



What Do United Methodists Believe? (Part 2)

By Thomas Lambrech



A recent [survey](#) by United Methodist Communications 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.

In a previous [blog](#), I examined the implications of this finding. Last [week](#) I delved more deeply into specific beliefs United Methodists hold about Jesus Christ, who is the center of our faith. Today, I want to look at some other Christian doctrines and what United Methodists believe about them.

The Bible

What do United Methodists believe about the Bible? The survey posed a number of statements about the Bible, from which respondents had to choose one. Three of the statements emphasized the divine origin of Scripture, with different levels of trust in the specifics:

- "The Bible is the actual word of God and should be taken literally."
- "The Bible is the inspired word of God with no errors, some verses symbolic."
- "The Bible is the inspired word of God with some factual or historic errors."

Traditionalists were nearly equally divided between these three statements (30, 28, and 30 percent). Moderates decisively preferred the third statement (47 percent), while 15 percent approved the first statement and 26 percent the second. Liberals also preferred the third statement (37 percent), while distancing themselves from the first statement (4 percent) and moderately supporting the second (22 percent).

Strikingly, 88 percent of both traditionalists and moderates affirmed the inspiration of Scripture (approving one of the above three statements), while only 63 percent of liberals did.

One-third (34 percent) of progressives supported the human origins of the Bible by affirming one of these two statements:

- "The Bible is not inspired. It tells how writers understood the ways and principles of God."
- "The Bible is just another book of teachings written by men."

Less than ten percent of moderates and conservatives agreed with either of these statements.

The significant minority of progressives holding a low view of Scripture's inspiration fits with the finding that only six percent of progressives chose Scripture as their most authoritative source in personal theology.

Encouragingly, only one percent across the board of all United Methodists thought that "the Bible is an ancient book with little value today."

What is salvation?

As expected, 89 percent of traditionalists believe that "salvation is being saved from the righteous judgment of God," while 80 percent of moderates and only 69 percent of liberals agreed. Fully 31 percent of liberals (and 20 percent of moderates) believe that "all people will die saved." This strain of universalism is not consistent with our Wesleyan theology and acts as another brake on evangelism. (If everyone will be saved, there is no urgency to proclaim the Gospel.)

Disturbingly, only 33 percent of conservatives and 15 percent of liberals believe that "salvation is through faith alone," while 67 percent of conservatives and 85 percent of liberals believe "salvation is a combination of faith and what we do in this world." Salvation by faith alone is a cardinal doctrine of the Reformation, of which we recently celebrated the 500th anniversary. As Protestants, we believe that good works follow from faith, but they do not contribute to our salvation. That depends upon faith in Jesus Christ alone, through his death and resurrection.

The influence of American evangelicalism on United Methodism is seen in the fact that 41 percent of conservatives believe that "once you are saved, you are always saved." One-third of liberals and 37 percent of moderates agreed with this statement. One of the primary distinctives of Wesleyan theology (in contrast to today's more common Calvinist theology) is that "a person can fall away and lose their salvation." "Backsliders" (as they were once called) can return to faith through repentance and once again be in right standing with God. But it seems on this question many of our members are more Calvinist than Wesleyan.

Another cardinal Wesleyan doctrine is that "God's grace is available to every person." Our people have gotten that message, as it is affirmed by over 95 percent across the board. Mystifyingly, while 97 to 99 percent of moderates and conservatives believe in God as "creator of heaven and earth," only 87 percent of progressives affirmed that statement.

Unsurprisingly, 91 percent of conservatives believe in a literal heaven, in contrast to 73 percent of progressives and 80 percent of moderates. At the same time, 82 percent of conservatives believe in a literal hell, in contrast to only 50 percent of progressives and 67 percent of moderates.

These beliefs about salvation do influence how effectively local churches proclaim and live out the Gospel. If everyone will be saved, there is no urgency or even any point in trying to get non-believers to believe in Jesus. The belief by supermajorities that "what we do in this world" impacts our salvation plays into the American emphasis on doing, rather than being, and upon the idea that we in some sense earn our own salvation. The prevalence of "once saved, always saved" thinking minimizes the need to authentically live out our faith and continue growing in our faith. Yet, even these three beliefs are contradictory, meaning that we have not helped our members think through a coherent and consistent theology of salvation.

Conclusion

The survey questions were not worded as carefully as I would have liked. Multiple interpretations of some of the questions could easily have somewhat distorted the results. However, taken together, I think the survey results show a clear theological difference between conservatives and liberals in general. Sometimes, moderates fall in the middle, but on many questions, moderates are closer to traditionalists in their views. It is this underlying theological difference that accounts for the depth of disagreement in our denomination. One might almost say that different groups in our church are operating according to different theological worldviews or different doctrinal systems. There are very few of the questions on which there is theological agreement.

Where there is much agreement and a small number of areas of disagreement, it is easier to preserve an overall unity and "agree to disagree" on those few issues of disagreement. However, where the disagreement seems clear and widespread over many issues, it is much more difficult to preserve unity. That is the situation that faces our church today.

The survey also makes it clear that systematic, clear teaching of United Methodist doctrine and theology is sorely needed in our churches. Perhaps we tend to focus so much on preaching and teaching that hits the "felt needs" of our people that we forget about the importance of laying the theological foundation on which the more practical teachings of the faith are based. And we have forgotten how practically relevant those foundational teachings really are. Our church's ministry needs more theological depth.

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