

What I believe

United Methodist Christians believe

by

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Salvation

1. Salvation begins as the gift of God's claim on us, God's love of us, and God's profession of delight in us. It is the truth that the church declares on God's behalf every time one of God's children is baptized: "You are God's daughter/son; you are God's beloved; and God is well pleased with you." We hear "from heaven" the same truth about us that was spoken to Jesus at his baptism by John in the Jordan River.
2. Salvation is the life-long process of the truth of this gift "sinking in" and healing the sin-sick soul, so that the image of God in which we have been created might flourish, so we may be enjoy the life for we were created.
3. Salvation is the work of grace setting us free from all that predisposes us to seek life down paths that are destined to be "dead ends." Instead of curing ourselves of our terminal "disease," we become sick unto death and spread its self-centeredness, self-justification, and self-righteous pride to others.
4. The process of salvation consists of these movements of God's grace:
 - a. **Prevenient grace** – This is the grace at work in us before we're aware of it, "wooing" us to an awareness of our need for what we cannot give ourselves. We accept that our only hope lies beyond ourselves. St. Augustine put it this way: "You made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." Prevenient grace makes us yearn to have our restless hearts find their rest in God.
 - b. **Justifying grace** – This grace enables us to give up our self-delusion of control and adequacy, so we may say Yes to the God that has been saying Yes to us all along. We allow God's relationship with us to be the primary relationship of our lives. John Wesley put it this way, "I realized that Jesus died for me – even me." We are justified, "made right with God," through the love of Jesus. It is "good news," because now we can begin to enjoy that life which is abundant and eternal. It is "bad news," because now we must forsake everything that up until now we'd trusted to satisfy and save us.
 - c. **Sanctifying grace** – Living now as the child of God whom Jesus shows us we are, we desire to love as the Lover has loved us. We seek to be holy as he is holy. We desire to be our True Self in Christ.
 - d. **Perfecting grace** – This grace replaces our will with "Thy Will be done." It transforms all our selfish motivations with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There is no intent in us but to love God and all whom God loves as God loves them.
5. Salvation is not something we possess. It is a relationship that possesses us. Relationships, if they are alive, are dynamic and changing.
6. Paul puts it this way: "Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving us is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and the saving. He creates us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does...." (Ephesians 2:7-10, The Message)

7. Baptists used to say, "Once saved, always saved." Methodists replied, "No, it's possible to fall from grace." Who's right? It depends on whose perspective you're speaking from.

From God's perspective, we never stop being loved as a child of God. The loving father didn't stop viewing his prodigal son as a son, even though the son stopped viewing him as his father. The prodigal son shows that it's possible to "fall from the grace" of the father (or out of an active relationship with the father) and suffer the consequences. It's not because the father withdrew his love from the son, but because the son chose to live on his own apart from the father's love.

8. Salvation is not a matter of asserting various propositions "about" the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's about being changed by the relationship one has with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
9. The Western Church (Roman Catholic and Protestants) and the Eastern Church (various Orthodox churches) view salvation through different metaphors. In the West, the courtroom provides the way for understanding what salvation is and how it's accomplished. It consists of our being indebted to God due the offence we've caused God by our disobedience. We are guilty and deserve punishment that we can neither satisfy nor withstand. Jesus' role is that of satisfying/forgiving the debt and of taking on himself the punishment that we deserve. Salvation comes from our faith that he has done this for us.

For the Eastern Church the metaphor is not the courtroom but the hospital. It is not debt that we can't repay, but "dis-ease" from which we must be healed. It is sickness unto death cause by our fear of death. Jesus' crucifixion is not a "sin offering" but his willingness to live "not my will but yours be done." His resurrection heals us from our "dis-ease," because we know that death, while continuing to sting, doesn't speak the last word or have the final victory. Life in God is eternal life and is more powerful than death.

How Baptism and Holy Communion Reflect Our Theology

1. Baptism and Holy Communion/Lord's Supper/Eucharist are "means of grace." That is, God uses them to convince us of the truth about who we are because of Whose we are.

Baptism

2. Denominations that practice "believer's baptism" place the emphasis on what the individual does. The individual professes belief in Jesus and obeys him by consenting to baptism and by participating in the Lord's Supper. These denominations believe that they are obeying the commands of the Bible. Obeying the commands requires being able to understand them. Therefore, one must be old enough to understand, believe, profess, and obey.
3. We United Methodists understand baptism and Holy Communion as "sacraments." The emphasis is on what God does – not on what we do. Our response is always to God's initiative. We can do nothing to deserve God's grace, love, mercy. God reconciles us with himself for the relationship God created us for and in which abundant and eternal life are made possible. Since no one can understand fully what it will mean to live as child of God, if understanding baptism is a prerequisite, no one would ever qualify.

4. The baptism of infants reflects our United Methodist belief that we are born into God's love and that love influences our life long before we're aware of it to cooperate with it. A baby enjoys the love of her mother and father long before she is aware of it, understands it, and is able to cooperate with it. Babies are baptized in recognition of God's prevenient grace.
5. When we baptize we acknowledge that the child is God's child. Someday he will receive the gift of that relationship and commit himself to allowing it to determine how he understands himself, his life, and all of life.
6. Because we believe that baptism is a "Sign-Act" of what God does, we see no need to be "re-baptized." God gets it right the first time. In fact, the very desire to celebrate a new awareness of and/or commitment to God's relationship with us is evidence of the truth spoken to us about us at our baptism. We may need to reaffirm our commitment to the covenant that God made with us at our baptism. Our church's baptismal liturgy of reaffirmation contains the words, "Remember your baptism and be thankful." In our theology of God's grace, baptism is first of all about God – not about us.

Holy Communion

7. Again, because we believe that baptism and Holy Communion are sacraments that Jesus has given his church as means of God's saving grace for God's people, we United Methodist Christians practice "open table" Holy Communion.
8. With Wesley we believe that the experience of being welcomed at the table of Jesus to be fed by him can not only help his disciples grow in his likeness (sanctification) but also be an occasion for the work of both prevenient grace and justifying grace. Being treated as a child of God can bring one to believe that one really is!
9. For this reason, all are invited to commune with Christ. This includes children who may not "understand" what Holy Communion is all about. (But who does? Children surely understand that eating satisfies their hunger and that being included is better than being left out.) When Paul speaks to the Christians in the church at Corinth about "eating the meal of the Lord in an unworthy manner," he's not referring to being informed of the church's teaching about Holy Communion. Rather he's referring to the disregard by the more well-to-do members toward those who are poor. The rich were getting to the fellowship dinner early and eating all the good pieces of chicken and leaving only the necks for those who got off work later. Paul tells the more fortunate, "If you allowed the Christ you consume in his meal to consume you, you'd show compassion to the poor and wait on them or at least leave them some of the better pieces of chicken."
10. Also invited to the Table are those who aren't United Methodist Christians and those who haven't been baptized, confirmed, or professed their faith Jesus Christ. Our United Methodist way is not to determine who qualifies, but to offer Jesus' hospitality to persons and then trust that Jesus will take it from there.
11. God works in mysterious ways. We say it, but then we try to fit God's ways into ways we can comprehend and can manipulate.

12. We United Methodist Christians believe that, because God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts, the different beliefs and practices of various denominations are justified. We can hold to our Wesleyan/United Methodist perspective, while respecting those who don't see things the way we do. Thus we can practice infant baptism and an open table without having to judge those who don't.

How United Methodists View the Bible and Doctrine

1. United Methodists, while taking the Bible and Church Doctrine seriously, resist the temptation to turn either into an idol. They are means to an end, not ends in themselves. I find that the Bible is best read as a "master narrative," as faith history (His-story). Stories contain meaning that is multi-dimensional. They resist literalism. For the same reason I find the stories of the biblical witnesses and of the saints since to be more healing, liberating, and inspiring than doctrinal propositions.

The Bible

2. No one takes the Bible literally – at least all of it. Even those who pick and choose which verses to take literally really don't, because they can't. Every translation is based on the translator/translators' judgment about the meaning of the original languages. Therefore, what is being taken literally is not the Bible but someone's interpretation of the Bible.
3. Those who claim to take the Bible literally disregard those verses that defy reason if taken literally. For example, Jesus tells us to cut off our hands or pluck out our eyes if they cause us to sin. I know of no one who's done such a thing. When John says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, "fire" is not taken literally or else those baptized by the Holy Spirit would be incinerated. I know of no literalists who take Jesus literally when he said that believers will witness to their faith by drinking poison and handling poisonous snakes – with the exception of a few in Appalachia.
4. No where else do we assume that the words we speak can be taken literally as though there is no possibility of misunderstanding what the speaker/writing is intending to convey. No matter how well we know another person we can't read her mind in order to know for sure that what she means by the words she says is what we think they mean.
5. The Bible is called the "Living Word of God." It is "God-breathed" or "inspired." This means that the witness of those in the Bible has the power to enable us to hear God's Voice as they heard it. Our experience is that what we hear that Voice say to us at one point in our lives can be something else at another point in our lives. It may be that we've changed and can hear a word we couldn't hear when we were less mature in our faith. Or, it may be that in our current crisis we need to hear a different word than we heard when our life was going smoothly. To read the Bible literally would be to limit its power to speak to us what we need to hear when we need to hear it. It is to turn the Living Word into a dead document. It is to assume that our initial reading has made the mind of God available to us for eternity.

6. Jesus said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth..." (John 16:12-13). To take the Bible literally is to deny the promise that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide us into all truth.
7. Paul said, "Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:5-6). To read the Bible literally is to turn it into words that kill because it has taken the Spirit out of the words.
8. The Bible wasn't dictated by God to humans who were unconsciously manipulated by God. The Bible is testimony by humans of their experience of God. It is for the purpose of helping us experience God too. When we turn their testimony into God, we reduce God to a book and God's Voice to what humans have said. We turn the Bible into an idol. It's been called, "bibliolotry." We worship the Bible rather than the God to whom the Bible witnesses.
9. In addition to reading the Bible literally, there are those today who assert that the Bible is inerrant and infallible. These are code words that accompany bibliolotry. It is maintained that, because God dictated every word in the Bible it is without any inconsistencies or self-contradictions. Such can be maintained only if those inconsistencies are denied. Read the four Gospel accounts of Easter morning, and you'll find different persons going to the tomb and different persons in the tomb. Those who say, "If you can't take any part of the Bible literally, then the whole Bible has no authority," simply have turned the book into God. God is bigger than the book that testifies to him. **The Bible is a means toward the end of bringing persons into a personal, vital, faithful relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The Bible is not end in itself.**

Doctrine

10. Doctrine has been described as a box that gives us shape. It is a system of beliefs that the church has developed to express its relationship with the God it has come to know through the Bible. Just as a particular interpretation of verses in the Bible can be turned into a litmus test to determine who's a Christian and who's not, so can the church's doctrines. The problem with such a litmus test is that it focuses solely on propositions made about God. It omits what is most important: how our lives are changed due to the relationship God has with us and we have with God.
11. United Methodists are not primarily doctrinal. While taking doctrine seriously, we believe that how we think about God is less important than being in a relationship with God that entails constant conversation with God's and God's people. Thus, all of life with God is prayer. It's been said, "Prayer changes things." Most importantly it changes us! All conversation changes us, but especially conversation with The Voice above all voices. Jesus shows us how to pray. He shows us how to live a life in constant communion with God.
12. John Wesley once said, "If your heart is as my heart, lend me your hand." Our opinions will be different. They will change. We will not think alike, but we can love alike."

13. The churches that demand conformity in doctrinal matters, in truth, are deluding themselves. All you have to do is ask: "How do you understand the doctrines, for example, of Original Sin, or the Atonement, or Salvation, to quickly discover that publicly professed unanimity "is only skin deep." Scratch the surface and you will discover great diversity of understanding. If doctrinal agreement is necessary for church membership, then there will be no church.

14. We United Methodist not only don't demand conformity on doctrinal matters – we don't expect it! Because we view salvation as a life-long process of growing in grace, we expect that how we think about our relationship with God will change. All minds will be transformed into the likeness of Christ along with all of rest of us.

15. I view doctrine not so much as a box as a house. The prevailing wisdom is, "We shape our buildings that then shape us." Our "doctrinal house," to be sure, shapes us. For example, as I've observed earlier, how we understand salvation shapes how we understand our relationship with God, the role of Jesus in God's reconciling the world to God's Self, and the ongoing way God is involved with the world through the Holy Spirit.

However, a house isn't an end in itself. It is for the sake of the lives of those who live in it. We don't worship the house. Our language, of course, confuses us: We speak of "going to church," and usually mean that we're going to the building where the "church" gathers for worship, study, fellowship, and service. "*Ekklesia*" is the Greek word translated "church." It means, "assembly." *We* gather, *we* assemble, in a building. However, the real church is the "*We*" – not the building.

16. Moreover, within the house that shapes the life and lives of those in it, is a blueprint of rooms and how they are arranged. If there is a prominent dining room in the house, then the persons who live in it will be shaped by eating together and all that happens around the table. It used to be said, "The family that prays together stays together." It is just as true that "The family that eats together stays together."

17. Not only do the rooms and their arrangement in the house shape those in it, our "doctrinal house" is best viewed as made of bricks that are translucent. They are not clear, for as Paul put it, "we see through a glass dimly." But the light of God in Christ shines into the house of the church's doctrine to help us to see as Christ sees. Again, doctrine shapes our house, but the life that is shaped and lived within it is illuminated by the light of the Holy Spirit. The life that the house shapes and shelters is "en-lightened." Those who live in a house grow up in it. The same is true for the church's "doctrinal house."

18. John Westerhoff, once a professor of Christian education at the Duke Divinity School, observed a pattern that persons often follow in their faith development. While others have offered more detailed and complex stages of faith development, I've found Westerhoff's accurate in depicting my own experience. He calls them "phases" rather than stages, so as not to imply that our growth as Christians permits us to move beyond one another and then puts us in a position to feel superior to those who haven't gotten as far along as we are. Just as a three-ring tree is no less a tree than one that has fifty rings, so an early phase Christian is no less a Christian than a more mature one.

19. His "phases" are these:

Experienced faith: This is the pre-conceptual trust or distrust based on the child's experience of those in her life. Faith is understood as the way one "leans into life." If the young child has been cared for, he leans into life expectantly. If the child has been neglected or abused, she leans into life on back on her heels. This is the "faith" of the child from birth to 6/8 years old.

Dependent faith: This is the faith of elementary and high school young person (6/8 – 16/18 years old). This phase of faith is characterized by belonging, authority, and feelings. Inclusion in a peer group; a person/group of persons who are given the authority to say, "This is who we are and how we do things"/ "This is right and this is wrong; and emotions/affections/feelings are crucial. It's why church youth groups which offer membership in which youth are wanted and given a role, which have an older "authority" figure that is respected and obeyed, and a musical component (feelings) attract teenagers. And why gangs do too. Sects and cults, in which authority, belonging, and feeling are manipulated and misused, are examples of enforced dependent faith. They keep persons stuck in an "arrested" childlike faith phase.

Seeking/Searching faith: As the intellectual capacity of young person develops, feelings give way to critical analysis. Authorities are now questioned. Belonging is sacrificed in order to gain objective distance on "where one came from" in order to evaluate how much of it one wants to keep, revise, and discard. In this phase young adults experiment with membership in new groups and "try on" new religions or become agnostics even atheists. This phase is necessary for becoming a responsible adult. One may return to the church/religion of her childhood but does so with a sense of "This is what I believe and this is why I believe it." One of the reasons the church has lost this age group is because it is threatened by its asking questions for which it has no definitive answers.

Owned faith: In this phase, because one knows what he believes and why, one is willing to suffer the consequences of his faith. Martin Luther said it well when his church put him on trial for what it considered his heresy as a Roman Catholic priest: "Here I stand. I can do no other." This is the faith of the martyrs and assassinated prophets.

20. There is much discussion today about how relativism has replaced absolute truth. Relativism has led to an attitude of "Since all beliefs are equal, it doesn't make any difference what you believe." Into that void have rushed many authorities claiming that they have the absolute truth. They are right and everyone else is wrong. I believe we United Methodists believe that there is absolute truth, but it lies in God's Love. The absolute truth is relational – not relativistic. In our relationship with God we must always discern how God's Love revealed in Jesus Christ is to be lived out in specific circumstances. In that sense truth is "relative." As we seek to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, our actions are "relative" to real life in real life situations. If there is an absolute truth it is that "God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts not our thoughts." It is, "God is Love."

Is Jesus the only Way?

1. What did Jesus mean when he said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).
2. Many Christians have used this verse to judge, if not condemn, all faiths other than their own. There is one way to God and it’s Jesus. The verse gives rise to a holier-than-thou, I’m right – you’re wrong, I’m superior – you’re inferior self-righteous pride. In other words, Jesus becomes the source of sin.
3. Of course, since the early church, Christians have found ways of doing the same toward other Christians. “We’re the only ones going to heaven, because everyone else is wrong.” Paul wrote Chapters 12, 13, and 14 of I Corinthians, because there were those in the church claiming to be superior Christians. They had the gift of *glossolalia* or speaking in tongues. It inspired Paul to write “The Love Chapter,” I Corinthians 13: “If I speak in tongues of men and angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Paul goes on to say that everything we do and say is for the sake of edifying the Body of Christ. His is the mind of the Body and his mind is Love. Whenever we do anything that undermines Divine Love we are outside of the way, truth, and life of Jesus.
4. To understand what Jesus is saying when he says, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” we must put that statement in the context of what he says before and after it. First, it must be noted that he has just washed the disciples’ feet. He tells them that his act is a sign of the life that is lived under the rule of God’s love. He calls the love of humble service, “a new commandment.” He is about to show them the epitome of humble service in his passion and death. He tells them that he is about to leave them and they can’t accompany him – at least not now.
5. He knows they are anxious about his leaving them. He seeks to reassure them: “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” There’s room in God’s love for everyone. There will never be a “No Vacancy” sign where God’s Love is. A few verses later Jesus will say, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them.”
6. Thomas wants to know where this dwelling place, this home is. He wants to know the way to where Jesus is going. It is then that Jesus responds: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Now listen to what he goes on to say, because it is crucial for beginning to understand what he’s just said: “If you *know* me, you will *know* my Father also. You’ve seen him and *know* him.”
7. The key word is “know.” You can know the Father only by living in relationship with the Father. “No one comes to the Father except through me.” To understand what Jesus is saying, you’ve got to accept that **knowing him is knowing the Father.**

8. For Jesus it's all about relationship and experience. We've turned *knowing Jesus* into *knowing about Jesus*. We've turned knowing Jesus into doctrines and beliefs about Jesus. We assumed that knowing Jesus is like knowing information that we regurgitate for an exam. It has no affect on us whatsoever. To know Jesus is not about information. It's about transformation. It goes back to the way we understand salvation. We understand salvation as the life-long process of knowing Christ in such a way that we become like him. Just as he embodied/incarnated the image of God, so will we.
9. It is like learning how to ride a bicycle. It is a "knowing" that has to be personally experienced. You can read about it or someone can tell you about it. But you can never truly know it except by experiencing it.
10. Some of us remember the King James Version of the Bible and its expression for sexual intimacy. "And Jacob *knew* Rachel and conceived and she bore a son, whose name was Joseph." To *know* was to be vulnerable, to give oneself fully, to become one with another and the Creator in the miracle of procreation.
11. We can *possess* information *about* Jesus. But to know Jesus is to have him *possess* us. Holy Communion demonstrates how knowing Jesus works. He gives us himself. We consume him in the bread and the cup. But then he consumes us from the inside out as his life moves into every cell in us.
12. The more Jesus' life becomes ours, the more loving it becomes and, consequently, the more abundant and eternal it becomes. The more it is inspired by, counseled by, encouraged by, helped by, comforted by, empowered by the Holy Spirit – the Life of the Father and the Son. Jesus will love as the Father loves. That's "where" he is going – into a relationship of pure Love.
13. The disciples don't understand. Because when they go somewhere it's to a place – not a way of being and living. They are taking Jesus' words literally. And so they miss the truth Jesus is offering them. The disciples want a road map. They want information. They want facts their minds can understand. Instead Jesus gives them himself: "Believe in God, believe also in me....I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through the way I and the Father are related."
14. And that way, truth, and life is Love. And Love doesn't demand its own way. It doesn't dominate or oppress or condemn or exclude. Love is willing to wash feet, deny self, and take up one's cross. **Love doesn't seek to be No. 1 or claim to be the only one. In fact, to make such a claim is evidence that we don't know Jesus the way he and the Father know each other and want us to know each other.**
15. I believe Jesus is the only way, but his way is to love all persons, no matter what their way may be.

