

Wesleyan Covenant Association Presentation
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Text: Romans 1:16-17

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Title: Unashamed of the Gospel

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

God’s grace is amazing.

In a world where there is hatred, grace produces love.

Where there is war, grace produces peace.

Where there is racism, grace embraces diversity.

Where there is sexual immorality, grace produces morality

Where there is loneliness, grace produces community.

Where there is greed, grace produces generosity.

Where there is emptiness, grace produces purpose.

Where there is anxiety, grace produces joy

Where there is pain, grace produces healing.

Where there is sin, grace produces holiness.

The world is full of problems. There are evil people, natural disasters, technical difficulties, bodily pain, human suffering, and ethnic divisions. This world needs salvation. Such a view is not unique to Christians—even non-religious persons can see our human condition and recognize that all is not as it should be.

We Christians agree that there are deep problems facing human beings and planet Earth. But we have received good news. Literally, there is a gospel. Good news. Good news. There is a God who has acted and is acting to save the world. That God sent his only begotten Son, actually the second aspect of his own being, to teach and die for the salvation of the world. Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the promises made to Abraham and his descendants that through them all the peoples of the earth would be blessed. Jesus did not leave humanity orphaned when he ascended into heaven, but sent us another comforter—the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Part of my amazement about grace is that God decided to use human beings as agents in the salvation story. Jesus gathered disciples who founded a church that is God’s primary means of grace to save the world. Now I have deep questions about God’s wisdom in adopting this strategy. I am, after all, a leader in God’s church. I have witnessed God’s church—especially that part called The United Methodist Church—when it is being used by God to do amazing things. We are often that means of grace that saves souls, heals bodies, reconciles people and transforms the world. But I have also witnessed God’s church—including The United Methodist Church—being a sinful group serving lesser purposes and engaging in practices of which I am ashamed. When I get to heaven, I am going to tell God, “Surely you could have found a better way to save the world than by using human beings. We are sinful, fallible, short-sighted, easily distracted, self-interested and prone to mistake. Surely, God there must have been a better way.”

I suspect, however, that God will look back at me and say like he did to Job, “Who are you to challenge my wisdom? Where were you when I created the universe? Who are you to presume to tell me how to accomplish my purposes?” I will probably hang my head and admit that God is God, and I am not, and God’s purposes to use the Church for the salvation of the world must be the right way. It’s just that I yearn for a Church that is sold out for the gospel and fully committed to sharing it with a world that needs it so desperately.

You see, I am not ashamed of the gospel, and I understand that God is always calling us to be vehicles for his grace and asking us to sacrificially serve his purposes in the world. What a privilege that is! I have seen God do amazing things if we are willing to offer our time, our talent, our money, our prayers, in other words, our very selves for God’s purposes. I am proud to be a United Methodist Christian and grateful for the blessings that God has poured out. I have been blessed in countless ways. Our United Methodist Church has been blessed and used by God in amazing ways. The Church is a means of grace and many are the times where we have saved souls, fed the hungry, healed diseases, opposed racism and sexism, and brought justice to the oppressed. We have been blessed to be a blessing, and I thank God for his amazing grace. It is a privilege to be a United Methodist Christian, and an incredible blessing to be a pastor, professor and leader in God’s church.

Yet, I know that when God’s power is active, there frequently arises opposition. Some times and places are more hospitable for the gospel to be preached and embodied than others. Parts of the problem we are facing in Europe and America are the cultural changes related to secularization and the improvements in technology. Leaders of our political systems, our educational institutions and our culturally influential decision-makers are much more hostile to Christian values and the Christian message than in the past. Too many universities founded by churches are now characterized by hostility to explicit belief in God. Our media—television, movies and internet—often have no religious content unless it is to contradict it. Leading scientists often display no understanding that one can believe in modern science and the Bible at the same time. In reaction, some of our Christian brothers and sisters engage in practices both intellectual and moral that cause us deep embarrassment, and we desperately seek to tell the non-believing world “We are not like them.” Serving Christ with biblical faithfulness, intellectual integrity and cultural relevance has become increasingly difficult in my lifetime.

Nevertheless, I can repeat with joy the words of the apostle Paul: “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” With John Wesley, I understand that difficult passages of Scripture are best interpreted in accordance with the analogy of faith, “that grand scheme of doctrine which is delivered in the Bible”. This general theme of Scripture is the way of salvation. Let’s rehearse that pathway one more time. I know, that probably is redundant in this group. I am preaching to the choir. Yet we must always hold fast to it. I remind you of Wesley’s opening words in his “Thoughts Upon Methodism:”

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.

Three key elements: spirit, discipline, doctrine. We must maintain the spirit and by that I understand our focus on our mission. We are at heart a missionary movement. We were raised up to reform the continent and to spread scriptural holiness across the land. You should know that

the first draft of our current mission statement quoted that phrase found in the first discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Fortunately for you and the whole church, Gary Mueller spent ten minutes convincing me that Jesus is more important than John Wesley, and that Matthew 28 is a more sacred text than the Discipline. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and our future vitality depends on aligning all our resources on that mission.

Wesley's admonition also calls us to maintain our discipline. Our disciplined approach to serving Christ is a hallmark of our identity. We obey our conferences. We obey our rules. In Charles Ferguson's famous phrase, we are organizing to beat the devil. We are methodical.

Wesley's admonition also focuses on our doctrine. We are a biblical people, and our way of reading Scripture is faithful and fruitful. Our Wesleyan understanding of the gospel, contained in our doctrinal standards is a precious resource for accomplishing our mission.

We believe in prevenient grace. Words like prevenient, convincing, justifying and sanctifying are sometimes difficult to explain to people, and yet I do not give up on them—they are biblical. Rather than avoiding the use of holy and powerful words, we should be explaining them. They carry so much clarity. First, grace is grace. It is the unmerited love of God. We know from 1 John 4:8 that God is love. In verse 19 it says, "We love because he first loved us."

I must tell you an illuminating anecdote. The week of 9/11, I was lecturing at Cliff College in the north of England. It was a mixed group of D.Min. students from all over the world—Methodists and other denominations. I started out with a claim that I thought was obvious and everyone could agree with. I said, "God's most important attribute is that God is love." Immediately I was in trouble with my audience. A missionary working in Sudan raised his hand and said, "That is wrong. God's most important attribute is God's sovereignty." Suddenly, I saw the Arminian-Calvinist controversies of the 17th and 18th centuries playing out right in front of me once again. Not all Christians believe that God's saving love is offered to everybody. I am a Wesleyan which means God's love is fundamental to my reading of Scripture. And it does extend to everybody. John 3:16 says "For God so loved all white people." No. For God so loved all black people." No. For God so loved all well-educated people." No. For God so loved all Americans. No. For God so loved all Methodists. Well maybe you'll give me a little on that one. What does it say? For God so loved _____. The World. Everybody. This is the biblical foundation of our Wesleyan commitment to human rights and the dignity of every person. This is the reason we welcome all persons regardless of race, national origin, language group, tribe, sexual orientation, political affiliation, whatever into our ministries. We believe Christ died for all. In the Texas Conference, we are working with the theme "We Love All God's Children." More than that, we believe that God's grace is actively working in the lives of the people we are evangelizing, even before we get to speak with them in person. It is prevenient.

We also believe in convincing grace. Andrew Thompson's recent blog calls attention to the fact that too many people overlook this aspect of God's saving work. God's grace tells us where we have fallen short. Wesley says that the law and the gospel work closely together. The law teaches us that we need salvation and the gospel then saves us. Preaching about sin might be painful, but it is like a physician diagnosing our disease and naming what is causing us pain. Without the right diagnosis, there can be no appropriate cure. Too often we preachers shy away from naming what is really wrong in the lives of our people and instead offer a watered-down version of love which comes across as "I'm okay, you're okay." Kenda Creasey Dean says too many churches don't offer a powerful gospel—they have substituted moralistic therapeutic

deism. I fear I have done that. Early in my ministry a prospective member of my church convinced me to remove the prayer of confession from the regular Sunday morning liturgy. He said it was a downer, and he need to be uplifted each week. So, I did that. A month later he abandoned his wife and daughter to run off with his secretary, with whom he had been having an affair. Where there is pain, grace produces healing. We need greater clarity about the sins of our time, and especially to note our own sins and shortcomings when viewed by the clear commandments of Scripture. The clear response to convincing grace is repentance.

We also believe in justifying grace. This is the great promise of Scripture including what the Psalms say about God's steadfast love, to the vision of Isaiah 1: "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Romans 5:1-2 is a powerful summary: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God." Each person's relationship to God, however bad it is, whatever sins one has committed, regardless of what one has done, there is hope for reconciliation with God and God's people. However far we have strayed, whatever country we have gone to, God wants us home and welcomes us.

Mr. Wesley said if religion is like a house, repentance is the porch, justification is the doorway and the rest of the house is sanctification. He quoted Hebrews 12:14 often: "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

We believe in sanctifying grace. That is really the whole point of the Christian life—to love God with everything we've got, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. I take the Bible very seriously. Along with Mark Twain, I say that it is not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that bother me. It's the parts I understand very well that bother me. Like Matthew 25 where the people who make it into the kingdom are those that feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick and imprisoned. Or the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Or the worst verse of all, Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." But this is where our Wesleyan doctrine is so helpful. Mr. Wesley says that every commandment in scripture is a covered or hidden promise. This verse which commands "be perfect" (present imperative) can equally well be translated as the future indicative, "You will be perfect." That's grace. That's the power of God for salvation. God is going to help you achieve the goals God has set for your life.

I suspect I am addressing a group of people for whom orthodoxy is a high value. When I summarize the Wesleyan understanding of the Bible's way of salvation, many of us want to get it just right. We care about doctrinal standards, and we have studied and believe in the Creeds, the Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith, Wesley's Sermons and Notes on the New Testament. We value right belief. But there are two dangers such a commitment engenders.

First, there is tendency within me to a lack of humility. Anybody else have that problem? John Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit" is very important here because he distinguishes between essential doctrines and matters of opinion. Essential doctrines like the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, the resurrection, and salvation by faith through grace are held by all Christians. If I were to make a list of all my opinions, I am certain of only one thing: I am wrong somewhere. To be human is to make mistakes, and no persons gets it all right all the time. I think Baptists are wrong about baptism, and I can make all the arguments to tell them so. But, since the mode of baptism is not an essential doctrine, I must cultivate humility about that in case it is one of the places where I am wrong. For those of us who care about truth and correct doctrine, we are especially prone to a sinful attitude that starts from a place of unintended but real arrogance. We

must always remember, when disagreeing with other Christians, that the other side just might be right on this point.

Second, orthodoxy is only valuable if it leads us to having the mind which was in Christ Jesus, to embodying holiness. It must be generous orthodoxy in the sense of helping us love. This is the whole point of Wesley's sermon. He builds on the text from 2 Kings 10 to focus on the question, Jehu asked Jehonadab: "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thine hand." This phrase is a strong way of talking about the unity of the church and why we are better serving Christ together.

But Wesley doesn't stop there. He describes what it means to join hands in the service of God.

First, love me with the love that is patient

Second, commend me to God in all thy prayers

Third, provoke me to love and good works.

He then makes clear. He rules out practical latitudinarianism and speculative latitudinarianism. He says that catholic spirit is not indifference to congregations. He describes a person of catholic spirit:

But while he is steadily fixed in his religious principles in what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus; while he firmly adheres to that worship of God which he judges to be most acceptable in his sight; and while he is united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation, --his heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love. And he that has this is of a catholic spirit. For love alone gives the title to this character: catholic love is a catholic spirit.

In the midst of controversies about what the church should teach and how the church should exercise discipline over its bishops and clergy, it is vital that we have a catholic spirit. We hold on to our understanding of gospel truth while loving everybody. Catholic spirit is a catholic love toward all humankind. Each of us needs a deeper sense of that love enlarging our own hearts and a greater discipline in practicing it. That love and that discipline come by the grace of God.

How do people get that grace? God's primary tool is the church, because all holiness is social—we do this in community. We do this by participating in the means of grace which are the ministries of the church—weekly worship, accountability groups, holy communion, daily Bible study, daily prayer, acts of mercy toward the poor. The Holy Spirit is aching to use us for the transformation of lives. We must embrace the gospel and our role in its proclamation and embodiment. I want to be part of a church that conveys God's amazing grace to people in need, like the ones shown in this video.

VIDEO

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3SQITjJ2U>

I belong to a denomination where many local churches are embodying God's amazing grace. What a privilege it is to be part that process. Thanks be to God for his gospel.