

*Daniel 3:19–21, 24–27 (CEB)*

<sup>19</sup>Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and his face twisted beyond recognition because of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In response he commanded that the furnace be heated to seven times its normal heat. <sup>20</sup>He told some of the strongest men in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the furnace of flaming fire. <sup>21</sup>So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, still dressed in all their clothes, and thrown into the furnace of flaming fire. . . .

<sup>24</sup>Then King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in shock and said to his associates, “Didn’t we throw three men, bound, into the fire?”

They answered the king, “Certainly, Your Majesty.”

<sup>25</sup>He replied, “Look! I see four men, unbound, walking around inside the fire, and they aren’t hurt! And the fourth one looks like one of the gods.” <sup>26</sup>Nebuchadnezzar went near the opening of the furnace of flaming fire and said, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire. <sup>27</sup>The chief administrators, ministers, governors, and the king’s associates crowded around to look at them. The fire hadn’t done anything to them: their hair wasn’t singed; their garments looked the same as before; they didn’t even smell like fire!

*Romans 12:9–17 (CEB)*

<sup>9</sup>Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. <sup>10</sup>Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. <sup>11</sup>Don’t hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! <sup>12</sup>Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you’re in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home. <sup>14</sup>Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them. <sup>15</sup>Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. <sup>16</sup>Consider everyone as equal, and don’t think that you’re better than anyone else. Instead associate with people who have no status. Don’t think that you’re so smart. <sup>17</sup>Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.

*How “United” are we United Methodists?*

I used to be troubled by all the denominations that make up the body of Christ. Aren’t we supposed to be one body, unified in Christ? Do the various denominations have to be seen as destroying the unity of the body?

In his various letters to churches, Paul often talks about the diversity among God’s people. Some of us are given gifts of caring or leadership. Others are gifted teachers or administrators. None of these gifts are superior to the others; all are needed in God’s household (see 1 Cor 12:4–31 for example). God’s family is strengthened, not weakened, by the diversity of these individual gifts. I’ve come to see denominations in much the same way. Christ’s church is strengthened by the Roman Catholic emphasis on tradition and the Baptist commitment to evangelism. All Christians can learn a lot about the reality and power of the Holy Spirit from the Pentecostals and the Eastern Orthodox. The Presbyterians and Reformed remind us all of the importance of the Christian mind. Within this diversity, we seek unity in the essentials of our Christian proclamation and in our service to others while respecting, and using, our differences. It is in this seeking after unity in diversity that we United Methodists make our own distinctive contributions.

### *The “Middle Way”*

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was born the son of an Anglican (Church of England) minister and died as an Anglican minister himself. Methodism was birthed in the Church of England. When the storms of the Protestant reformation swept across Europe, the English struggled to reconcile two polarized groups. On the one hand, there were those who wanted to stay part of the Roman Catholic church. On the other hand, there were groups like the Puritans who wanted to restore what they referred to as “primitive Christianity.” The leaders of the Church of England sought to find a “middle way.” This seeking after the center, the *via media*, underlies the Anglican and the United Methodist churches to this day.

I couldn’t count how many “mixed” marriages I’ve encountered in Methodist churches. You know what I mean – one spouse raised Roman Catholic and the other Southern Baptist. It seems that Methodist churches have enough liturgy and tradition to speak to the Catholic but enough revivalism to speak to the Baptist. This commitment to the “middle way,” or as Scott Jones (a UMC Bishop) puts it, “the extreme center,” is reflected in our theology as well as in our practices. United Methodists affirm that the Bible is the “primary criterion of Christian doctrine,” but we remember that our traditions, our intellect, and our experience all help to shape our understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We try hard to avoid simplistic “bumper-stick” interpretations and passing fads. We are committed to unity in the essentials of our faith but remember that there is much that Christians can disagree about. As Wesley put it, “we think and let think.” But thinking was not enough for Wesley; our faith must be lived out.

### *A practical folk*

While at Oxford, John Wesley and his brother, Charles, recognized that even though many of their peers professed faith in Christ and could get an “A” on any theology exam, you’d never guess it from how they lived or what they did. Many Christians, embracing the Reformation slogan of “faith alone,” thought they could sever what they believed from how they lived. It was, and still can be for many, the perspective that coming to faith in Jesus gets one’s ticket to heaven punched and anything that follows is just gravy – good to do, but certainly not part of the business of salvation.

It was Charles’s idea to form a small group of Christians who would pursue lives of genuine discipleship. The group, which never exceeded twenty-five, was mockingly referred to by fellow students as the “Holy Club.”

The “Holy Club” members fasted until 3 PM on Wednesdays and Fridays, received Holy Communion once each week, studied and discussed the Greek New Testament and the classics each evening in a member’s room, visited prisoners and the sick, and systematically brought all their lives under strict review.

Later, the Wesleys’ methodical approach to discipleship and holy living led to the tag, again meant mockingly, “methodists.” This “Methodist” movement within the Church of England grew and spread to the American Colonies, where Methodism began as a lay movement. After the revolution, John Wesley put in place the tools and mechanisms that would ultimately allow the Methodists in America to separate from the Church of England and become an independent church. John sent to America a prayer book with orders of worship and twenty-five articles of faith. John even sent over two lay preachers that he ordained himself, which led to Methodism’s split from the Church of England.

Thus, from our beginnings, Methodists have always emphasized the living out of one’s faith. The stated mission of the UMC is simple and reflects the Great Commission

given us by Christ: “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

And we Methodists embrace a practical theology – or “practical divinity” as John Wesley put it. Here is what the UMC says about our theological task:

“Our theological task is essentially practical. It informs the individual’s daily decisions and serves the Church’s life and work. While highly theoretical constructions of Christian thought make important contributions to theological understanding, we finally measure the truth of such statements in relation to their practical significance. Our interest is to incorporate the promises and demands of the gospel into our daily lives.

Theological inquiry can clarify our thinking about what we are to say and do. It presses us to pay attention to the world around us.”<sup>2</sup>

A word of caution – by “practical” we mean that we put our theology, our beliefs, into practice. We don’t mean a utilitarian, “whatever works,” sort of faith. We mean simply that our rebirth in Christ must be borne out in how we live. Do we build up the body of Christ? Are we a good witness to Jesus in all that we say and do? Do we seek to help those in need and minister to those who suffer? In all this, we can find unity with Christians throughout the world and across denominational divides.

### *Getting to the truth*

This organic connection between what we know about God and how we live with God and others, depends on our making our way ever closer to the truth about God. But how do we do that? How do we arrive at a trustworthy core of beliefs about the God with whom we live? Further, how do we develop the trust in God seen in Daniel’s friends as they were tossed into that fiery furnace? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego simply would not abandon their faith and their God even in the face of seemingly certain death.

The UMC Book of Discipline holds that “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified [to impart vitality] in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.” These four: *Scripture*, *tradition* (what we’ve gotten from those who came before us), *experience*, and *reason* constitute what has been dubbed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. A mistake sometimes made is to think that Methodists see the four as equals, merely four complementary means of coming to know the truth about God. But that isn’t it at all. We affirm that Scripture is the primary criterion of what we believe, the measure against which all claims are judged. But we recognize that we learn about God also by listening to those who have come before us (tradition), by seeking to understand our own experience with God and others, and by learning to think well.

As United Methodists, we know that to live out our stated mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ, 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.

All of Paul’s teachings about Christian behavior can be summed up in this way: do what builds up the community, do what is a good witness to those on the outside, avoid what tears down the community, and avoid what is a bad witness. For Paul, contributing to the needs of others and showing hospitality (v. 13 in today’s passage from Romans) are good acts in themselves, but they are part of the larger purpose. Generosity and kindness proclaim to others God’s goodness and power.

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<sup>1</sup> From the UMC *Book of Discipline*, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Living in harmony with one another (v. 16), rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep (v. 15)– these are all good in and of themselves. But they are part of a larger purpose. Loving one another with mutual affection (v. 10) is part of how we carry out God’s charge to us to be the light to the world. God calls us to love God and one another *with passion*, to build up St. Andrew *with passion*, to protect the community that God has entrusted to us *with passion*, to serve others *with passion*, to give *with passion*, to learn *with passion*. Always and everything, *with passion*. Notice what Paul writes in v. 11: “Don’t hesitate to be enthusiastic – be on fire . . .” Are we passionate servants of Jesus? Are we passionate about St. Andrew? Are we a passionate church? Here is how Eugene Peterson has rendered v. 10 in *The Message*: “Don’t burn out: keep yourselves fueled and aflame.” Are we on fire? That is the question John Wesley would ask us.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. It is a good time to reflect on our own experiences with Methodism. Here a few questions to think about or discuss with others:
  - How did you come to faith in Jesus Christ? Has it been a lifelong process for you or can you identify a moment or a period in your life when you were consciously changed?
  - Why are you a United Methodist? What attracted you to United Methodism? What disturbs you about Methodism?
2. 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

**Monday, Isaiah 59:1-8** Why do prayers and fasting have no effect? Not because of God, but because of the people’s violence and social injustice.

**Tuesday, Matthew 28:16-20** Jesus gives his disciples the Great Commission.

**Wednesday, Luke 6:27-36** Jesus talks about loving those who are the hardest to love.

**Thursday, John 13:1-20** Jesus washes the feet of the disciples at the last supper.

**Friday, Ephesians 4:1-16** Building the body of Christ – the larger passage

**Saturday, 1 Corinthians 12** God has equipped his people with various gifts.

## Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

*This class will not meet on July 2, 9, and 16.*

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Colossians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

*This class will not meet on July 3 and 10*

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.