

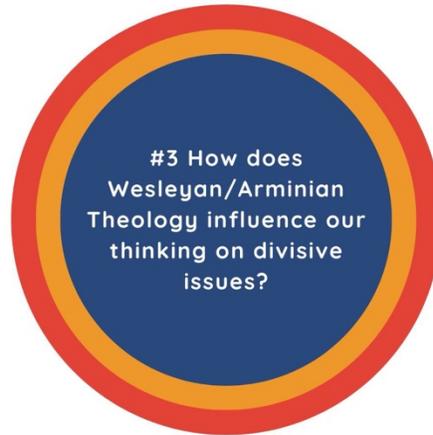
Human Sexuality and Our Future in the UMC

Circle #3

“How does Wesleyan/Arminian Theology influence our thinking on divisive issues?”

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Fig. 3.1



From time to time, I hear people assert that they want to leave the UMC because the denomination is abandoning traditional, orthodox Methodist theology. I've been a Methodist all my life, and I've studied John Wesley and his theology since I was a teenager. I have read Wesley's Journal and most of his printed sermons, if not all of them. I love the God whom John Wesley, my Methodist parents, and several United Methodist congregations taught me to love! So, I am frequently surprised at what some people "think" is Wesleyan theology when it's a theological perspective that Wesley himself would have rejected. When discussing Methodist or Wesleyan theology, we discuss a unique and distinctive perspective on God and the world that is often at odds with popular religious views of God.

John Wesley (1703-1791), the son and grandson of clergypersons in the Church of England, followed in their footsteps to become a priest. Educated at Oxford, Wesley always adhered to a rigid, disciplined life of faith. He and his brother, Charles, the great hymn writer, formed the Holy Club at Oxford. The club members were derisively referred to by their classmates as "*Methodists*" because of the rhythm and method of daily spiritual life they maintained. Initially intended as an insult, "*Methodist*" became the moniker of a movement that transformed 18th-century England from a brutal and hedonistic society into a kinder and more compassionate culture with faith in God as the centerpiece.

The core of Wesley's theology emerges from the theological foundation of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), who was a Dutch theologian. Arminius' views sharply contrasted with John Calvin's teachings (1509-1564). Calvin believed God exercised absolute

sovereignty in determining who was saved and who was not. Resisting Calvin's teaching that God "*elects*" those he saves, Arminius asserted that God's grace is available to all. Any who desires to be saved can be saved, and God only reluctantly denies salvation to those who reject him. Wesley embraced Arminian doctrines and frequently sparred with those who supported Calvin's doctrines (*notably, George Whitefield, a dear friend and colleague in the Methodist movement*). Because of the influence of Arminius' theology, "*Wesleyan/Arminian*" theology is the term that describes Wesley's theological perspective.

The problem we face as Wesleyans/ Arminians is that Calvinist theology is the dominant theology in most American churches today. Calvinist denominations include Presbyterians (*although the PCAs are stricter Calvinist than the Mainline PCUSA*), Southern Baptists, Congregational Churches, and most non-denominational churches. Wesleyan/ Arminian-influenced denominations consist of the denominations with Methodist in their names, like the United Methodist Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, but also the Church of the Nazarene, Wesleyan Churches, the Salvation Army, and the Assemblies of God.

Wesley's theology emphasizes a life of Christian holiness: to love God with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself. One of the unique attributes of Wesley's theology is how he hammered it out on the anvil of pastoral ministry while Calvin formulated his systematic theology at the university. That may explain the accessibility of Wesley's theology to clergy and laity alike.

The hallmark of Wesley's theology is his description of "*The Scriptural Way of Salvation.*" Here, I rely heavily on the work of Rev. Dr. Donald W. Haynes, a retired United Methodist elder in the Western North Carolina Conference.

The story of our salvation always begins with a loving God in Wesleyan theology; however, in Calvinist theology, God is first "*sovereign*" before he is "*loving.*" In his sovereignty, Calvinists argue that God plans, ordains, and governs absolutely everything that happens without exception. This belief is where the phrase "*Everything that happens to me is part of God's plan*" has its roots. This statement does NOT reflect Wesleyan/ Arminian theology because it denies humanity's free will. Sometimes things happen because WE make poor choices! Sin has its painful yet natural consequences – God doesn't have to manufacture suffering to punish us or shape us – sin does that well enough by itself. It's hard to envision God as a loving God if he intentionally makes life hard for us or willingly causes us to suffer through horrendous experiences because "*it's all a part of God's plan.*"

In Wesley's theology, God seeks us through his "*prevenient*" grace, the grace that goes before us and woos us into a relationship with him long before we know our need for God. God keeps sending us reminders of his love, hoping we'll love him back.

When we awaken to God's loving presence and see his unconditional love for us, even amid our rebellion, we can be convicted by his love and repent of our sins, experiencing his "saving" and "justifying" grace.

Once we receive the gift of God's saving grace, we continue to grow in our relationship with God through his "perfecting" and "sanctifying" grace, increasing our holiness. God's grace continues to work beyond the point of our salvation and influences our development as followers of Jesus Christ throughout our lives. The deeper we go in our relationship with God, the deeper we can go! We'll never exhaust the depths of the loving relationship we can have with God the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, and with the help of the Holy Spirit!

At any point in this process, because God has given us free will, we can reject God. When we do, we sin. Despite our rejection, God's grace is still available to us whenever we repent and turn back toward God. (*Some may be familiar with the term "backsliding," which describes when we fall back into sinful ways, leaving us far from God until we repent and turn toward him again.*) God never forces his grace on us, but he extends it to us repeatedly, no matter how many times we turn away. In Wesleyan theology, God WANTS us to be saved, and everyone who desires salvation can be saved.

In Calvinist theology, only those whom God predetermines will be saved, whether they want to be saved or not (*also known as "limited atonement" and "irresistible grace"*). Everyone who is not God's "elect" is condemned to hell for eternity, regardless of their choices. This action is known as "divine determinism," which is a "belief that God determines all things according to a preconceived plan and his omnipotent power, including sin and evil." (See Counterfeit Christianity: The Persistence of Errors in the Church by Roger E. Olson, 2015, p. 123)

It's important to recognize these two vastly distinctive perspectives on God's nature (*Wesleyan/Arminian versus Calvinism*) and how the perspective we hold influences our response to various life circumstances – including human sexuality. Calvin's sovereign God can come off as a harsh and vindictive deity who is distant, demanding, and unwavering in his dealings with his children. On the other hand, Wesley's God lovingly seeks out all his children, offering grace to any who would receive it, like a gentle and compassionate Father. I believe when we look at Jesus, Wesley's perspective most clearly reflects the Father whom Jesus revealed to us when he answered his disciple Philip's request,

"'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.'" (John 14:8-10, NRSVue)

If we want to know who God is, we must look to Jesus! As followers of Jesus Christ, 1 John 4:7-11 calls us to embody the love of the Father for others as we have experienced it in his Son, Jesus Christ.

“Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:7-11, NRSVue, underlining mine)

Wesley understood God’s nature simply as “Love,” as 1 John declares. God demonstrated his love by sending his Son, who sacrificed his life for our forgiveness; therefore, our love for others must also be self-giving and self-sacrificing.

Dr. Steve Harper, a retired professor from Asbury Theological Seminary, wrote:

“What we see in the Wesleyan tradition is a remarkable movement of God that ‘spread scriptural holiness’ (the life of love) across the land and eventually around the world. The paradigm of love does not eliminate or minimize the reality or negativity of sin. But for Wesley, as for others before and after him, the way of love is the context into which we put all other aspects of the Christian life. We are never free to abandon love to establish any other principle.”

John Wesley... experienced rejection and opposition throughout his lifetime, with some of the most severe persecution coming from fellow Christians in the Church of England. When confronted with this, he responded, ‘If we can’t all think alike, can we at least not all love alike?’ And as a further recognition that Christians would come to differing conclusions about things, he wrote in the sermon on ‘Christian Perfection’ words that we all need to take to heart as we face our differences:

‘Hence, even the children of God are not agreed as to the interpretation of many places in holy writ [the Scriptures]: Nor is their difference of opinion any proof that they are not children of God on either side.’”

--in For the Sake of the Bride: Restoring the Church to Her Intended Beauty, 2014, pp. 58-59, underlining mine)

In 1742, John Wesley summarized the distinguishing traits of Methodists in “*The Character of a Methodist.*” Wesley wrote:

“The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his

espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point. Whosoever, therefore, imagines that a Methodist is a man of such or such an opinion, is grossly ignorant of the whole affair; he mistakes the truth totally. We believe, indeed, that 'all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God;' and herein we are distinguished from Jews, Turks, and Infidels. We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice; and herein, we are fundamentally distinguished from those of the Romish Church [who placed authority in the Pope]. We believe Christ to be the eternal, supreme God; and herein we are distinguished from the Socinians [Unitarians] and Arians. But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think. So that whatsoever they are, whether right or wrong, they are no distinguishing marks of a Methodist."

[https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N20188.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext, underlining mine\)](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N20188.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext,underlining mine)

Wesley's primary theological emphasis was on God's love expressed through his granting unmerited grace that saves us when we respond in faith. This benchmark of belief comes from Ephesians 2:8-9, one of Wesley's favorite verses:

*"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."
(Ephesians 2:8, NRSVue)*

In a sermon delivered on June 18, 1738, "Salvation by Faith," preached shortly after his heart-warming experience at Aldersgate Street on May 24, 1738, Wesley said,

"All the blessings which God hath bestowed upon man are of his mere grace, bounty, or favor; his free, undeserved favor; favor altogether undeserved; man having no claim to the least of his mercies. It was free grace that 'formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into him a living soul,' stamped on that soul the image of God, and 'put all things under his feet.' The same free grace continues to us, at this day, life, and breath, and all things. For there is nothing we are, or have, or do, which can deserve the least thing at God's hand...."

"If then sinful men find favor with God, it is 'grace upon grace!' If God vouchsafes still to pour fresh blessings upon us, yea, the greatest of all blessings, salvation; what can we say to these things, but, 'Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift!' And thus, it is herein, 'God commends his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died to save us.' 'By grace' then 'are ye saved through faith.' Grace is the source, faith the condition, of salvation."

<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-1-salvation-by-faith/>

For Wesley, God loves us and provides for our salvation through the gift of his unearned, undeserved, and unconditional grace, which we access simply through faith—believing in God and his desire to save us. All other “*opinions, schemes of religion, notions, or judgments, whether right or wrong*” are not marks of a Methodist.

Wesley was not without conviction, and he staunchly defended the *Articles of Religion* that outlined Methodism’s most fundamental beliefs. Then, Wesley instituted the *Restrictive Rules*, forbidding changes to the *Articles of Religion*. In all other matters, Wesley felt that Christian charity (*i.e., love*) should guide our teaching and practice.

As we struggle to discern our place in the United Methodist Church, I urge us to recommit to the essential doctrines of Christian theology and demonstrate unity despite non-doctrinal differences. In 1743, John Wesley developed *The General Rules* as guidelines for Methodists (*distinctive from the Restrictive Rules*). *The General Rules* state:

“That [Methodists] should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced ...

Secondly: By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all people ...

Thirdly: By attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are:

- *The public worship of God.*
- *The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.*
- *The Supper of the Lord.*
- *Family and private prayer.*
- *Searching the Scriptures.*
- *Fasting or abstinence.”*

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/the-general-rules>

We would be wise to practice these rules daily as we learn and grow together through the discernment process. Not only were the *General Rules* good for maintaining unity in Wesley’s day, but they are also sufficient for developing and maintaining unity today.