

WILLIAM H.
WILLIMON

THIS WE
BELIEVE

THE CORE OF WESLEYAN
FAITH AND PRACTICE

IDEAL FOR USE WITH
The WESLEY STUDY BIBLE

THIS WE BELIEVE THE CORE OF WESLEYAN FAITH AND PRACTICE

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CHAPTER ONE

WE BELIEVE IN ONE GOD— FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

Amid the numerous and often acrimonious theological disputes of his day, John Wesley was unusually generous and charitable in his theology. “Keep close to the grand scriptural doctrines,” he advised his Methodists, urging them to avoid unproductive, theological hairsplitting.

There are many doctrines of a less essential nature, with regard to which even the sincere children of God (such is the present weakness of human understanding!) are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think; we may “agree to disagree.” But, meantime, let us hold fast the essentials of “the faith which was once delivered to the saints,” . . . insisted on at all times and in all places. (Sermon preached on the death of George Whitefield, 1770)

At our best, this has led us later-day Wesleyans to hold fast to the great tradition of biblical Christianity without

being drawn into squabbles over nonessentials. At our worst, this generous Wesleyan “think and let think” has led to our acting as if ideas about God are not that important after all and to the sad error of thinking that because thought about God is inconsequential, who cares what anybody believes as long as that belief is sincerely held?

Wesley was a fierce foe of this sort of goofy theological “indifferentism.” So is the Bible. Jesus Christ clearly caused a theological crisis. When people met him, they were forced to rethink their received and cherished ideas about God and themselves. To say that we don’t know everything we might like to know about God does not excuse us from the responsibility to think on the basis of what has been revealed to us and to bet our lives on what we know.

To begin with the “faith which was once delivered unto the saints,” let us begin with God. Christians believe that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have seen as much of God as we ever hope to see. As 1 John declares, “No one has ever seen God” (4:12). I daresay that most people, if they ever get around to thinking about God, think of God as whatever or whoever is large, distant, and invisible. God is unfathomable, beyond reach of our thinking and perceiving.

Christians admit that it may be of the nature of God to be beyond human visibility or comprehension. *Until Jesus Christ.* Jesus Christ is the full, perfect, sufficient revelation

of who God is and what God does. Everything we believe about God flows from what we've seen of God in Jesus Christ. Although Wesley made allowances for everybody, even those who didn't know Christ, to have some implicit knowledge of God through the working of prevenient grace (more about that later), knowledge of God is necessarily imperfect until it is knowledge that is explicitly derived from encounter with Christ. Wesleyans believe that in Jesus Christ, God gets personal, relational, available, and virtually unavoidable.

In his first Advent among us, Jesus as the "Son of God," the "Messiah" (that is, "anointed one of God") challenged how people thought about God. Lots of people looked at Jesus, listened to his teaching, witnessed his work, saw his death, and said, "That's not God. God is powerful, distant, high, and lifted up. God is _____." (Fill in the blank with whatever high and noble attribute God simply must have if God is to be worthy of your worship.) Jesus failed to measure up to their preconceptions of who God ought to be and how God is to act if God is really God.

Especially today, to stand and affirm, with the Apostles' Creed—"I believe in God the Father Almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord. . . . [And] I believe in the Holy Spirit"—is to assert a considerably more complex and challenging view of God than that which prevails among most Americans.

Most people in our society appear to want God to be generic, abstract, vague, distant, and arcane. “God? Oh, can’t say anything too definite about God. God is large and indistinct.” For many of us God is this big, blurry concept that we can make to mean about anything we like, something spiritual, someone (if we have any distinct notions about God) whom we can make over so that God looks strikingly like us.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God got physical, explicit, and peculiar, and God came close—too close for comfort for many. Jesus Christ is God in action, God refusing to remain a general idea or a high-sounding principle. Jesus Christ is God in motion toward us, God refusing to stay enclosed in God’s own divinity. Many people think of God as a vaguely benevolent being—who never actually gets around to *doing* anything.

It is as if we are threatened by the possibility that God might truly be an active, intervening God who shows up where we live. We’ve designed this modern world, controlled by us, functioning rather nicely on its own, thank you, everything clicking along in accord with natural laws, served on command by technological wonders of our creation. So who needs a God who relishes actually showing up and doing something? We modern people are loath to conceive of a God who is beyond our control or a world other than the one that is here solely for our personal benefit.

This is the deistic God of the philosophers, a minimalist, inactive, unobtrusive, noninvasive, detached God who is just about as much of a God as we moderns can take. There's a reason why many thoughtful modern people seem so determined to sever Jesus from the Trinity, to render Jesus into a wonderful moral teacher who was a really nice person, someone who enjoyed lilies and was kind to children and people with disabilities. To point to a peripatetic Jew from Nazareth who wouldn't stay confined within our boundaries for God and say, "Jesus is not only a human being but also God," well, it's just too unnerving for us enlightened modern people to handle. Note how frequently many people refer to "God" and how seldom they refer to "Christ," and you will know why the statement "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19) is a threatening disruption to many people's idea of a God who stays put.

John Wesley did not think of himself as a theological innovator, particularly in his thoughts about God. Wesley fully affirmed the traditional Articles of Religion of the Church of England, passing them on, with a few revisions, to the Methodists in North America (his "poor sheep in the wilderness") as the valid, biblical affirmation of faith. These revised articles are still printed toward the beginning of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*. Here's Article 1 (with a line drawn through the portion removed by early Methodists):

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, ~~or passions~~, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

All of this is fine, as far as it goes. But although he affirmed this article of religion, in actual practice Wesley emphasized something about God that led Wesley to distinctive thought about God. God was not only the “maker” of all reality but also the “preserver.” On the basis of what he knew of God in Jesus Christ, Wesley stressed God as “Sovereign” and as an active, loving Parent. The person who knows Christ “knows God: his Father and his friend, the parent of all good, the centre of the spirits of all flesh, the sole happiness of all intelligent beings. He sees, clearer than the light of the noonday sun, that this is the end of man: to glorify him who

God’s chief characteristic—even more than power, justice, or righteousness—is active, initiating, seeking love.

made him for himself, and to love and enjoy him for ever” (Sermon 33, “Sermon on the Mount, XIII,” §II.2).

GOD OF LOVE

God’s chief characteristic—even more than

power, justice, or righteousness—is active, initiating, seeking love. In his *Notes* on 1 John 4:8, “God is love,” Wesley mused, “God is often styled holy, righteous, wise; but not holiness, righteousness, or wisdom in the abstract, as he is said to be love; intimating that this is his darling, his reigning attribute, the attribute that shed an amiable glory on all his other perfections.”

In a sermon Wesley said that God “can do whatever he pleases. He can strike me or you dead in a moment” (and well we deserve it, I might add). But God doesn’t because God “loves you; he loves to do you good. He loves to make you happy. Should not you then love *him*? And he will teach you how to love him” (Sermon 94, “On Family Religion,” §III.7). Here most of Wesley’s assertions about the nature of God are linked immediately to practical implications for us. God not only loves us but “loves to do [us] good,” not only seeks our love but teaches us “how to love him.” Our love of God is responsive, responsible love. Of 1 John 4:19, “We love because he first loved us,” Wesley said in his *Notes*, “This is the sum of all religion.” It wasn’t so much that Wesley affirmed that God is love; any number of Christian traditions do the same. It was that Wesley relentlessly repeated that God’s love evokes our love. God’s love evokes, enables, and even requires our response. This Wesleyan interplay between theological assertion and practical human implication is the main reason *The Wesley Study Bible* is full of sidebars that offer

practical, pastoral insights in response to Scripture's many grand theological affirmations.

Wesley's God is not simply full of love as an inclination or disposition. God is love in action. God did not sit on high serenely pronouncing, "I love you. Promise me you won't change a thing." God came to us as Jesus Christ, reaching toward us, transforming us with his touch. What is God like? God, taught Jesus, is like the woman who searches for one lost coin; the shepherd who relentlessly seeks the one lost sheep until he finds it; the father who eagerly awaits the return of the profligate son so he can welcome him not with harsh lectures and justly deserved paternal punishment but with an extravagant party (Luke 15).

This is a chief difference in the Wesleyan experience of God when compared with many current concepts of God. Wesley didn't just teach some banal platitude like "God is love"; he taught that God is wonderfully interactive, resourceful, responsive love, love that not only acts for us, in the cross and the Resurrection, on the vast stage of world history but also graciously acts in us, deep within our souls, activating our hands and feet in witness and service, so that we adoringly respond to the God who has so lovingly responded to us. "The life of God in the soul of a believer . . . immediately and necessarily implies the continual inspiration of God's Holy Spirit: . . . a continual action of God upon the soul, the re-action of the soul upon God" (Sermon 19, "The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God," §III.2).

An often repeated criticism of Jesus was that he “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). Jesus constantly intruded where he was not invited, sometimes where he was not wanted. The

The thing that got Jesus’ critics was that Jesus loved the wrong people.

thing that got Jesus’ critics (at least those in Luke 15) was not that Jesus loved people but that Jesus received, ate with, and thereby loved the wrong people. Thus Jesus showed us not only that God is love but also that God’s love was considerably more interesting, active, expansive, and determined than most of what passes for “love” around here (see *WSB* 180). In Jesus Christ, God was not only loving us but was also God *with* us, Emmanuel. As Charles Wesley said of the active Christ in one of his greatest hymns:

He left his Father’s throne above
(so free, so infinite his grace!),
emptied himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam’s helpless race. (*UMH*, 363)

THESE THREE ARE ONE

Wesleyans have historically practiced a robust trinitarianism. With all orthodox Christians at all times and places

we have maintained that God is one; but not simply one, not merely one. We baptize in the name of the Trinity (see *WSB* 1165), thus signifying that baptism relates us to the fullness of God. We are monotheists (believers in one God) but not mere monotheists. We believe that the God who is present to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct yet unified and interactive, relational, and loving ways in which God is one. The Trinity is God in three ways being the same God.

If all this talk of three-in-one seems a bit overwhelming to you, you are not alone. Unitarianism is always a bit easier on the brain than trinitarianism. Still, there is no way for us to do justice to the God whom we have met in Jesus Christ without believing three ways in one God. Perhaps the Trinity is best approached not in analysis but in poetry, as in this Charles Wesley hymn, “Communion of Saints”:

Father, Son, and Spirit, hear
 Faith’s effectual, fervent prayer,
 Hear, and our petitions seal;
 Let us now the answer feel,
 Mystically one with thee,
 Transcript of the Trinity,
 Thee let all our nature own
 One in Three, and Three in One. (*HSP* [1740], 188)

To say with the Hebrew Scriptures, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut. 6:4-9, see *WSB*

Deepen your understanding of United Methodist core beliefs

This book can be used as an eight-week, small-group study. A Leader Guide is also available.

Beginning with the Core Terms found in *The Wesley Study Bible*, Bishop Willimon systematically lays out key Wesleyan tenets of faith so that you will have a fresh way to hear God's voice, share in God's grace, and become more like Jesus Christ.

"Wonderful! Rich in depth, yet clear and accessible, this guide to Wesleyan theology composed by Bishop Willimon to accompany *The Wesley Study Bible* is a gift. Willimon, with his sharp wit, wisely integrates biblical and theological themes offering a lively account of the church for our time and context." --Lacey C. Warner

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"In this exceptional book, Bishop Willimon acts as our personal guide. By combining reflections on *The Wesley Study Bible*, *The Book of Discipline*, the writings of Wesley, and life experiences, the author provides invaluable assistance as we search to know how our Bible, our heritage, our church, and our lives intertwine in our daily attempt to be vital Christians." --Richard P. Heitzenrater

William H. Willimon is Presiding Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of The United Methodist Church, Birmingham, Alabama Area, and Visiting Research Professor at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.