Hi,

Today’s update:

* There won’t be a “Hope in Christ” email tomorrow, as I will be out of the office.
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

Today, we reflect on the practicality that infuses Methodism.

***Ephesians 2:8-10 (NRSV)***

**For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.**

***James 2:14-18(NRSV)***

**What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.**

**But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.**

***Matthew 7:24-27 (NRSV)***

**“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”**

Jesus spent two and a half years or so with his disciples. Teaching them by way of parables and more. Enacting for them the arrival of God’s kingdom. Showing them what it really means to live in God’s way. Why? Why so much teaching and doing? Because Jesus was making them into disciples, genuine apprentices learning to be like the Master. They weren’t to be just hearers of Jesus’ words, but doers of them. And before Jesus returned to the Father, he told them, in the Great Commission, that they were to go out and *make* still more disciples (Matthew 28:19). We are re-born into Christ, but we are *made* into disciples.

Too often, Christians feel forced to choose between the above passages from Ephesians and James. Doesn’t Ephesians say that we are saved by faith, not works? But then doesn’t James ask sarcastically, “Can faith save you?” Paul, the writer of Ephesians, seems to make it all about faith while James, Jesus’ half-brother, seems to make it all about works. We wonder, which is it?

But, as in much Christian theology, we don’t have to and, indeed must not, choose between them. As Roger Olsen of Baylor’s seminary puts it, salvation is both gift *and* task. Our re-birth into God’s family is all about God’s grace and his grace alone. We don’t contribute to it or assist in any way. AND . . . this gift of faith is embodied in how we live, i.e., our “works.” Both Paul and James would embrace this AND. Both knew that genuine faith in Christ *will* result in good works, or, as Paul put it, the “fruit of the Spirit.”

Faith and works. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ by virtue of God’s saving grace, we are re-born. But we still have to be made into disciples, for what we do (our “works”) is the embodiment of our faith. It isn’t so much that the good works are an “ought,” but that they are the inevitable outworking of genuine faith. Thus, the NT writers can speak of salvation as both gift *and* task, as instantaneous *and* as a process.

*The Holy Club*

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. Many Christians, embracing the Reformation slogan of “faith alone,” thought they could separate 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’ 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.

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.” 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 (from the 2016 Book of Discipline):

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.

Realities of intense human suffering, threats to the survival of life, and challenges to human dignity confront us afresh with fundamental theological issues: the nature and purposes of God, the relations of human beings to one another, the nature of human freedom and responsibility, and the care and proper use of all creation.

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? Do we build our houses on sand, only hearing Jesus’ words or do we build them on rock, on being doers of the Word?

*A bit more: Is It the Teachings or the Teacher?*

Too often people, including non-Christians will think they can live by Jesus’ teachings while ignoring Jesus. J. Budziszewski calls this “The Second Tablet Project. When Moses brings down the two tablets, the first speaks to our relationship with God (no other gods, for example) while the second tablet speaks to our relationships with others (no coveting, for example). Thus, the “Second Tablet Project” is an attempt by many in our world to live according to the second tablet while disregarding the first – trying to live by the teachings while ignoring the teacher.

But, as Ellsworth Kalas, so aptly puts it, “the teachings did not prove the greatness of the teacher; Jesus proved the greatness of the teachings. Jesus’ disciples acknowledged that these teachings came with an authority greater even than Moses because of what they saw in Jesus, not what they heard in the teachings.”

These teachings are not capable of transforming us, only Jesus transforms. Left to ourselves, we could never love our enemies. To the extent that we can do so at all is because the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) works within us. Jesus is more than our teacher. He is our Savior. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Trying to live out the teachings of Christ without the power of Christ is a project doomed to failure.

But by the grace of God, we are not on our own as we strive toward true kingdom living. God’s Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, works with us, helping to transform us into ever-truer disciples of Jesus – in all things.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott