

# *Because Christianity Is Not a Private Affair*

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

February 22, 2009

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*Genesis 1:1 (NRSV)*

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth . . .

*Genesis 12:1-3 (NRSV)*

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

*Leviticus 19:18 (NRSV)*

<sup>18</sup>You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

*John 3:16 (NRSV)*

<sup>16</sup>"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

*1 Corinthians 12:12 (NRSV)*

<sup>12</sup>For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

*With this study, we finish up our series, "Why We Are United Methodists." We know that God's Good News is not a matter of private faith but a public proclamation of God's work to restore his creation. As Methodists, we live out this public life through "The Connection."*

John Wesley had a missionary's heart. He devoted the better portion of his life to preaching the Good News among the masses and to righting the injustices of his own country. Wesley embraced open-air preaching after overcoming his misgiving about its appropriateness. He went to the people -- he had a story they needed to hear. He probably felt more like a town crier than an Anglican priest, but he went. John, with his hymn-writing brother Charles, went to Georgia as a missionary in his early thirties. It didn't go too well; Charles returned home after six months and John followed about a year later. Nonetheless, he went.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is a proclamation meant for the whole world. I often read and hear commentators who say they are ok with religious faith of any stripe, so long as we keep it to ourselves; in other words, they are saying that religion has no place in the public square. But John Wesley would certainly strive to help them see that not only would the banishment of religion from the public square be bad for our country, the Christian story is a *public* story.

*We've a Story to Tell to the Nations*

We Christians have a story to tell, a story that we believe to be true, a public story. Even the angels who arrived to announce the birth of Jesus carried a message intended for all the world. Of course, when I say we have a story to tell, I perhaps need to spell it out a bit. The Scripture passages I selected for this week highlight key themes of this story. Bishop N.T. Wright, staying away from Christian "jargon," tells it the story thusly<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup>This summary of the Christian story is from N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 32. Wright's work stands squarely in the midst of the historic, traditional, orthodox Christian faith. Wright is presently the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England.

"The story is about a creator and his creation, about humans made in this creator's image and given tasks to perform, about the rebellion of humans and the dissonance of creation at every level, and particularly about the creator's acting, through Israel and climactically through Jesus, to rescue his creation from its ensuing plight. The story continues with the creator acting by his own spirit within the world to bring it towards the restoration which is his intended goal for it."

### The Wesley Study Bible

Abingdon, the publishing arm of the UMC, has just released their new Wesley Study Bible. Using the NRSV translation, the study notes are written by biblical scholars who are all members of the Wesleyan-Methodist family, which is much larger than just the UMC. The notes "assist the reader in following the flow of the text and highlight issues that are important to our Wesleyan heritage."

It also includes textboxes on key Wesleyan terms and perspectives (about 250 of them), as well as "life application" textboxes written by Wesleyan/Methodist pastors.

In the introduction, the editor writes, "We need to *know* who we are. Even more, we need to *be* who we are. Therefore, we offer the *Wesley Study Bible* to the people called Methodists across the world, trusting that it will serve as God's instrument to help us be clear about who we are, shape us as people going on to perfection, and encourage us to live lives that truly reflect our faith in Christ."

Wright holds that these sorts of over-arching stories seek to answer four questions: Who are we? Where are we? What is the problem? What is the solution? Christians, he writes, propose the following answers to these questions:

"(1) Who are we? We are humans made in the image of the creator. We have responsibilities that come with this status. We are not fundamentally determined by race, gender, social class, geographical location; nor are we simply pawns in a deterministic game.

(2) Where are we? We are in a good and beautiful, though transient, world, the creation of the god in whose image we are made. We are not in an alien world, as the Gnostic<sup>2</sup> imagines; nor in a cosmos to which we owe allegiance as to a god, as the pantheist<sup>3</sup> would suggest.

(3) What is wrong? Humanity has rebelled against the creator. This rebellion reflects a cosmic dislocation between the creator and the creation, and the world is consequently out of tune with its created intention.

(4) What is the solution? The creator has acted, is acting, and will act within his creation to deal with the weight of evil set up by human rebellion, and to bring his world to the end for which it was made, namely that it should resonate with his own presence and glory. This action, of course, is focused upon Jesus and the spirit of the creator."

This is the story that God has given us to tell. It is a public story, meant for the ears of those who will listen. It is much more than a matter of private belief. And yes, it contradicts other stories told by other religions and even by atheists, whose story is devoid of any god. Nonetheless, we hold that it is true that there is a creator God who revealed himself fully in Jesus Christ and who, out of love, gave his Son so that the world may be reconciled to God.

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<sup>2</sup>Gnosticism (as seen, for example, in the so-called Gnostic Gospels of *DaVinci Code* fame) holds a dualistic world-view, in which spirit is good and material is evil. Thus, for the Gnostic, the human goal is to escape from the material world and body. This is accomplished by gaining access to some sort of special knowledge, the *gnosis* (the Greek word for "knowledge"). Gnostic perspectives permeate much of the present-day religious and spiritual landscape. Sometimes people will try to escape this evil world by searching for their inner spirit, looking for the god within themselves. Others will attempt to escape by looking upward, seeking to climb some sort of spiritual ladder. There are two excellent books on American Gnosticism: Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) and Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Pantheism holds that god and the cosmos are identical. God is everything and everything is god. This is different from "panentheism" which is the belief that God and the cosmos are not the same thing, but that god exists within and interpenetrates every part of the cosmos. Both of these belief systems (worldviews) are antithetical to the Christian worldview.

## Methodist “Connectionalism”<sup>1</sup>

“United Methodists often joke about the many organizational layers of church life, but, as members of other denominations have been heard to say: ‘If you want something done, get the Methodists to do it.’ Followers of the Wesleys are indeed ‘methodical’ about the ways they approach mission and ministry.

One reason United Methodists are able to accomplish great things is the church’s emphasis on ‘connectionalism.’ It is common to hear United Methodist leaders speak of the denomination as ‘the connection.’ This concept has been central to Methodism from its beginning.

The UMC, which began as a movement and a loose network of local societies with a mission, has grown into one of the most carefully organized and largest denominations in the world. The UM structure and organization began as a means of accomplishing the mission of spreading Scriptural Holiness over the land. John Wesley recognized the need for an organized system of communication and accountability and developed what he called the ‘connexion,’ which was an interlocking system of classes, societies, and annual conferences. (UM Member’s Handbook, p 24)

No local church is the total body of Christ. Therefore, local United Methodist churches are bound together by a common mission and common governance that accomplish reaching out into the world. United Methodist churches and organizations join in mission with each other and with other denominations.

Connectionalism shows through the clergy appointment system, through the developing of mission and ministry that United Methodists do together, and through giving.

An example of connectionalism: Mission work around the world, whether it be a new university in Africa or bicycles for Cuban pastors, is the work of “the connection,” as opposed to the work of a single congregation.”

<sup>1</sup>from the UMC’s “United Methodism 101”

## “The Connection”

As United Methodists, we know that to live out our of stated mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ<sup>4</sup>, we must not only proclaim this Good News to the world in all that we say and do, but we must also *be* good news. Our way of being this good news, of being the church, is to embrace our common fellowship, our connection to one another, one church to another. The text box to the left will give you a brief overview of what we Methodists call “connectionalism.”

We believe that even with all the problems of “organized religion,” there is great power in our churches connection to one another, working together for common goals. For example, the United Methodist Commission on Relief (UMCOR) responds to natural disasters all over the world. Because they are able to use the UMC’s existing organization structure 100% of the money that local churches donate to UMCOR go directly to relief and not to overhead. Thus, when St. Andrew generously responded to the tsunami tragedy of several years ago, we did so confident that our 100% contributions went right to the place of need.

Here’s other examples. Because all the UMC churches contribute money to a “common pot,” the UMC is able to help sustain churches in small communities and poorer neighborhoods. We support a worldwide system of missionaries, who help us to sustain a global vision of our part in the building of God’s kingdom. Indeed, the fastest growing conferences in the UMC are in Africa and Asia. Of the 11.5 million United Methodists, only about 8 million reside in the U.S.

Still following John Wesley’s vision of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, we United Methodists remain committed to taking our place in the public square, as God’s people proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup>In the UMC Book of Discipline, our governing documents, the stated mission of the UMC is refreshingly brief, only six words long: “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” The UMC goes on to state that “Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making happens.”

## Garrison Keillor on Methodists

Several people sent me this in recent weeks. I'm not sure where it came from, but I thought you'd enjoy it – and it is often very much on the mark!

People, these Methodists, who love to sing in four-part harmony are the sort of people you can call up when you're in deep distress.

- If you're dying, they will comfort you.
- If you are lonely, they'll talk to you..
- And if you are hungry, they'll give you tuna salad.
- Methodists believe in prayer, but would practically die if asked to pray out loud.
- Methodists like to sing, except when confronted with a new hymn or a hymn with more than four stanzas.
- Methodists believe their pastors will visit them in the hospital, even if they don't notify them that they are there.
- Methodists usually follow the official liturgy and will feel it is their way of suffering for their sins.
- Methodists believe in miracles and even expect miracles, especially during their stewardship visitation programs or when passing the plate.
- Methodists think that the Bible forbids them from crossing the aisle while passing the peace.
- Methodists drink coffee as if it were the Third Sacrament.
- Methodists feel guilty for not staying to clean up after their own wedding reception in the Fellowship Hall.
- Methodists are willing to pay up to one dollar for a meal at the church.
- Methodists still serve Jell-O in the proper liturgical color of the season and think that peas in a tuna casserole add too much color.
- Methodists believe that it is OK to poke fun at themselves and never take themselves too seriously.

All this means that, if you are to be counted among their numbers, You will know you are a Methodist when:

- It's 100 degrees, with 90% humidity, and you still have coffee after the service.
- You hear something funny during the sermon and smile as loudly as you can.
- Donuts are a line item in the church budget, just like coffee.
- When you watch a Star Wars movie and they say, "May the Force be with you," and you respond, "and also with you."

And lastly, you'll know you've been in the presence of a Methodist, if it takes ten minutes to say good-bye!

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the study, I wrote that "I often read and hear commentators who say they are ok with religious faith of any stripe, so long as we keep it to ourselves; in other words, they are saying that religion had no place in the public square." Do you hear this yourself? If so, what do you think is driving this move to shove not only Christians, but people of all faiths, out of the public square? What do you think ought to be our response? What ought to really matter to us when it comes to our place in the public square? From what you see, where do Christians get this right? Where do we get this wrong?

2. The old hymn goes, "We've a story to tell to the nations." We do . . . but could you tell it? How would you tell it? What do you think of Bishop Wright's succinct telling of this story? What changes would you make to his telling? Which parts of this story do you think might raise the most trouble with non-Christians? Where would you find your own story in this larger story? What do the five Scripture fragments that I used today have to do with this story?

3. The UMC is a large well-organized institution. This has its advantages and disadvantages. You might make a top five or top ten list of the pro's and con's. When you look over your lists, what changes to the UMC come to mind. If you had five or ten minutes to speak to the UMC's General Conference (the governing body that meets every four years), what would you say to them?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. This week's readings are all the larger passages from which small portions were used in this study.

<p><b>Monday, Genesis 1</b> God creates the cosmos.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Genesis 12:1-9</b> After the rebellion of the humans, God sets out to put things right and calls Abraham to be the one through whom God's project would move forward.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Deuteronomy 6:1-9 &amp; Leviticus 19:9-18</b> God tells his people what he expects of them: to love God and to love neighbor.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, John 3:1-21</b> Jesus tries to help a Pharisee understand what is happening in and through Jesus. God is completing his project to rescue all the world. Why is God doing this? Because "God so loved the world . . ."</p>
<p><b>Friday, 1 Corinthians 12</b> God has equipped his people with various gifts so that they might be strengthened in their of building for God's kingdom.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## ***Jesus: The Great I AM***

***This new sermon series begins next week at 9:30***

Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Lent. In John's Gospel, Jesus makes seven dramatic statements about himself that begin "I am . . ." These include "I am the bread of life" and "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In this Lenten series, we'll explore each of the seven statements, seeking a deeper understanding of what they reveal to us about Jesus and the vocation that will take him to a cross in Jerusalem and to his resurrection.

## ***The God of Possibilities***

Why do we pray? Do we actually think we can influence God? Does God genuinely respond to us? Do our prayers actually matter in how things work out? We'll tackle these questions and more as we consider how it is that God relates to each of us and to his creation.

This series concludes today in Scott Engle's Sunday class.

We meet in Festival Hall at 11:00. Please join us!

## ***What Have They Done With Jesus?***

***Why You Can Trust the Bible***

***A new series in Scott's 11:00 class – begins next Sunday***

We are coming up to what I call the "silly season" of Easter television specials about Jesus. Each year there seems to be some new discovery or new insight that is supposed to reveal, at long last, the truth about Jesus. One year it is about the love child of Jesus and Mary Magdalene and the next it is the scoop revealed by Judas in his gospel. I wonder what it will be this year?

Join us for Scott Engle's class at 11:00 on Sundays, beginning next Sunday, March 1, as we debunk the latest fad theories about Jesus.

### **Sermon Notes**

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