



What Do United Methodists Believe? (Part I)

By Thomas Lambrecht



A previous "Perspective" [blog](#) called attention to a [survey](#) conducted by United Methodist Communications that indicated 44 percent of grassroots United Methodists consider themselves theologically conservative/traditional. At the same time, 28 percent identified as moderate/centrist and 20 percent as progressive/liberal.

This finding runs counter to the narrative that the "vast majority" of American United Methodists are moving in a more progressive direction, particularly on issues like marriage and sexual ethics. While the survey did not include questions specifically related to the denomination's current controversy, the results pointed to a substantially conservative theological foundation for United Methodism in the U.S. Even when there is a clear difference between conservatives and liberals, a majority of liberals often affirm a traditional theological perspective. (Of course, one wonders if people might be using the same words, yet defining them differently based on different doctrinal perspectives.)

The online survey was aimed at laity who were members or regular attendees of United Methodist churches in the United States, but who do not serve as local church leaders. As such, the survey attempted to reach the ultimate "grass roots" of the church in order to gauge their beliefs on a number of theological points. Previous surveys have found that the farther up the "ladder" from the grass roots membership into the leadership of the church one ascends, the more theologically liberal are the beliefs people hold.

Who Is Jesus?

The most important aspect of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ. Orthodox Christian doctrine answers the questions Who is Jesus and What did Jesus do? Over 92 percent of

United Methodists of all theological stripes believe that "Jesus was a real person who actually lived."

When asked if Jesus was "the son of God?" 98 percent of conservatives believed so, compared to 82 percent of liberals (moderates were at 92 percent). At the same time, nine percent of both conservatives and moderates said "Jesus was only human and not the son of God." (The numbers do not add up properly here, so the results may not have been accurately reported. Alternatively, some may have answered both "yes" and "no" to the son of God question.) Notably, 16 percent of progressives asserted that Jesus was only human. This is a small percentage and reflects a relatively high view of Jesus Christ even among United Methodist progressives.

More than 35 percent of liberals thought "Jesus was only a religious or spiritual leader." While 21 percent of conservatives and 23 percent of moderates agreed, 25 percent of liberals thought "Jesus was a great man and teacher but not divine," compared with 20 percent of moderates and 15 percent of traditionalists. These answers do not fit well with the answers to the previous question "Was Jesus the son of God." One can only assume that many members have only a fuzzy idea of what it means to call Jesus "the son of God."

Strikingly, 48 percent of progressives thought "Jesus committed sins like other people." One-third of conservatives and 38 percent of moderates agreed.

Fully 82 percent of conservatives believe "Jesus will return to earth someday." Only 66 percent of liberals agreed, as well as 76 percent of moderates.

Finally, 94 percent of conservatives believe Jesus was conceived by a virgin. Only 68 percent of liberals agree, along with 82 percent of moderates.

The inconsistent answers to these questions about Jesus indicate we may not have done a very good job as a church of teaching our doctrines. Our Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith teach that Jesus was indeed the son of God, that he is divine, conceived by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and that he will return again to earth. And the Bible clearly states that Jesus did not sin (II Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15, I Peter 2:22).

What did Jesus do?

Nearly all (98 percent) conservatives believe that "Jesus died on the cross to reconcile us with God," while 96 percent of moderates agreed. By contrast, 84 percent of progressives affirmed that statement. The overwhelming majority of conservatives (95 percent) affirmed that "Jesus died so we could have eternal life" - 90 percent of moderates agreed, while 82 percent of liberals agreed. Disappointingly, 18 percent of liberals affirmed, "Jesus' death has no impact on my eternal life."

Not surprisingly, 86 percent of traditionalists believe "the only way to salvation is through a relationship with Jesus." Only 64 percent of moderates and 54 percent of liberals agreed. More than 35 percent of moderates and 46 percent of liberals believe "there are ways to salvation that do not involve Jesus."

In accordance with an orthodox perspective, 98 percent of conservatives "believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead." Meanwhile, 90 percent of moderates and 81 percent of progressives believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection.

Here again, the official teachings of our church affirm that Jesus died on the cross to reconcile us with God, so that we could have eternal life. Our teachings hold that Jesus bodily rose from the dead, and that the only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ. The divergence indicated by the survey answers pinpoints a need for clearer teaching of the main essentials of our faith.

The fact that so many moderates and progressives believe in multiple ways of salvation is a key factor in the decline of evangelism in the church. Why focus so much on Jesus if he is not essential to our salvation?

Conclusion

There is nothing more at the heart of our Christian faith than our understanding of who Jesus is and what he accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection. It is encouraging that super-majorities of United Methodists hold to orthodox, traditional theological understandings.

Still, significant minorities of our members believe that Jesus is not God, calling into question the Trinitarian heart of our faith. This includes a significant number of progressives denying the virgin birth of Christ (one of the articles of the Apostles' Creed). Large numbers think that Jesus committed sins, just like the rest of humanity. And significant percentages do not believe Jesus will return to earth someday (another article of the Apostles' Creed).

Next week, we will look at other beliefs of grass-roots United Methodists.

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