

LIVING OUT
GOD'S TRUTH

A 6-WEEK CONVERSATION BASED ON THE TEACHINGS OF REV. DR. GARY MASON



Facilitator Guide

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Welcome

Welcome to **Living Out God's Truth**, a 6-week conversation based on the teachings of The Rev. Dr. Gary Mason that were offered at the 2019 North Georgia Annual Conference Gathering of the United Methodist Church.

A Methodist pastor, Mason has spent decades living out the truth of the Gospel in his home country of Ireland, including the violent conflicts of the late 20th century, known as The Troubles. His experience guiding individuals and communities to find healing and reconciliation following violent division now informs his teaching and coaching in communities across the globe. Through the lens of scripture and Wesleyan theology, he invites and challenges Christians to seek a faith of authentic, embodied, and communal truth. The goal of which is beloved community.

In one of his presentations during the 2019 North Georgia Annual Conference, Mason asked whether we as followers of Christ are becoming more like Jesus or conversely trying to make Jesus more like ourselves. Mason continued by stating that rather than squeezing and shaping the Gospel to fit our American culture and politics, we should be allowing the Gospel to shape us as we discover the truth about ourselves.

After these statements, Mason argued that the *“cross ought to be raised again at the center of the marketplace.”* This claim is in line with our Wesleyan foundation that is rooted in grace and social holiness. Yet, many of us have compartmentalized the practice of our faith as separate and apart from our everyday comings and goings. Thus, the faithful religious practices that were once at the center of everyday life seem to have been relegated to the inside of the church walls and used solely on Sunday morning for sharing among “friends.”

Today, however, our nation is in need of connection to grace and a social holiness—love for one another—because we are extremely divided. We, as followers of Jesus, should be providing a different way of being that is a witness to that which we all need: unity and an agape love for all. Our actions should be the witness in the center of the marketplace. But, doing so is no cheap matter, as Mason would say. Allowing our faith to intersect our Monday through Saturday life requires more authenticity and a belief in something bigger and better than what we currently see when we look around.

Allowing ourselves to live out our faith requires hope, courage, and commitment to the realness of Christ. Living a truth that goes against cultural norms will require us to examine ourselves, reconcile our differences, restore relationships with one another, and recommit to living out our social covenant together.

It is our hope that this six-session conversation will help you extend your practice of faith to all aspects of your life so that the Gospel may be known by others as authentic and hope-filled truth. These weekly discussion topics and exercises are intended to challenge you to dig deeper both personally and collectively about what it means to be a Christian today. Ultimately, we pray for your transformation: personally, communally, and broadly in the marketplace.

The best way for us to begin is by allowing ourselves to be honest even though it may be uncomfortable.

I am an African American female from the South. I am an Ordained Elder in The United Methodist Church. I have achieved a higher level of education and now live out my calling to make disciples and transform the world, beginning with the university community and students under my charge. I draw on many different facets of my life and experience to inform who I am and how I view the world. Just as this is true for me, it is also true for each of us, which means we all view life through a unique lens.

Because of our varied perspectives, it is important that we are honest both with ourselves and also with one another. In our differences, we have much to teach each other. Our differences, however, should not supersede those things that we have in common—our commitment as Christians to love and respect one another. This is beloved community: the ability to see one another's differences and appreciate that our authentic diversity makes us all better.

—Rev. Dr. Tonya Lawrence-Miles

For the Facilitator

Thank you for agreeing to lead these important conversations.

Your role is critical. It is our hope that you will lead with grace, confidence, and an open heart so that your faith may be renewed just as it is your hope that each participant will be transformed by his/her participation.

As a facilitator, your role is to:

1. Gather people for conversation.
2. Facilitate the discussion.
3. Help the group figure out what to do next.

1. Gather people for conversation.

Who do you gather?

Participation in this conversation may be determined a few different ways. Depending on your intended outcomes, you may extend an open invitation to the broad congregation or you may intentionally extend invitations to a select group to share together—perhaps it is a particular leadership team, an intergenerational group, or even a cross section of the congregation that reflect differing perspectives. You may also consider inviting a pre-existing group to engage in this experience, like a Sunday School class, women's or men's bible study, or other small group. Perhaps gather a combination of seasoned members and new members. You may even consider bringing together practicing Christians from around your community. In this case, we encourage selecting a meeting location that is either

shared or neutral. We also recommend considering if the role of facilitator should be held by one person or two to represent the different communities coming together to share this experience.

When do you gather?

The standard plan per session is a 60-minute experience. Weekly lesson plans include additional discussion questions to extend the conversation should you decide that an extended experience serves your particular context better. Your role as the facilitator is to honor the time of the group by beginning and ending each session as agreed upon. Monitoring the responsiveness of the participants will be key in managing the group's flow of discussion, and will also help you to establish a culture of trust within the group.

Where do you gather?

Assure that the gathering space is appropriate for the group and the discussion. Again, we recommend a space that is welcoming and physically accessible to all. Church classrooms or meeting rooms, a group member's home, or community space are all options. Ensure that the space is quiet and that conversation cannot be overheard by non-participants. This will help hold confidentiality and encourage more courageous sharing by group members.

2. Facilitate the Conversation.

In order to manage the group's expectations, please stress to the participants in the first session and as often as necessary that your role is to facilitate the group's experience of honest conversation, and to witness to the fruits that come of it. You are not the teacher or resident expert. To support you, this facilitators guide includes additional resources to help you to prepare and to guide the conversation.

Each session will include:

- a designated scripture reading
- quotes from a John Wesley sermon
- a quote about "beloved community"
- discussion questions
- an activity
- a closing prayer to be prayed in unison and aloud each week

This should be more than enough content to encourage a healthy 60-minute conversation. You will notice that there are a few questions that are the same every week. This is intended to provide consistency and to encourage the flow of the discussion from week to week.

There will also be work that each participant should complete prior to the next meeting. These exercises are intended to encourage personal reflection that will help to inform the group's dialogue during your time together.

Your guide will be slightly different from that of the participants. Your guide will include a list of supplies that will be needed for each of the sessions as well as any additional documents that may inform your preparation time, and documents that will need to be copied for the group. Please use these resources as you deem necessary.

BEFORE each Session:

- Be positive, confident, and open to the Holy Spirit.
- Pray daily for yourself, your group, the experience.
- Prepare and plan before each session by watching Mason's video for that week, reading support materials, and reading through the accompanying conversation guide.

DURING each Session:

- Know your audience. And help them know one another. There will be individuals in the room who will readily speak up and others who will be more reserved. Balance this out by allowing everyone's voice to be heard in the first five minutes of the conversation. This can be done in the form of a centering question or a simple ice breaker of your choosing. (Creating space for all voices to be heard allows the more reserved participants a comfort level that will encourage their engagement throughout the discussion.)
- Present yourself as a participant in the discussion, as a facilitator of dialogue not the most knowledgeable person in the conversation.
- Remain impartial and open to all opinions.
- Remind participants about the importance of maintaining confidentiality.
- Ask open-ended questions and follow up with "why" to help participants reach their own conclusion.
- Do not feel that you have to have all of the answers (no one does!), but be willing to correct any false information in a gracious way.
- If at any time there is silence in the room, do not feel that you have to fill the moment with words. Silence, even when it is uncomfortable, may allow the Holy Spirit to break through in an unexpected way.
- Pause regularly to check in, ask for feedback, or invite comments.
- Be in tune to the "mood of the room" and redirect as needed. Should a conversation become overwhelming a pause and/or a prayer always helps.
- Ask for clarification and encourage learners to do likewise.
- Remember that you are the "timekeeper." By keeping the discussion on course, you will be able to work through the material as you have planned. However, as you begin to learn your group, you will know better the needs of the group and where more or less time should be focused.

- In the wrap up each week, clearly restate what was covered. Remind participants of activities to be completed before the next session and give an overview of the next session so that they know what to expect.
- Finish strong in prayer together.

AFTER each session:

- Follow up with anyone who misses a session.
- Send out reminder emails pertinent to the next session, and share any prayer concerns offered to the group.

3. Help the group decide what to do next.

By the end of these six weeks of shared, honest dialogue, your group should be able to identify what has been learned, to set goals and standards of accountability for continued discussion, and to share those insights with the larger church community. Specifically, who hope this group and its individuals members are spurred to help the larger church consider new approaches to ministry with one another and with the broader community.

Further, there should be dialogue about how this group continues in conversation, who from this group might be willing to facilitate a new group, and how new groups can be formed with this mindset of beloved community.

Solitary religion is not to be found there. "Holy Solitaries" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than Holy Adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.

John Wesley

Session 1: Introduction to Series

Goal	To introduce everyone to this 6-week experience and to set expectations for this time together
Supplies Needed	Video: “Being One with Each Other” Session 1 (This video can be found at www.ngumc.org/conversation-guide), newsprint, markers, “Expectations for Our Time Together,” and the “Authentic Living” Survey.
This Session	<p>Begin with an introduction of the 6-Week Series and summarize the series intro and participant material, including Mason’s bio. Lay out the goals:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Authentic sharing2. Honest dialogue3. Stretched perspective4. Gaining an understanding (and even glimpse of) Beloved Community. <p>To break the ice, ask each participant to share his/her name, and respond to the following question: What are you hoping to gain by participating in this 6-week experience?</p>
Scripture	Ask for a volunteer to read Romans 12. As it is being read, encourage each participant to underline a word or phrase that best captures their hopes for this experience.
Prayer	Ask for a volunteer to lead the group in prayer using Romans 12 as intercession.
Video	Watch the “Being One with Each Other” Session 1 video with Rev. Dr. Gary Mason which is 29:51 minutes in length
Reflection	<p>Ask participants to take a moment of silent reflection. Ask them to write down 2 or 3 moments in the video that left the biggest impression on them. (2 mins)</p> <p>When ready, ask the group to report out. List those moments for everyone to see. (5 to 7 mins)</p> <p>As the members of the group share, take note of the commonality among the group. Are there things that seemed to create passion or interest in the group? Any of these would be great starting place for further dialogue.</p>

Being mindful of the remaining time in your session. Keep the conversation going by sharing that many of the things mentioned in the video will be explored further in the remaining sessions.

- Discussion Now ask participants to relate any of the content from the video to the Romans 12 passage. Please allow them a moment to reference the passage that was read. (5 mins)
- Now, considering the following questions:
- In what ways have you experienced authenticity in the church?
 - What is your understanding of personal holiness?
 - What is your understanding of social holiness?
 - How do you define Beloved Community?
- Response Now, set expectations for the group's 6-week time together. (See the "Time Together Expectations Guide.") Depending on how much time you have remaining, you may want to be proactive in guiding this process along in order to establish a list of expectations that all can agree upon before the session ends.
- For Next Week Review the "Sacrificial Living" assessment and "The Almost Christian" to be read before next session. Answer any questions that may arise.
- Prayer Finally, pray the "All Together" prayer aloud and in unison.

Questions for Additional Conversation:

- In the video, Gary Mason stated that younger generations are seeking a religious experience that is both authentic and one that lives out its truth. Do you believe that your congregation offers the type of ministry that younger generations are seeking? If yes, provide examples of this authentic and truthful ministry. If not, what may be preventing this type of ministry from happening?
- In Romans 12, we are instructed not to conform to this world but to renew our minds so that we might know God's will. In what ways have you conformed to the world around you?
- Can you provide examples of ways that you renew your mind? How often does your renewal happen?
- How does one discern God's will?
- What does it mean to be a living sacrifice?
- How does one know what is pleasing to God? Does pleasing God matter to you?
- What challenged you today? How will you resolve it?

The great question of all, then still remains: Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Are you happy in God? Is God in your heart, 'that he who loveth God love his brother [sister] also? Do you love every man [woman], even your enemies, even the enemies of God as your own soul?

John Wesley

Session 2: Reconsidering Our Theology

Goal	To consider how our personal theology has contributed to our environment and identify beliefs that need to be reshaped.
Supplies Needed	“Being One With Each Other” session 2 video and the “Through their Eyes” activity
This Session	Begin by centering the group with either an ice breaker of your choice or the following question: What excites you about this session’s discussion?
Scripture	Read 1 Corinthians 13. Again, underline the word or phrase that jumps out at you.
Prayer	<p>Ask for a volunteer to lead the group in prayer using 1 Corinthians 13 for intercession.</p> <p>Ask each participant to share something that he/she found revealing in the Sacrificial Living Survey. (Be prepared to share from your results as a way to begin the discussion)</p>
Video	<p>Provide an introduction and watch the “Being One with Each Other” Session 2 video with Rev. Dr. Gary Mason” Video. (35:30 Minutes)</p> <p>* This video can be found at www.ngumc.org/conversation-guide</p>
Reflection	<p>After the video, define the following terms for the group: the “Almost Christian,” the Theology of Contempt, and Toxicity. Then, ask participants how all of these are related to one another.</p> <p>As an example of how harmful contempt can be, reference the impact of Hitler’s contempt. His beliefs led to the torturing and death of 6 million Jewish people. He believed that his actions were in line with the Almighty’s will. Then, ask: How do we as human beings figure out God’s will for our lives? How might our contempt for others damage our ability to know God’s will?</p>
Discussion	<p>Then, ask the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Theology means “beliefs about God.” How are you living out your theology as an individual? How is your congregation living out its beliefs about God?• What do your congregation’s behaviors and practices communicate to others (implicitly and explicitly) about your beliefs of God? Church? Worship?

- Today, 9 out of 10 Americans are willing to go along with a theology of contempt in order to remain within the circle of power. In what ways do you either encourage or discourage this behavior?
- In your opinion, what is the difference between an “Almost Christian” and an “Altogether Christian?” How do we move from one to the other?
- Gary Mason stated that “religion is like fire. It warms but it can also burn.” As Methodists, how are we currently using our flame? Give examples.
- In 1 Corinthians 13:1, Paul explains that action without love is nothing more than noise or an empty gesture. How does this concept relate to your understanding of the “Almost” and “Altogether” and your personal actions?
- What do we do (past and present) in the name of God (knowingly and unknowingly) that is harmful to others?
- If love never fails, then why does hate exist?

For Next Week

Help participants locate the “Circumcision of the Heart” reading assignment for the next session.

Explain the “Through Their Eyes” activity that is to be completed before next session and respond to any questions that may arise. (Finding someone with whom to share in this activity with may be a challenge for some. It may be helpful to have a few names of individuals who would be willing to serve as partners in the conversation.)

Prayer

Finally, pray the “All Together” prayer aloud and in unison.

Questions for Additional Conversation

- What challenged you today?
- How will you resolve it?

The circumcision of heart of a true Christian follower is one of acceptance with God. It is not either an outward circumcision or baptism ...but is a right state of the soul--a mind and spirit renewed after the image of him that created it. It is a truth that can only be spiritually discerned. The circumcision of the heart, the seal of thy calling, is foolish to the world.

John Wesley

Session 3: Repenting for Our Harmful Actions

Goal	To reflect upon that which we have done in the name of God that may have been hurtful to others and to repent for those things.
Supplies Needed	The Baptismal Covenant, Instructions for Lectio Divina
This Session	Begin by centering the group with the following question: What excites you about this session's discussion?
Prayer	<p>Explain that this week will be structured a bit differently from the first two weeks and then ask for a volunteer to lead the group in prayer.</p> <p>Ask each participant to share something that he/she found revealing in the "Through Their Eyes" exercise (Be prepared to share from your experience as a way to begin the discussion). Again, using a white board of large sheet of paper, list the responses for all to see. Once all have shared, note any points of similarity, but especially points of contrast that draw out our different perspectives even on shared experiences.</p> <p>Share with the group that this week's discussion will be informed by God's revealing voice rather than a video.</p>
Lectio Divina	You may take this time to explain the spiritual exercise known as Lectio Divina, a historical practice and how the group will engage it together this evening.
Scripture	Please select three readers for the Luke 6:27-49 passage and share with them their order for reading prior to beginning the activity. Then, follow the directions as stated for each reading.
Reflection	After the three readings, return to the "Through Their Eyes" exercise. Ask why might the differences in perspectives exist? (Consider the role of power and privilege in this discussion. As well as the dynamics between insiders or outsiders.)
Discussion	How might such difference be hurtful? How might such difference be harmful to one's growth in faith? In what ways did we contribute to these harmful actions either by omission or commission? For what do we need to ask forgiveness?

This is a great time for you as the facilitator to talk about the role that confession, repentance, and forgiveness play in our worship of God and relationships with each other.

Take time to process this spiritual practice and the power of the Holy Spirit that works among us always and can be so revealing when we are attentive. (Please know that it is okay if some conversations remain open ended. Encourage participants to continue to hold the dialogue in their heart until next week and to talk to God about it.)

Explain the assignment “Baptismal Covenant” to be completed prior to the next session and respond to any questions that may arise.

Prayer

Finally, pray the “All Together” prayer aloud and in unison.

Questions for Additional Conversation

- If we believe God is in control, why do we struggle with conforming to God’s will?
- Often we acknowledge those with whom we have direct connections and overlook those with whom we are not connected. As Christians called to transform the world, how can we become more aware of those with whom we are not directly connected?
- In what ways can we take a more active role in dismantling injustice in our community?
- What challenged you today? How will you resolve it?

We are not sufficient of ourselves to help ourselves; that without the Spirit of God we can do nothing but add sin to sin. It is he alone who worketh in us by his almighty power, either to will or do that which is good. It is impossible for us to think a good thought without the supernatural assistance of his Spirit as to create ourselves, or to renew our whole souls in righteous and true holiness.

John Wesley

Session 4: Reconciling Our Will to God's Will

Goal	To reconcile our actions and our free will with God's will for our lives.
Supplies Needed	Baptismal Covenant Homework
This Session	<p>Center the group with the following question: What excites you about this session's discussion?</p> <p>Begin by following up from last week's discussion to allow space for participants to share what God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, may have revealed to them over the course of the week.</p> <p>Ask participants to share what resonated with them in the "Baptismal Covenant Exercise" and ask what it means to them to be in covenantal relationship? To "surround" someone and also who they believe should be surrounded. Then ask whether or not that happens in their congregation and why.</p>
Scripture	Ask for a volunteer to read Philippians 4. Again, encourage participants to underline or word or phrase that jumps out at them.
Prayer	<p>Ask for a volunteer to lead the group in prayer using Philippians 4 as intercession.</p> <p>Begin by explaining Paul's environment and condition as he was sharing those powerful words, specifically, his persecution and imprisonment. Highlight that clearly, the "peace that surpasses all understanding" is not of our doing but is necessary in order to rise above cultural chaos and helps us to live out God's truth in the world.</p>
Discussion	<p>Consider the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why is it so hard for us to have hard conversation?• How to we disagree without disengaging?• How might knowing someone else's story change our experience worshiping God next to them?• What prevents us from knowing one another?• How do you describe a "politics of hope?" What would that look like in your church? Our community?• At our best, how are Methodists uniquely equipped to model beloved community to a divided society?• What does peace look and feel like to you?• What does peace require of us?

Almost Christians are Christian on the outside, and do nothing which the Gospel forbids. Almost Christians follow commandments, help faithfully, and acknowledge the importance of God. Altogether Christians have a heart purified by faith, love God and neighbor and work by this love.

John Wesley

Session 5: Recommitting to Living Out Our Faith

Goal	To recommit to living out our faith in all aspects of our life authentically.
Supplies Needed	“Being One with Each Other” Session 5 Video (found at www.ngumc.org/conversation-guide), copies of The United Methodist Church mission statement, your church vision statement, and copies of your church’s Mission Insite Report including mosaic profiles. (Note that the Conference Center for Congregational Excellence staff can help you gather this report this but need 5 days’ notice.)
This Session	<p>Begin by centering the group with either an ice breaker of your choice or the following question: What excites you about this evening’s discussion?</p> <p>Ask for a volunteer to read 1 Galatians 6. Again, ask participants to underline any word or phrase that jumps out.</p> <p>Ask for a volunteer to lead the group in prayer using 1 Galatians 6 for intercession.</p>
Discussion	<p>Discuss the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What views have changed for you over the last few weeks? In what ways have you grown?• How has your understanding of being “Almost Christian” and “Altogether Christian” changed?• How has your understanding of “Authenticity” changed as a result of participating in this conversation?• In Gary Mason’s presentation, he mentioned that if Moses took a straw poll among the Children of Israel that he would have discovered that his leadership was considered a great bother and quite unpopular. As a leader, have you struggled with decisions that would make you either popular within the group or faithful to God? Please provide an example.• How am I called to live out God’s truth in this world?• How will you live more authentically after participating in these conversations?• What do we gain when we talk to those who are different in some way? (Note: engagement does not equal endorsement.)• How will you share this experience with others?
Next Week	Hand out and explain the assignment for next week, including the Mission Insite report, the United Methodist mission statement, and your church’s vision statement. Please highlight any particular

Christian's participation in God is the essence of Christian existence. The means to this single end are: not faith alone, but humility (i.e., repentance), faith, hope and love.

John Wesley

Session 6: Reimagining Beloved Community

Goal To reimagine the vision for the congregation with the beloved community in mind.

Supplies Needed Beloved Community Traits

This Session Begin by centering the group with either an ice breaker of your choice or the following question: What excites you about this session's discussion?

Over the course of these 6-weeks, you have discussed a lot. You may want to ask how individuals are feeling at this point and whether or not this is a conversation that should continue or broaden and what that might look like in implementation.(i.e., who would be involved? Who would lead the discussions?)

Ask for a volunteer to read 1 Corinthians 12. Again, ask participants to underline any word or phrase that jumps out.

Ask for a volunteer to lead the group in prayer using 1 Corinthians 12 for intercession.

Discuss the following questions from the material you shared last week:

- What from the Mission Insite report was helpful?
- What surprised or challenged you?
- What questions did it raise for you?
- What ideas did it spark in you?
- Does the mission and the vision statement make sense *for* your community?
- Do they make sense *to* your community?

PRACTICAL NEXT STEPS:

Even as you conclude this 6-week discussion, the journey continues. As individuals, complete the following statements. (10 mins)

To continue my personal growth in authentic witness to my faith,

In the next week I will...

In the next month, I will....

In the next three months, I will...

By this time next year, I will have....

Then, allow 15 minutes to complete the following statements as a group.

Who is Rev. Dr. Gary Mason?

Gary Mason is a Methodist Minister who holds a PhD from the school of Psychology at the University of Ulster. He was also awarded an honorary Doctorate in Divinity by Florida Southern College for his role in peace building in Ireland. He completed his theological studies at Queens University and holds a Bachelor's in Business Studies from the University of Ulster.

Gary is a Senior Research Fellow at the Kennedy Institute for Conflict Intervention at Maynooth University in Ireland. He is also an adjunct Professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. Gary is a faculty advisor to the Negotiations Strategies Institute, which is a Harvard University programme for leaders in the Israeli / Palestinian context. He has lectured in political, religious and academic forums throughout Europe, South Africa, the Middle East and the U.S.A. seeking to engage, mentor and share lessons from the Irish peace process. He has travelled widely in the USA and has spoken in Churches of all Christian denominations as well as other faith settings. Gary has also given lectures in a number of College, University and denominational settings across the United States from Harvard University, Boston College, Boston University, Tufts University, Emory University, Duke University, University of Alabama, Florida Southern College, Birmingham Southern College, Fairmont State University, Wesleyan WV, Rollins College, St. Cloud University, St. John's University Minnesota and Hamline University.

Prior to founding Rethinking Conflict, Gary spent 28 years as a clergy person in Belfast and was involved in the "Northern Irish Peace Process." He has been and continues to be a close advisor to Protestant ex-combatants on the civilianisation efforts of paramilitaries. To learn more about Rev. Dr. Mason, visit www.rethinkingconflict.com.

Who is Rev. Dr. Tonya Lawrence-Miles?

A native of Orangeburg, South Carolina, Dr. Tonya L. Miles received a Bachelor of Science in Marketing from North Carolina A&T State University. She also holds a degree in Fashion Buying and Merchandising from the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, NY. After more than a decade in corporate retail, Dr. Miles accepted her call to ministry. In May 2010, she received dual Master's degrees in Divinity and Youth Ministry from Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, NJ. Dr. Miles earned a Doctor of Educational Ministry degree at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia in May 2016.

Dr. Miles is an ordained Elder in The United Methodist Church. She has faithfully served at various levels within the connectional system as preacher, teacher, author and leader.

Dr. Miles is currently appointed as the University Chaplain/Director in the Office of Religious Life at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta and also serves as an adjunct professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

All Together Prayer

All Together

(Please pray aloud and in unison)

Gracious and loving Lord, we give you thanks for your faithfulness, and for your unconditional love. We give you thanks for the gift of life, the graces that you have bestowed upon each of us and the ministry to which you have called each of us. As we join together in prayer, we ask that you could help us to open our hearts and our minds to hear your will and to be willing to fulfill it.

At this time when division seems more common than unity, we ask that you would draw us closer to you so that we might be the love, grace and peace that our community desperately needs. Help us on our journey to perfection so that we might be courageous enough to be altogether as we live out our faith.

Help us to see one another as goodness created by you so that we might be more authentic as we build a more beloved community together. May thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. **Amen.**

Activity

How Sacrificial is My Living? (Based upon Romans 12:9-21)

On a scale of 1-5, how likely are you to do the following as a Christian believer? (1= not at all likely, 2= somewhat likely, 3=neutral, 4=likely, 5= extremely likely)

- ___ Love without pretending.
- ___ Hate evil, and hold on to what is good.
- ___ Love each other like the members of your family.
- ___ Be the best at showing honor to each other.
- ___ Be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord!
- ___ Be happy in your hope
- ___ Stand your ground when you're in trouble
- ___ Devote yourselves to prayer.
- ___ Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home.
- ___ Bless people who harass you—bless and don't curse them.
- ___ Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying.
- ___ Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else.
- ___ Associate with people who have no status.
- ___ Live at peace with all people.
- ___ Don't try to get revenge for yourselves
- ___ Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.
- ___ Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.
- ___ Total of All Responses
- ___ Average of All Responses (To determine your average, divide the "Total of All Responses" by 17.)

Thoughts

Activity

Through Their Eyes

Identify someone in your congregation with whom you rarely share in conversation. Explain that you are taking part in a 6 Week conversation and that one of your assignments is to see the congregation “through the eyes” of another member. Then, invite that person to have a conversation with you about their perspective on the culture in your congregation. You may consider some of the following questions to help facilitate that conversation. (Please remember that this may feel awkward for the other person. Please record your responses to the same questions before you engage in conversation with the other person so that you may be able to share your perspective and encourage openness from them.)

- How long have you been a member?
- Are you currently active in any ministries?
 - If so, which ones?
 - If not, why not? Have you even been active in ministries?
- Is this an open and welcoming congregation?
- Do you think that everyone knows everyone?
 - If not, what prevents that from happening?
- How can we make it a goal for everyone to know everyone?

After your conversation, please note the interviewee’s responses in comparison to your responses to the same questions.

- Where are the similarities? Where are the differences?
- What new things did you learn about your congregation?
- Would such an activity be beneficial for all members of the congregation to experience?
- Are our thoughts, will, and actions synonymous with God’s will for us?

Notes

Activity

THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT I

The pastor addresses the congregation, and the congregation responds:

Do you, as Christ's body, the Church,
reaffirm both your rejection of sin
and your commitment to Christ?

We do.

Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life
and include these persons now before you in your care?

**With God's help we will proclaim the good news
and live according to the example of Christ.**

**We will surround these persons
with a community of love and forgiveness,
that they may grow in their trust of God,
and be found faithful in their service to others.**

**We will pray for them,
that they may be true disciples
who walk in the way that leads to life**

COMMENDATION AND WELCOME

16 The pastor addresses the congregation:

Members of the household of God,
I commend these persons to your love and care.
Do all in your power to increase their faith,
confirm their hope, and perfect them in love.

The congregation responds:

**We give thanks for all that God has already given you
and we welcome you in Christian love.
As members together with you**

**in the body of Christ
and in this congregation
of The United Methodist Church,
we renew our covenant
faithfully to participate
in the ministries of the Church
by our prayers, our presence,
our gifts, our service, and our witness,
that in everything God may be glorified
through Jesus Christ.**

The pastor addresses those baptized, confirmed, or received, using an appropriate gesture of blessing:

The God of all grace,
who has called us to eternal glory in Christ,
establish you and strengthen you
that you may live in grace and peace.

Questions for Review

- How does your congregation practice:
 - Increasing other's faith?
 - Confirming other's hope?
 - Perfecting other's love?
- How has your congregation done these things for you?
- How are you currently upholding your covenant to your community in
 - Prayer
 - Presence
 - Gifts
 - Service
 - Witness
- Which new disciples are you praying for? Write out a short prayer for each.
- What does it mean to "surround these persons"?
- Is our community one that fosters love and forgiveness?
- In what ways can we covenant better with one another?

Activity

Lectio Divina (Group Exercise)

As the facilitator, coordinate the reading of the designated text three times by three different people. Each reading should be followed by a time of silence and an opportunity for each member of the group to share the fruit of her or his lectio.

The first reading is for the purpose of hearing a word or passage that touches the heart. When the word or phrase is found, each member takes it in, and reflects on it during the silence that follows. After the silence, each person shares with the group the word or phrase that has touched his or her heart.

The second reading (by a member of the opposite sex from the first reader) is for the purpose of "hearing" or "seeing" Christ in the text. Each ponders the word that has touched the heart and asks where the word or phrase touches his or her life that day. Then, after the silence, each member of the group shares what he or she has "heard" or "seen."

The third and final reading is for the purpose of experiencing Christ "calling us forth" into doing or being. Members ask themselves what Christ in the text is calling them to do or to become today or this week. After the silence, each shares for the last time, and the exercise concludes with each person praying for the person on the right of him or her.

Those who regularly practice this method of praying and sharing the Scriptures find it to be an excellent way of developing trust within a group. It also is an excellent way of consecrating projects and hopes to Christ before more-formal group meetings.

Notes

Lectio Divina (As a Personal Exercise)

- Choose a text of the Scriptures that you wish to pray.
- Place yourself in a comfortable position, allow yourself to become silent. and allow yourself to enjoy silence for a few moments.
- Turn to the selected text and read it slowly, gently. Savor each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the "still, small voice" of a word or phrase that somehow says, "I am for you today." Do not expect lightning or ecstasies. In lectio divina, God is teaching us to listen to him, to seek him in silence. He does not reach out and grab us; rather, he gently invites us ever more deeply into his presence.
- Once you have identified the word or phrase for you, take the word or phrase into yourself. Slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas. Do not be afraid of distractions. Memories or thoughts are simply parts of yourself that, when they rise up during lectio divina, are asking to be given to God along with the rest of your inner self. Allow this inner pondering, this rumination, to invite you into dialogue with God.
- Speak to God. Whether you use words, ideas, or images--or all three--is not important. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. And give to him what you have discovered during your experience of meditation. Experience God by using the word or phrase he has given you as a means of blessing and of transforming the ideas and memories that your reflection on his word has awakened. Give to God what you have found within your heart.
- Rest in God's embrace. And when he invites you to return to your contemplation of his word or to your inner dialogue with him, do so. Learn to use words when words are helpful, and to let go of words when they no longer are necessary. Rejoice in the knowledge that God is with you in both words and silence, in spiritual activity and inner receptivity.

<https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/catholic/2000/08/how-to-practice-lectio-divina.aspx>

Activity

Traits of The Beloved Community

(Based upon 25 Traits of Beloved Community Resource – GCORR)

The beloved community manifests and protects agape love as its guiding principle and is expressed in many ways. Below are twenty-five traits that the General Commission on Religion and Race have identified. as present in beloved community. Please consider each trait and rank how well you believe each describes your community:

On a scale of 1-5, determine how well each of the following statements describe your community? (1= not at all, 2= very little, 3=neutral, 4=somewhat, 5=very much)

- ___ Offers radial hospitality to everyone; an inclusive family rather than exclusive club;
- ___ Recognizes and honors the image of God in every human being;
- ___ Exhibits personal authenticity, true respect, and validation of others;
- ___ Recognition and affirmation, not eradication, of differences;
- ___ Listens emotionally (i.e., with the heart) – fosters empathy and compassion for others;
- ___ Tolerates ambiguity – realizes that sometimes a clear-cut answer is not readily available;
- ___ Builds increasing levels of trust and works to avoid fear of difference and others;
- ___ Acknowledges limitations, lack of knowledge, or understanding – and seeks to learn;
- ___ Acknowledges conflict or pain in order to work on difficult issues;
- ___ Speaks truth in love, always considering ways to be compassionate with one another;
- ___ Avoids physical aggression and verbal abuse;
- ___ Resolves conflicts peacefully, without violence, recognizing that peacefully doesn't always mean comfortably for everybody;
- ___ Releases resentment and bitterness through self-purification (i.e., avoidance of internal violence through spiritual, physical, and psychological care);
- ___ Focuses energy on removing evil forces (unjust systems), not destroying persons;
- ___ Unyielding persistence and unwavering commitment to justice;
- ___ Achieves friendship and understanding through negotiation, compromise, or consensus – considering each circumstance to discern which will be most helpful;
- ___ Righteously opposes and takes direct action against poverty, hunger, and homelessness;
- ___ Advocates thoroughgoing, extensive neighborhood revitalization without displacement (this also applies to the Church – working toward responsible and equitable growth, discipleship, and worship);
- ___ Blends faith and action to generate a commitment to defeating injustice (not forgetting that injustice can also be found within the Church);
- ___ Encourages and embraces artistic expressions of faith from diverse perspectives;

Resource

The mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World.

Resource

Find information on how to access Mission Insight demographic data at www.ngumc.org/missioninsitedemographics.

Glossary of Terms

Covenant - a solemn agreement between the members of a church to act together in harmony with the precepts of the gospel.

Grace – God’s ability to love us as we are, yet love us too much to let us stay as we are. Considered by Wesleyans to be a work of the Holy Spirit.

Toxicity - causing unpleasant feelings; harmful or malicious

Authenticity – not false or copied, genuine, real; representing one’s true nature or beliefs; true to oneself or to the person identified

Implicit - implied, rather than expressly stated

Explicit - fully and clearly expressed or demonstrated; leaving nothing merely implied; unequivocal

Contempt - an act showing such disrespect; the feeling with which a person regards anything considered mean, vile, or worthless; disdain; scorn

Personal Holiness – a personal dedication or devotion to God, practiced in the Wesleyan tradition through means of Grace and works of piety (prayer, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines)

Social Holiness – Christian friendship with the world practiced in the Wesleyan tradition through means of grace and works of mercy (service, charity, feeding, clothing, visiting, welcoming, justice-seeking)

Beloved Community – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s Beloved Community is a global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. (King Center)

Lectio Divina – a practice of scriptural reading

Agape Love – selfless love of one person for another (especially love that is spiritual in nature)

The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 2

The Almost Christian

Preached at St. Mary's, Oxford, before the university, on July 25, 1741.

"Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." Acts 26.28.

AND many there are who go thus far: ever since the Christian religion was in the world, there have been many in every age and nation who were almost persuaded to be Christians. But seeing it avails nothing before God to go only thus far, it highly imports us to consider,

First. What is implied in being almost,

Secondly. What in being altogether, a Christian.

I. (I.) 1. Now, in the being almost a Christian is implied, First, heathen honesty. No one, I suppose, will make any question of this; especially, since by heathen honesty here, I mean, not that which is recommended in the writings of their philosophers only, but such as the common heathens expected one of another, and many of them actually practised. By the rules of this they were taught that they ought not to be unjust; not to take away their neighbour's goods, either by robbery or theft; not to oppress the poor, neither to use extortion toward any; not to cheat or overreach either the poor or rich, in whatsoever commerce they had with them; to defraud no man of his right; and, if it were possible, to owe no man anything.

2. Again: the common heathens allowed, that some regard was to be paid to truth, as well as to justice. And, accordingly, they not only held him in abomination who was forsworn, who called God to witness to a lie; but him also who was known to be a slanderer of his neighbour, who falsely accused any man. And indeed, little better did they esteem wilful liars of any sort, accounting them the disgrace of human kind, and the pests of society.

3. Yet again: there was a sort of love and assistance which they expected one from another. They expected whatever assistance any one could give another, without prejudice to himself. And this they extended not only to those little offices of humanity which are performed without any expense or labour, but likewise to the feeding the hungry, if they had food to spare; the clothing the naked with their own superfluous raiment; and, in general. the giving, to any that needed, such things as they needed not themselves. Thus far, in the lowest account of it, heathen honesty went; the first thing implied in the being almost a Christian.

(II.) 4. A second thing implied in the being almost a Christian, is, the having a form of godliness; of that godliness which is prescribed in the gospel of Christ; the having the outside of a real Christian. Accordingly, the almost Christian does nothing which the gospel

forbids. he taketh not the name of God in vain; he blesseth, and curseth not; he sweareth not at all, but his communication is, yea, yea; nay, nay. he profanes not the day of the Lord, nor suffers it to be profaned, even by the stranger that is within his gates. he not only avoids all actual adultery, fornication, and uncleanness, but every word or look that either directly or indirectly tends thereto; nay, and all idle words, abstaining both from detraction, backbiting, talebearing, evil speaking, and from "all foolish talking and jesting"--eutrapelia, a kind of virtue in the heathen moralist's account; --briefly, from all conversation that is not "good to the use of edifying," and that, consequently, "grieves the Holy Spirit of God, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.'

5. He abstains from "wine wherein is excess"; from revellings and gluttony. he avoids, as much as in him lies, all strife and contention, continually endeavouring to live peaceably with all men. And, if he suffer wrong, he avengeth not himself, neither returns evil for evil. he is no railer, no brawler, no scoffer, either at the faults or infirmities of his neighbour. he does not willingly wrong, hurt, or grieve any man; but in all things act and speaks by that plain rule, "Whatsoever thou wouldest not he should do unto thee, that do not thou to another."

6. And in doing good, he does not confine himself to cheap and easy offices of kindness, but labours and suffers for the profit of many, that by all means he may help some. In spite of toil or pain, "whatsoever his hand findeth to do, he doeth it with his might;" whether it be for his friends, or for his enemies; for the evil, or for the good. For being "not slothful" in this, or in any "business," as he "hath opportunity" he doeth "good," all manner of good, "to all men;" and to their souls as well as their bodies. he reproveth the wicked, instructs the ignorant, confirms the wavering, quickens the good, and comforts the afflicted. he labours to awaken those that sleep; to lead those whom God hath already awakened to the "Fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness," that they may wash therein and be clean; and to stir up those who are saved through faith, to adorn the gospel of Christ in all things.

7. He that hath the form of godliness uses also the means of grace; yea, all of them, and at all opportunities. he constantly frequents the house of God; and that, not as the manner of some is, who come into the presence of the Most High, either loaded with gold and costly apparel, or in all the gaudy vanity of dress, and either by their unseasonable civilities to each other, or the impertinent gaiety of their behaviour, disclaim all pretensions to the form as well as to the power of godliness. Would to God there were none even among ourselves who fall under the same condemnation! who come into this house, it may be, gazing about, or with all the signs of the most listless, careless indifference, though sometimes they may seem to use a prayer to God for his blessing on what they are entering upon; who, during that awful service, are either asleep, or reclined in the most convenient posture for it; or, as though they supposed God was asleep, talking with one another, or looking round, as utterly void of employment. Neither let these be accused of the form of godliness. No; he who has even this, behaves with seriousness and attention, in every part of that solemn service. More especially, when he approaches the table of the Lord, it is not

with a light or careless behaviour, but with an air, gesture, and deportment which speaks nothing else but "God be merciful to me a sinner!"

8. To this, if we add the constant use of family prayer, by those who are masters of families, and the setting times apart for private addresses to God, with a daily seriousness of behaviour; he who uniformly practises this outward religion, has the form of godliness. There needs but one thing more in order to his being almost a Christian, and that is, sincerity.

(III.) 9. By sincerity I mean, a real, inward principle of religion, from whence these outward actions flow. And, indeed if we have not this, we have not heathen honesty; no, not so much of it as will answer the demand of a heathen Epicurean poet. Even this poor wretch, in his sober intervals, is able to testify,

Oderunt peccare boni, virtutis amore;
Oderunt peccare mali, formidine poenae.

[Good men avoid sin from the love of virtue; Wicked men avoid sin from a fear of punishment.]

So that, if a man only abstains from doing evil in order to avoid punishment, Non pasces in cruce corvos, [Thou shalt not be hanged.], saith the Pagan; there, "thou hast thy reward." But even he will not allow such a harmless man as this to be so much as a good heathen. If, then, any man, from the same motive, viz., to avoid punishment, to avoid the loss of his friends, or his gain, or his reputation, should not only abstain from doing evil, but also do ever so much good; yea, and use all the means of grace; yet we could not with any propriety say, this man is even almost a Christian. If he has no better principle in his heart, he is only a hypocrite altogether.

10. Sincerity, therefore, is necessarily implied in the being almost a Christian; a real design to serve God, a hearty desire to do his will. It is necessarily implied, that a man have a sincere view of pleasing God in all things; in all his conversation; in all his actions; in all he does or leaves undone. This design, if any man be almost a Christian, runs through the whole tenor of his life. This is the moving principle, both in his doing good, his abstaining from evil, and his using the ordinances of God.

11. But here it will probably be inquired, "Is it possible that any man living should go so far as this, and, nevertheless, be only almost a Christian? What more than this, can be implied in the being a Christian altogether? I answer, First, that it is possible to go thus far, and yet be but almost a Christian, I learn, not only from the oracles of God, but also from the sure testimony of experience.

12. Brethren, great is "my boldness towards you in this behalf." And "forgive me this wrong," if I declare my own folly upon the house-top, for yours and the gospel's sake. --

Suffer me, then, to speak freely of myself, even as of another man. I am content to be abased, so ye may be exalted, and to be yet more vile for the glory of my Lord.

13. I did go thus far for many years, as many of this place can testify; using diligence to eschew all evil, and to have a conscience void of offence; redeeming the time; buying up every opportunity of doing all good to all men; constantly and carefully using all the public and all the private means of grace; endeavouring after a steady seriousness of behaviour, at all times, and in all places; and, God is my record, before whom I stand, doing all this in sincerity; having a real design to serve God; a hearty desire to do his will in all things; to please him who had called me to "fight the good fight," and to "lay hold of eternal life." Yet my own conscience beareth me witness in the Holy Ghost, that all this time I was but almost a Christian.

II. If it be inquired, "What more than this is implied in the being altogether a Christian" I answer,

(I.) 1. First. The love of God. For thus saith his word, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." Such a love is this, as engrosses the whole heart, as rakes up all the affections, as fills the entire capacity of the soul and employs the utmost extent of all its faculties. he that thus loves the Lord his God, his spirit continually "rejoiceth in God his Saviour." his delight is in the Lord, his Lord and his All, to whom "in everything he giveth thanks. All his desire is unto God, and to the remembrance of his name." his heart is ever crying out, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee." Indeed, what can he desire beside God Not the world, or the things of the world: for he is "crucified to the world, and the world crucified to him." he is crucified to "the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, and the pride of life." Yea, he is dead to pride of every kind: for "love is not puffed up" but "he that dwelling in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him," is less than nothing in his own eyes.

(II.) 2. The Second thing implied in the being altogether a Christian is, the love of our neighbour. For thus said our Lord in the following words, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" If any man ask, "Who is my neighbour" we reply, Every man in the world; every child of his who is the Father of the spirits of all flesh. Nor may we in any wise except our enemies or the enemies of God and their own souls. But every Christian loveth these also as himself, yea, "as Christ loved us." he that would more fully understand what manner of love this is, may consider St. Paul's description of it. It is "long-suffering and kind." It "envieth not." It is not rash or hasty in judging. It "is not puffed up;" but maketh him that loves, the least, the servant of all. Love "doth not behave itself unseemly," but becometh "all things to all men." She "seeketh not her own;" but only the good of others, that they may be saved. "Love is not provoked." It casteth out wrath, which he who hath is wanting in love. "It thinketh no evil. It rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth. It covereth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

(III.) 3. There is yet one thing more that may be separately considered, though it cannot actually be separate from the preceding, which is implied in the being altogether a Christian; and that is the ground of all, even faith. Very excellent things are spoken of this throughout the oracles of God. "Every one, saith the beloved disciple, "that believeth is born of God." "To as many as received him, gave he power to become the sons of God. even to them that believe on his name." And "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." Yea, our Lord himself declares, "He that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life; and cometh not into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life."

4. But here let no man deceive his own soul. "It is diligently to be noted, the faith which bringeth not forth repentance, and love, and all good works, is not that right living faith, but a dead and devilish one. For, even the devils believe that Christ was born of a virgin: that he wrought all kinds of miracles, declaring himself very God: that, for our sakes, he suffered a most painful death, to redeem us from death everlasting; that he rose again the third day: that he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father and at the end of the world shall come again to judge both the quick and dead. These articles of our faith the devils believe, and so they believe all that is written in the Old and New Testament. And yet for all this faith, they be but devils. They remain still in their damnable estate lacking the very true Christian faith." [Homily on the Salvation of Man.]

5. "The right and true Christian faith is (to go on in the words of our own Church), "not only to believe that Holy Scripture and the Articles of our Faith are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence to be saved from everlasting damnation by Christ. It is a sure trust and confidence which a man hath in God, that, by the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favour of God; whereof doth follow a loving heart, to obey his commandments."

6. Now, whosoever has this faith, which "purifies the heart" (by the power of God, who dwelleth therein) from "pride, anger, desire, from all unrighteousness" from "all filthiness of flesh and spirit;" which fills it with love stronger than death, both to God and to all mankind; love that doeth the works of God, glorying to spend and to be spent for all men, and that endureth with joy, not only the reproach of Christ, the being mocked, despised, and hated of all men, but whatsoever the wisdom of God permits the malice of men or devils to inflict, --whosoever has this faith thus working by love is not almost only, but altogether, a Christian.

7. But who are the living witnesses of these things I beseech you, brethren, as in the presence of that God before whom "hell and destruction are without a covering--how much more the hearts of the children of men" --that each of you would ask his own heart, "Am I of that number Do I so far practise justice, mercy, and truth, as even the rules of heathen honesty require If so, have I the very outside of a Christian the form of godliness Do I abstain from evil, --from whatsoever is forbidden in the written Word of God Do I, whatever good my hand findeth to do, do it with my might Do I seriously use all the

ordinances of God at all opportunities And is all this done with a sincere design and desire to please God in all things"

8. Are not many of you conscious, that you never came thus far; that you have not been even almost a Christian; that you have not come up to the standard of heathen honesty; at least, not to the form of Christian godliness --much less hath God seen sincerity in you, a real design of pleasing him in all things. You never so much as intended to devote all your words and works. your business, studies, diversions, to his glory. You never even designed or desired, that whatsoever you did should be done "in the name of the Lord Jesus, and as such should be "a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable to God through Christ.

9. But, supposing you had, do good designs and good desires make a Christian By no means, unless they are brought to good effect. "Hell is paved," saith one, "with good intentions." The great question of all, then, still remains. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart Can you cry out, "My God, and my All" Do you desire nothing but him Are you happy in God Is he your glory, your delight, your crown of rejoicing And is this commandment written in your heart, "That he who loveth God love his brother also" Do you then love your neighbour as yourself Do you love every man, even your enemies, even the enemies of God, as your own soul as Christ loved you Yea, dost thou believe that Christ loved thee, and gave himself for thee Hast thou faith in his blood Believest thou the Lamb of God hath taken away thy sins, and cast them as a stone into the depth of the sea that he hath blotted out the handwriting that was against thee, taking it out of the way, nailing it to his cross Hast thou indeed redemption through his blood, even the remission of thy sins And doth his Spirit bear witness with thy spirit, that thou art a child of God

10. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who now standeth in the midst of us, knoweth, that if any man die without this faith and this love, good it were for him that he had never been born. Awake, then, thou that sleepest, and call upon thy God: call in the day when he may be found. Let him not rest, till he make his "goodness to pass before thee;" till he proclaim unto thee the name of the Lord, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin." Let no man persuade thee, by vain words, to rest short of this prize of thy high calling. But cry unto him day and night, who, "while we were without strength, died for the ungodly," until thou knowest in whom thou hast believed, and canst say, "My Lord, and my God!" Remember, "always to pray, and not to faint," till thou also canst lift up thy hand unto heaven, and declare to him that liveth for ever and ever, "Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee."

11. May we all thus experience what it is to be, not almost only; but altogether Christians; being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus; knowing we have peace with God through Jesus Christ; rejoicing in hope of the glory of God; and having the love of God shed abroad in our hearts, by the Holy Ghost given unto us!

The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 17

The Circumcision of the Heart

Preached at St. Mary's, Oxford, before the University, on January 1, 1733.

"Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter." Romans 2:29.

1. It is the melancholy remark of an excellent man, that he who now preaches the most essential duties of Christianity, runs the hazard of being esteemed, by a great part of his hearers, "a setter forth of new doctrines." Most men have so lived away the substance of that religion, the profession whereof they still retain, that no sooner are any of those truths proposed which difference the Spirit of Christ from the spirit of the world, than they cry out, "Thou bringest strange things to our ears; we would know what these things mean:" -- Though he is only preaching to them "Jesus and the resurrection," with the necessary consequence of it, -- If Christ be risen, ye ought then to die unto the world, and to live wholly unto God.

2. A hard saying this to the natural man, Who is alive unto the world, and dead unto God; and one that he will not readily be persuaded to receive as the truth of God, unless it be so qualified in the interpretation, as to have neither use nor significance left. He "receiveth not the" word "of the Spirit of God," taken in their plain and obvious meaning; "they are foolishness unto him: Neither" indeed "can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned:" -- They are perceivable only by that spiritual sense, which in him was never yet awakened for want of which he must reject, as idle fancies of men, what are both the wisdom and the power of God.

3. That "circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter;" -- that the distinguishing mark of a true follower of Christ, of one who is in a state of acceptance with God, is not either outward circumcision, or baptism, or any other outward form, but a right state of soul, a mind and spirit renewed after the image of Him that created it; -- is one of those important truths that can only be spiritually discerned. And this the Apostle himself intimates in the next words, -- "Whose praise is not of men, but of God." As if he had said, "Expect not, whoever thou art, who thus followest thy great Master, that the world, the one who follow him not, will say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' Know that the circumcision of the heart, the seal of thy calling, is foolishness with the world. Be content to wait for thy applause till the day of thy Lord's appearing. In that day shalt thou have praise of God, in the great assembly of men and angels."

I design First, particularly to inquire, wherein this circumcision of the heart consists; and, Secondly, to mention some reflections that naturally arise from such an inquiry.

I. 1. I am, First, to inquire, wherein that circumcision of the heart consists, which will receive the praise of God. In general we may observe, it is that habitual disposition of soul

which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin, "from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit;" and, by consequence, the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus; the being so "renewed in the spirit of our mind," as to be "perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect."

2. To be more particular: Circumcision of heart implies humility, faith, hope, and charity. Humility, a right judgment of ourselves, cleanses our minds from those high conceits of our own perfection, from that undue opinion of our own abilities and attainments, which are the genuine fruit of a corrupted nature. This entirely cuts off that vain thought, "I am rich, and wise, and have need of nothing;" and convinces us that we are by nature wretched, and poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked. "It convinces us, that in our best estate we are, of ourselves, all sin and vanity; that confusion, and ignorance, and error reign over our understanding; that unreasonable, earthly, sensual, devilish passions usurp authority over our will; in a word, that there is no whole part in our soul, that all the foundations of our nature are out of course.

3. At the same time we are convinced, that we are not sufficient of ourselves to help ourselves; that, without the Spirit of God, we can do nothing but add sin to sin; that it is He alone who worketh in us by his almighty power, either to will or do that which is good; it being as impossible for us even to think a good thought, without the supernatural assistance of his Spirit, as to create ourselves, or to renew our whole souls in righteousness and true holiness.

4. A sure effect of our having formed this right judgment of the sinfulness and helplessness of our nature, is a disregard of that "honor which cometh of man," which is usually paid to some supposed excellency in us. He who knows himself, neither desires nor values the applause which he knows he deserves not. It is therefore "a very small thing with him, to be judged by man's judgment." He has all reason to think, by comparing what it has said, either for or against him, with what he feels in his own breast, that the world, as well as the god of this world, was "a liar from the beginning." And even as to those who are not of the world; thought he would choose, if it were the will of God, that they should account of him as of one desirous to be found a faithful steward of his Lord's goods, if haply this might be a means of enabling him to be of more use to his fellow-servants, yet as this is the one end of his wishing for their approbation, so he does not at all rest upon it: For he is assured, that whatever God wills, he can never want instruments to perform; since he is able, even of these stones, to raise up servants to do his pleasure.

5. this is that lowliness of mind, which they have learned of Christ, who follow his example and tread in his steps. And this knowledge of their disease, whereby they are more and more cleansed from one part of it, pride and vanity, disposes them to embrace, with a willing mind, the second thing implied in circumcision of the heart, -- that faith which alone is able to make them whole, which is the one medicine given under heaven to heal their sickness.

6. The best guide of the blind, the surest light of them that are in darkness, the most perfect instructor of the foolish, is faith. But it must be such a faith as is "mighty through God, to the pulling down of strong-holds," -- to the overturning all the prejudices of corrupt reason, all the false maxims revered among men, all evil customs and habits, all that "wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God;" as "casteth down imaginations," reasoning, "and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringeth into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

7. "All things are possible to him that" thus "believeth." "The eyes of his understanding being enlightened," he sees what is his calling; even to glorify God, who hath bought him with so high a price, in his body and in his spirit, which now are God's by redemption, as well as by creation. He feels what is "the exceeding greatness of this power," who, as he raise up Christ from the dead, so is able to-quicken us, dead in sin," by his Spirit which dwelleth in us." "This is the victory which overcometh the world, even our faith;" that faith, which is not only an unshaken assent to all that God hath revealed in Scripture, -- and in particular to those important truths, "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners;" "He bare our sins in his own body on the tree;" "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world;" [N.B. The following part of this paragraph is now added to the Sermon formerly preached.] -- but likewise the revelation of Christ in our hearts; a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free, unmerited love to me a sinner; a sure confidence in his pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost; a confidence, whereby every true believer is enabled to bear witness, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," that I have an "Advocate with the Father," and that "Jesus Christ the righteous" is my Lord, and "the propitiation for my sins," -- I know he hath "loved me, and given himself for me," -- He hath reconciled me, even me, to God; and I "have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins." 8. Such a faith as this cannot fail to show evidently the power of Him that inspires it, by delivering his children from the yoke of sin, and "purging their consciences from dead works;" by strengthening them so, that they are no longer constrained to obey sin in the desires there of; but instead of yielding their members unto it, as instruments of unrighteousness," they now "yield themselves" entirely "unto God, as those that are alive from the dead."

9. Those who are thus by faith born of God, have also strong consolation through hope. This is the next thing which the circumcision of the heart implies; even the testimony of their own spirit with the Spirit which witnesses in their hearts that

* N. B. The following part of this paragraph is now added to the Sermon formerly preached.

they are the children of God. Indeed it is the same Spirit who works in them that clear and cheerful confidence that their heart is upright toward God; that good assurance, that they now do, through his grace, the things which are acceptable in his sight; that they are now in the path which leadeth to life, and shall, by the mercy of God, endure therein to the end. It is He who giveth them a lively expectation of receiving all good things at God's hand; a joyous prospect of that crown of glory, which is reserved in heaven for them. By this anchor a

Christian is kept steady in the midst of the waves of this troublesome world, and preserved from striking upon either of those fatal rocks, -- presumption or despair. He is neither discouraged by the misconceived severity of his Lord, nor does He despise the riches of his goodness." He neither apprehends the difficulties of the race set before him to be greater than he has strength to conquer, nor expects there to be so little as to yield in the conquest, till he has put forth all strength. The experience he already has in the Christian warfare, as it assures him his "labor is not in vain," if "whatever his findeth to do, he doeth it with his might;" so it forbids his entertaining so vain a thought, as that he can otherwise gain any advantage, as that any virtue can be shown, any praise attained, by faint hearts and feeble hands; or, indeed, by any but those who pursue the same course with the great Apostle of the Gentiles - "I," says he, "so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest, by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." 10. By the same discipline is every good soldier of Christ to inure himself to endure hardship. Confirmed and strengthened by this, he will be able not only to renounce the works of darkness, but every appetite too, and every affection, which is no subject to the law of God. For "every one," saith St. John, "who hath this hope, purifieth himself even as He is pure." It is his daily care, by the grace of God in Christ, and through the blood of the covenant, to purge the inmost recesses of his soul from the lusts that before possessed and defiled it; from uncleanness, and envy, and malice, and wrath; from every passion and temper that is after the flesh, that either springs from or cherishes his native corruption: as well knowing, that he whose very body is the temple of God, ought to admit into it nothing common or unclean; and that holiness becometh that house for ever, where the Spirit of holiness vouchsafes to dwell. 11. Yet lackest thou one thing, whosoever thou art, that to a deep humility, and a steadfast faith, hast joined a lively hope, and thereby in a good measure cleansed thy heart from its inbred pollution. If thou wilt be perfect, add to all these, charity; add love, and thou hast the circumcision of the heart "Love is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment." Very excellent things are spoken of love; it is the essence, the spirit, the life of all virtue. It is not only the first and great command, but it is all the commandments in one. "Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are amiable," or honorable; "if there be any virtue, if there be any praise," they are all comprised in this one word, -- love. In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness. The royal law of heaven and earth is this, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." 12. Not that this forbids us to love anything besides God: It implies that we love our brother also. Nor yet does it forbid us (as some have strangely imagined) to take pleasure in any thing but God. To suppose this, is to suppose the Fountain of holiness is directly the author of sin; since he has inseparably annexed pleasure to the use of those creatures which are necessary to sustain the life he has given us. This, therefore, can never be the meaning of his command. What the real sense of it is, both our blessed Lord and his Apostles tell us too frequently, and too plainly, to be misunderstood. They all with one mouth bear witness, that the true meaning of those several declarations, "The Lord thy God is one Lord;" "Thou shalt have no other Gods but me;" "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy strength" "Thou shalt cleave unto him;" "The desire of thy soul

shall be to His name;" -- is no other than this: The one perfect Good shall be your one ultimate end. One thing shall ye desire for its own sake, -- the fruition of Him that is All in All. One happiness shall ye propose to your souls, even an union with Him that made them; the having "fellowship with the Father and the Son;" the being joined to the Lord in one Spirit. One design you are to pursue to the end of time, -- the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity. Desire other things, so far as they tend to this. Love the creature as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought, and word, and work, be subordinate to this. Whatever ye desire or fear, whatever ye seek or shun, whatever ye think, speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole End, us well as Source, of your being. 13. Have no end, to ultimate end, but God. Thus our Lord: "One thing is needful:" And if thine eye be singly fixed on this one thing, "thy whole body shall be full of light." Thus St. Paul: "This one thing I do; I press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus." Thus St. James: "Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, ye double-minded." Thus St. John: "love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." The seeking happiness in what gratifies either the desire of the flesh, by agreeably striking upon the outward senses; the desire of the eye, of the imagination, by its novelty, greatness, or beauty; or the pride of life, whether by pomp, grandeur, power, or, the usual consequence of them, applause and admiration; -- "is not of the Father," cometh not from, neither is approved by, the Father of spirits; "but of the world:" It is the distinguishing mark of those who will not have Him to reign over them.

II. 1. Thus have I particularly inquired, what that circumcision of heart is, which will obtain the praise of God. I am, in the Second place, to mention some reflections that naturally arise from such an inquiry, as a plain rule whereby every man may judge of himself, whether he be of the world or of God. And, First, it is clear from what has been said, that no man has a title to the praise of God, unless his heart is circumcised by humility; unless he is little, and base, and vile in his own eyes; unless he is deeply convinced of that inbred "corruption of his nature," "whereby he is very far gone from original righteousness," being prone to all evil, averse to all good, corrupt and abominable; having a "carnal mind which is enmity against God, and is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be," unless he continually feels in his inmost soul, that without the Spirit of God resting upon him, he can neither think, nor desire, nor speak, nor act anything good, or well-pleasing in his sight. No man I say, has A title to the praise of God, till he feels his want of God; nor indeed, till he seeketh that "honor which cometh of God only;" and neither desires nor pursues that which cometh of man, unless so far only as it tends to this.

2. Another truth, which naturally follows from what has been said, is, that none shall obtain the honor that cometh of God, unless his heart be circumcised by faith; even a "faith of the operation of God:" Unless, refusing to be any longer led by his senses, appetites, or passions, or even by that blind leader of the blind, so idolized by the world, natural reason, he lives and walks by faith; directs every step, as "seeking Him that is invisible;" "looks not

at the things that are seen, which are temporal, but at the things that are not seen, which are eternal;" and governs all his desires, designs, and thoughts, all his actions and conversations, as one who is entered in within the veil, where Jesus sits at the right hand of God.

3. It were to be wished, that they were better acquainted with this faith, who employ much of their time and pains in laying another foundation; in grounding religion on the eternal fitness of things on the intrinsic excellence of virtue, and the beauty of actions flowing from it; on the reasons as they term them, of good and evil, and the relations of beings to each other. Either these accounts of the grounds of Christian duty coincide with the scriptural, or not. If they do, why are well meaning men perplexed, and drawn from the weightier matters of the law, by a cloud of terms, whereby the easiest truths are explained into obscurity? If they are not, then it behooves them to consider who is the author of this new doctrine; whether he is likely to be an angel from heaven, who preacheth another gospel than that of Christ Jesus; though, if he were, God, not we, hath pronounced his sentence: "Let him be accursed."

4. Our gospel, as it knows no other foundation of good works than faith, or of faith than Christ, so it clearly informs us, we are not his disciples while we either deny him to be the Author, or his Spirit to be the Inspirer and Perfecter, both of our faith and works. "If any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his." He alone can quicken those who are dead unto God, can breathe into them the breath of Christian life. and so prevent, accompany, and follow them with his grace, as to bring their good desires to good effect. And, as many as are thus led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." This is God's short and plain account of true religion and virtue; and "other foundation can no man lay."

5. From what has been said, we may, Thirdly, learn, that it none is truly "led by the Spirit," unless that "Spirit bear witness with his spirit, that he is a child of God;" unless he see the prize and the crown before him, and "rejoice in hope of the glory of God." So greatly have they erred who have taught that, in serving God, we ought not to have a view to our own happiness! Nay, but we are often and expressly taught of God, to have "respect unto the recompense of reward;" to balance toil with the "joy set before us," these "light afflictions" with that "exceeding weight of glory." Yea, we are "aliens to the covenant of promise," we are "without God in the world," until God, "of his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a living hope of the inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.

6. But if these things are so, it is high time for those persons to deal faithfully with their own souls who are so far from finding in themselves this joyful assurance that they fulfil the terms, and shall obtain the promises, of that covenant, as to quarrel with the covenant itself, and blaspheme the terms of it; to complain, they are too severe; and that no man ever did or shall live up to them. What is this but to reproach God, as if He were a hard Master, requiring of his servants more than he enables them to perform -- as if he had mocked the helpless works of his hands, by binding them to impossibilities; by commanding them to overcome, where neither their own strength nor grace was sufficient for them.

7. These blasphemers might almost persuade those to imagine themselves guiltless, who, in the contrary extreme, hope to fulfil the commands of God, without taking any pains at all. Vain hope ! that a child of Adam should ever expect to see the kingdom of Christ and of God, without striving, without agonizing, first "to enter in at the strait gate;"-that one who v. as "conceived and born in sin," and whose "inward parts are very wickedness," should once entertain a thought of being "purified as his Lord is pure," unless he tread in His steps, and "take up his cross daily;" unless he "cut off His right hand," and "pluck out the right eye, and cast it from him ;" -- that he should ever dream of shaking off his old opinions, passions, tempers, of being "sanctified throughout in spirit, soul, and body," without a constant and continued course of general self-denial!

8. What lees than this can we possibly infer from the above-cited words of St. Paul, who, living "ill infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses" for Christ's sake; -who, being full of "signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds," -- who, having been "caught up into the third heaven;" -- yet reckoned, as a late author strongly expresses it, that all his virtues would be insecure, and even his salvation in danger, without this constant self-denial "So run I," says he, "not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air which he plainly teaches us, that he who does not thus run, who does not thus deny himself daily, does run uncertainly, and fighteth to as little purpose as he that "beateth the air."

9. To as little purpose does He talk of "fighting the fight of faith," as vainly hope to attain the crown of incorruption, (as we may, Lastly, infer from the preceding observations,) whose heart is not circumcised by love. Love, cutting off both the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, -- engaging the whole man, body, soul, and spirit, in the ardent pursuit of that one object,-is so essential to a child of God, that, without it, whosoever liveth is counted dead before him. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing." Nay, "though I give all my goods to feed the poor, and my body to be burned, and have not love, it profit me nothing."

10. Here, then, is the sum of the perfect law; this is the true circumcision of the heart. Let the spirit return to God that gave it, with the whole train of its affections. "Unto the place from whence all the rivers came thither let them flow again. Other sacrifices from us he would not; but the living sacrifice of the heart he hath chosen. Let it be continual offered up to God through Christ, in flames of holy love. And let no creature be suffered to share with him: For he is a jealous God. His throne will he not divide with another: He will reign without a rival. Be no design, no desire admitted there, but what has Him for its ultimate object. This is the way where in those children of God once walked, who, being dead, still speak to us:" Desire not to live, but to praise his name: Let all your thoughts, words, and works, tend to his glory. Set your heart firm on him, and on other things only as they are in and from him. Let your soul be filled with so entire a love of him, that you may love nothing

but for his sake." "Have a pure intention of heart, a steadfast regard to his glory in all your actions." "Fix your eye upon the blessed hope of your calling, and make all the things of the world minister unto it." For then, and not till then is that "mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus;" when, in every motion of our heart, in every word of our tongue, in every work of our hands, we "pursue nothing but in relation to him, and in subordination to his pleasure;" when we, too, neither think, nor speak, nor act, to fulfil our "own will, but the will of him that sent us;" when, whether we;' eat, or drink, or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God."

Edited by Dave Giles with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons of Northwest Nazarene University for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.

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