

LESSON 2

What's my Christian Heritage?

****Check out the "Church History Chart" at the end of this lesson to see our Family Tree!***

OK - so now we know about the Church and how it came to be. Now let's look at what happened in between the first church and our church today. This is super important as we try to understand what we believe and why, as well as how, our faith and denomination (United Methodist... versus, say, Baptist or Presbyterian) got to be what they are. There are three main questions that will help us figure all this stuff out:

- 1.) What does *Protestant* mean?
- 2.) Who was *John Wesley*?
- 3.) What makes me *Methodist*?

Let's look at these questions one at a time.

1.) What does *Protestant* mean?

The word *Protestant* comes from *The Protestant Reformation* led by Martin Luther. Maybe you've heard about it. Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany, on November 10, 1483, to a peasant miner and his wife. Luther went to prep school and then to the University of Erfurt, where he graduated in 1505.

Luther's parents wanted him to have a career in law, so after college he went to law school. During this time, Luther was heavily influenced by a religious revival. He had started to feel really bad about mistakes he had made in his life (a fancy word for this is "sin") and worry about what would happen to him after he died. Luther also almost got struck by lightning and then was shocked by the sudden death of one of his very best friends. Needless to say, life was pretty stinky for Luther for a while. In the midst of all of these really hard times, he just wanted to be alone. He wanted to experience God in his life, so before too long, he quit law school and entered a monastery!

Luther loved life in the monastery! He spent a ton of time figuring out what real salvation was and how he and others could receive it. He had felt really guilty about how sinful he was and wanted to start over again. After a lot of time alone, reading Scripture, and praying, Luther realized that if he was going to understand salvation the way it really was, he was going to have to understand *God* the way God really was. Up until this point, people saw God as someone who expected perfection. If they messed up, they had to *do* something to make God forgive them. Luther didn't think this was right, though. He believed that God had taken care of sin a long time ago when God sent Jesus, so God was really more loving and merciful than God was mad and unforgiving. In fact, the more sinful Luther realized he was, the better and more loving he realized God was! Luther then understood that salvation had everything to do with God's love and mercy and nothing to do with what people had, did, or were.

HAVE YOU EVER FELT THIS WAY? Describe a time when you felt or believed that God’s love was WAY bigger than the mistakes you’d made.

Luther’s thinking challenged a lot of what Christians believed at the time. The Roman Catholic Church sold certificates of forgiveness called “indulgences.” Catholics taught that people had to literally *buy* these certificates in order to be forgiven. Luther thought this was not only bizarre, but it was also unbiblical (i.e. not what the Bible said) and wrong. It was crazy to think that forgiveness could come by *buying something* instead of by God! Luther was so frustrated that he wrote all of his thoughts and arguments out on paper. Then, on October 31, 1517, he nailed them to the Castle Church door at Wittenberg. This famous paper is called the *Ninety-Five Theses*.

Luther knew that doing this would cause a ruckus, but he figured the arguments over his Theses would be small. And besides that, he figured that after they argued, the church officials would realize they were wrong and change their doctrine (Doctrine is just a fancy word for a system of belief.). Unfortunately, it wasn’t quite that easy, though. Luther got stuck in debate that lasted for years, and he had to stand trial in Germany. Then the court ordered him to quit and take back his arguments, but he refused. Even a ban was made against Luther! He *still* wouldn’t stop, though! He was committed to his cause and refused to back down.



**Martin Luther...
Rebel With a Cause!**

Even though lots of people didn’t like Luther’s thoughts, tons of Christians around the world loved what he stood for and made him a hero. Because he was “protesting” so much, Luther’s followers called his movement “Protestant.” The Reformation grew and grew, and eventually, the Christian faith changed dramatically. Now we call ourselves *Protestant* because our thinking was shaped by Martin Luther, who led the Protestant Reformation. Rather than think we can buy our forgiveness or earn it somehow, we put our whole trust in God. His goodness gives us grace, love, and forgiveness that we could never get on our own.

2.) Who was John Wesley?



So now we know how Protestants, as opposed to Catholics, came to be. Our next task is to figure out who John Wesley was and why he is important to our Christian faith. John Wesley was the man who started the Methodist Church. He was born in 1703 to an Anglican clergyman and his wife, Samuel and Susanna Wesley. He was one of 19 children! John went to Oxford and was an ordained priest in the Church of England. He also served briefly at Epworth and then returned to Oxford to be a resident tutor.

While John was at school, he always wanted to grow in his relationship with Christ. He was very disciplined, so he woke up early in the morning to read his Bible, pray, and serve the poor of the city. After all this, though, he still did not feel like he had reached the closeness with God that he wanted. A few years later, his brother, Charles, came to Oxford to study. The two of them formed a group of Christians who met together for prayer, Bible study, fasting, visiting prisoners in jail, serving others, and doing all kinds of other stuff. All they did was very organized, structured, and *methodical* (they followed a *method*... think “scientific method” from science class). This practice of Christianity became known as *Methodist*.

On a scale of 1-10, how “methodical” would you say your Christian faith and practice are? Do you spend much time in Bible study, prayer, and service to others? How “methodical” would you say most Methodists are?

In 1735 John became a chaplain in the new colony in Georgia. He still did not feel like he had experienced inner peace from his faith, though. After a few years, he became frustrated that he wasn’t satisfied. Finally, John met a man named Peter Boehler, a German pietist. Peter taught him his belief that the Christian life begins with a “soul-shaking, instantaneous conversion experience that is supported by one’s inner feelings of assurance of faith” (*Journey to Discipleship*).

John experienced this “inner feeling” on May 24, 1738. He went to a meeting that he really didn’t want to go to, and a man was reading a piece of Martin Luther’s (remember him?) writing. John said the man was describing “the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ.” During the reading, John said, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death” (*Journey to Discipleship*).

This moment was HUGE for Wesley! It, and many others he experienced afterwards, turned him into a man convinced of God's love, forgiveness, power, and grace. He began to call his Christianity "the religion of the warmed heart," and from then on, Wesley was super excited to go out and tell others about Christ!

**Recognize this cross and flame?
It's the official cross of the
Methodist Church and
represents Wesley's
"warmed heart" sensation!**



Now, as we've already talked about, Wesley was a really organized guy. (Remember... *Methodist* came from his *methodical* practice.) Before he died in 1791, he used his organization to form groups of adults into societies that got together for prayer, Bible study, discipline, and service. These people then grew to preach the Gospel, visit the sick, and minister to the poor. Before long, Methodism became a really big movement in Christianity. Rather than focus too much on the "rules" of religion, Methodists looked to be better disciples of Jesus, live out their faith every day, and experience God all around them.

3.) What makes me *Methodist*?

(*Note: in 1968, *The Methodist Church* and *The Evangelical Brethren Church* united to become the United Methodist Church, which is technically our denomination. Most of what we believe, though, comes from John Wesley's Methodist movement, so we'll refer to ourselves as simply "Methodists" throughout this book.)

There are a few things that make Methodists, Methodists. A Methodist:

- believes in God ~ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ~ and accepts Jesus Christ as his or her Savior
- believes in what the Old and New Testaments (i.e. the Bible) have to say about God, humans, and the Christian life and faith
- promises to be committed to God's Kingdom and purposes
- lives the Christian life
- supports the church with prayers (communicating with God), presence (going to worship, being involved in Sunday School, etc.), gifts (sharing talents, giving money, etc.), service (service projects, mission trips, etc.), and witness (showing and telling other people about the faith)

**FYI – If you choose to be confirmed, you'll be asked to commit to these five things on Confirmation Sunday!*

Methodists believe in:

God's grace – God's free gift of love for everyone. We cannot earn God's love, we cannot buy it, and we cannot be "good enough" for it. We can only accept it. Jesus showed God's grace when he

ate with sinners, died on the cross, and rose from the grave. God's grace in Christ forgives our sins, lets us grow closer to Christ and to each other, and allows us to experience joy as God's children... basically, it changes our lives! *Read John 4:9-11 for a great description of grace!

Methodists believe in:

Salvation by faith. To be "saved" from something literally means to be rescued or delivered from it (see Webster). This is usually a good thing since the things we normally want to be saved from are bad, dangerous, and/or hurtful. (Think about being "saved" from drowning... we are rescued from death!) In the Christian sense, being "saved" by faith means God gives us a "life jacket" (Jesus) to rescue us forever from mistakes we make and our sinful nature in general. We cannot earn salvation by good works, "being nice," or "doing the right thing." These things are what we do to say "thank you" to God for His great love and grace (James 2:17). *Eternal life is a gift that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.* We need only to accept it and continue to live it out.

Methodists believe in:

The importance of being involved in social concerns and outreach. How can we tell others about Jesus and show his love if we only live for ourselves? Methodism has always shown interest in human problems such as poverty, suffering, and unfairness. The men and women who worked with John Wesley always helped the less fortunate. Jesus always reached out to the needy. Methodists have formed a "social creed" that we follow in caring for others with God's love.

Methodists believe in:

Experiencing God through both emotion and intellect. It is important to make our Christian faith a reality in our hearts *and* in our heads. We should *feel* God's presence and *think* about the way God is at work in our world and in our lives. Doing one without the other could be dangerous!

Methodists believe in:

A connectional and an ecumenical church. Wow ~ those are big words! Basically, *connectional* means that all Methodists are "connected" because we share common beliefs. We connect to all Methodist churches around the world with the same mission to make disciples for Jesus Christ. "Ecumenical" means "the entire universe." *All* Christians, every denomination throughout the world, form one Church to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ! The Methodist Church is both connectional and ecumenical because we believe that God calls the Christian Church to be unified.

What's important to know about Methodists is that we want every person to know, understand, experience, and accept God's constant love, forgiveness, presence, and power in Jesus Christ. Rather than focusing too much on doctrine, rules, and theology (even though these things are important!), we look to reach others and bring them into a new birth and conversion experience much like John Wesley's. As mentioned, Methodists practice Christianity with their hearts just as much as their heads. John Wesley did a lot of reading, thinking, praying, and fasting, but none of these activities would have been as meaningful for him if he would not have felt the strange warming in his heart. Finally, remember that Methodism is only one of many great Protestant denominations in the Christian faith. All come from the New Testament Church (the first one that started on the Day

of Pentecost), and all have been *reborn* through the Protestant Reformation. *Most importantly, all honor and glorify God who gives us life, love, fun, power, and grace through Jesus Christ!*

*Want to know more about Methodism? Visit the official website of the United Methodist Church: www.umc.org.

*** Go The Extra Mile!**

Think about these beliefs and pray about whether or not they are something you're already willing to commit to. If you are, write out a personal statement of your belief in God and the Church. Keep it with you forever and never forget how much GOD LOVES YOU!!



CHURCH HISTORY CHART



