Methodism. So the early Methodists were called “reasonable enthusiasts.”

¹ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.i.v.html> Accessed on Feb. 3rd 2017

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-28/1738-john-charles-wesley-experience-conversions.html> Accessed Feb. 3rd 2017

Unfortunately, the title, “enthusiast” for John Wesley was a disgraceful nickname because the Anglican Church priests hated enthusiasm. The word “Enthusiasm” was originated from the Greek, “en-theos, “the God within”) and it meant, “possession by a divine spirit” In the eighteen century, enthusiasm was regarded as a deadly enemy with possession of diabolic spirits or a dread disease in a form of hysteria harming the healthy state of mind. But John Wesley and his colleagues preached the Holy Spirit. Of course, John Wesley was very careful to distinguish his definition of enthusiasm from other forms of enthusiasms. John warned his followers in his sermon, “The Nature of Enthusiasm” saying that “Enthusiasts deny this “plain, scriptural, rational way to know” the will of God.” Ironically he and his colleagues were named “Enthusiasts by the Anglican Church priests. But John Wesley believed right enthusiasm as “the only acceptable one being the operation of grace in individuals”. In John Wesley’s sermons, he saw the definition of enthusiasm as negative. He defined it as a sign of “religious madness” arising from some falsely imagined influence or inspiration of God. Religion should be an expression of a sound mind and such expressions cannot be considered sound.”³

Our Methodism emphasizes the balanced stance between our experience and reason. The term, “Methodist” originates in Oxford. John Wesley and Charles Wesley formed themselves and organized a spiritual formation group, called, “The Holy Club”. They rigorously kept spiritual disciplines such as communion, prayers and Scripture study for deepening their spirituality. Literally they lived by “Method”. In other people’s eyes, these young students’ spiritual disciplines seemed to be too rigid, methodical and non-rational.

For John Wesley and early Methodists, the experience of Grace was a sound form of enthusiasm. This gift of grace comes from God and will be given and revealed in our individual enthusiasm experience. But this gift of grace does not define our understanding of enthusiasm. We should continue to make our intentional efforts, strive to grow and become mature through ongoing spiritual disciplines and practicing individual holiness and social holiness. John Wesley and his fellows established a “methodical ways” to practice our spirituality. We should keep these seven spiritual disciplines in our minds and do it as possible as we can. These are as follows:

First, *prayer*. Be spiritually awake and keep conversing with God
Second, *the importance of public and private worship*. In short, do as much as you can in order to stay in touch with God.

³ <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-37-the-nature-of-enthusiasm/> Accessed Feb.23rd 2017

Third, ***observe communion***. Be intentionally to attend communion service. Communion is not merely a symbolic rite to remember our Christ Jesus. We experience God's presence in taking bread and cup the body of Christ during this holy hour.

Fourth, ***Alms of giving***: Reaching out the poor, sick and help those in need is not an additional option as Methodists, but it is requirement for our salvation

Fifth, ***Bible study***. Do not neglect to know God. Be diligent through your intentional faith development and improve your spiritual senses.

Six ***Fasting***. Fasting doesn't necessarily mean to torture your body or to be on a diet for your sake. Rather it reminds us that we are spiritual beings. Through practice of fasting with varieties of ways, for example, during Lenten season, having a light meal or avoiding sweet things for the purpose of restoring our spiritual relationships with God.

Lastly, ***Christian Conferencing***. It means your Christian connections through Church ministries and committees and your interaction with your pastor and church spiritual leaders.

Who are we? Who are Methodists? We know God by our minds, accept Jesus Christ by our hearts and do serve and transform our world by our hands and feet. Most importantly we have the power of God's grace. What John Wesley emphasized to Christ followers and us is a balanced heart and mind, reason and experience and grace and holiness. Simply speaking about Christian spirituality, we are "reasonable enthusiasts!" This is the essential Methodist spirit that defines us! Amen.