



# Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter

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## Wesleyan (United Methodist) Theology Free Will

*<sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Gen 2:16-17*

*<sup>6</sup> So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Gen 3:6*

One of the most daunting aspects of Christian Theology, and indeed many other religions and philosophies, is the role of humanity's Free Will. It surfaces in a number of religious contexts. On the one hand, the argument goes that there is no free will because an all knowing, all powerful God decided our fates before the beginning of time and we are all simply living out the roles assigned to us. However, to take that position requires that God is the author of all evil in the world which is contrary to scripture and all we have come to believe about the nature of God. Moreover, how can anyone be responsible for their sin if it was preordained?

If, on the other hand, humankind has free will where is the omnipotence of God? By hurting someone are we thwarting the will of God? How can we possibly do that? Or, if God allows us to hurt someone doesn't that make God, who has the power to stop us, responsible for our acts by standing by and allowing us to act?

Moving in the Christian context, if human free will can affect our salvation doesn't that imply that salvation is actually a work of humankind and not a work of God? That it is not through faith in Christ alone that we receive salvation but through our own efforts; through the exercise of our free will? Such questions have given Christians headaches for centuries.

At the time the Methodist Societies began to form, one view of salvation that commanded much attention was that proposed by the followers of the theologian John Calvin (the Calvinists came to be known as Presbyterians). Calvin proposed that salvation was entirely the work of God and that it operated according to a set of principles known by the acronym TULIP. TULIP stands for:

- The TOTAL DEPRAVITY of humankind. That humankind is unable to ever do anything that is good and right in the eyes of God.
- God's UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION for salvation of some of humanity. In other words, salvation is entirely the work of God and an exercise of God's mercy.
- The LIMITED ATONEMENT of Christ for the sins of those elected for salvation. Christ died only for the sins of those elected for salvation and not for the sins of the many not elected for salvation.
- The IRRESISTIBLE GRACE of God that brings the elect to salvation. We have no power to resist God's election, just as we have no power to compel God to offer us salvation. If God wishes you to be saved, you cannot prevent it. And
- The PERSEVERANCE of the Saints. The perseverance of the saints is the work of God that prevents the elect from losing their salvation. To paraphrase a concept from our Baptist brethren, "once elected for salvation, always elected for salvation."

The Calvinist doctrine of election disposed of the concept of free will quite handily. All humankind was born in, and lived in, total depravity. Indeed, humanity was only capable of total depravity no matter where its free will led them. All human choices are evil. God, through God's sovereign will, elected some percentage of humankind for salvation. Calvin based his theology, in part, on such scriptures as Romans 9:16-18.

*<sup>16</sup> So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. <sup>17</sup> For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." <sup>18</sup> So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.*

And Ephesians 1:3-6:

*<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup> just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <sup>5</sup> He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*

A corollary to election for salvation is election for damnation. Those who are not elected for salvation must have been selected by God, from birth, for damnation. Those elected for damnation have nothing to complain about since that is the destined fate of all humankind but for the Grace of God. Also, since some are born for damnation the benefit of the atoning sacrifice of Christ is limited to those whom God has elected for salvation. In other words, Christ did not die for everyone's sins, only for the sins of the elect.

Methodist theology as formulated and preached by Wesley and his pastors rejected the idea of election and considered instead the role of humanity's Free Will. Looking at the principles of Calvinism, they had this to say:

- The TOTAL DEPRAVITY of humankind. Yes, on its own humankind was totally depraved and unable to choose the good. However, a gift of the Prevenient Grace of God was the ability to choose the good despite our total depravity. By allowing us to know about the existence of God, and to understand our need for God, the prevenient grace of God also conferred the ability to choose the good. In other words, our free will to choose the good comes from God.
- UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION for salvation. Wesley agreed that it was God's desire to bring salvation to creation. However, salvation was dependent upon humankind exercising its God given

gift to choose the good; to use its God given free will to choose to accept salvation through Christ. In Wesley's view, a good and just God would not elect anyone for damnation. Election for damnation also erased the concept of sin since sin required that one has chosen to go against what is good.

- **LIMITED ATONEMENT.** Wesley rejected the concept of limited atonement. Christ's sacrifice was perfect and complete and was sufficient for the salvation of creation. However, God gave humankind true free will by allowing us to choose what was good or what was evil. A person's salvation is still dependent upon accepting the justifying grace of God available through Christ's sacrifice. Salvation is available to those who choose Christ.
- **The IRRESISTIBLE GRACE of God.** Wesley found this concept contrary to scripture and his life experience. Time and again in scripture humankind resisted the grace of God, beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Apostle Paul himself said that he resisted the grace of God by continuing to sin. Wesley observed many people around him resisting the grace of God. From Wesley's perspective it was clear that God had not created and did not desire puppets. Humankind had been created in the image of God and had the ability to exercise true free will, choosing good or choosing evil. Moreover, without the ability to resist the grace of God, to choose not to do what is good and right in the eyes of God, the concept of sin was meaningless. If the concept of sin was meaningless then Christ's sacrifice was meaningless. If Christ's sacrifice was not for the sin of humankind, then Christianity was an empty shell.
- **The PERSEVERANCE of the Saints.** Again, Wesley saw numerous examples of the saints falling away from the church and faith in Christ. He also saw such people repent and return. Wesley could not accept that God ordained such behavior and believed that it was a matter of free will.

Free Will, then, is at the heart of an understanding of Wesleyan theology. God makes our salvation through Christ possible by giving to us the ability to choose salvation for ourselves. In that sense, salvation is a work of God and not of humankind. However, we are not puppets forced into a mold of God's making. We must choose to accept the justifying grace of God that comes through Jesus Christ. Thinking of it another way, God opens a door but we must choose to walk through it.

Free Will also makes much evil possible. God cannot stop the evil that arises out of human free will without denying us free will. Wesley believed that God intervenes in the world for God's purposes and that we might never divine the reasons for, or even existence of, that intervention. Wesley also believed that there was power in prayer, but not in the context of coercing God into action. Wesley considered prayer another gift of God; a means of accessing the grace of God. The results of prayer, although always good, were not always something that we could perceive and understand.

Finally, Wesley saw the exercise of human free will in the work of the Sanctifying Grace of God. By choosing to do what is right humankind enables the sanctifying grace of God in its work of uncovering the image of God that we all bear. It is through the exercise of free will that God's Grace moves us onward toward Christian perfection: having the heart and mind of Christ in all that we do.

## Holy Week

Palm Sunday marked the beginning of the last week in the season of Lent. The last week of Lent is called Holy Week.

On Thursday we will have a combined **Maundy Thursday and Tenebrae service**. Maundy Thursday gets its name from the Latin phrase *mandatum novum* meaning New Commandment. Jesus gave his Disciples a new commandment on that night as recorded in John 13:34-35:

<sup>34</sup> *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* <sup>35</sup> *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”

**The Tenebrae Service** is sometimes called a Service of Shadows. It is a meditation on the passion of Christ. Just before the service begins the church will be “stripped.” The symbols of the faith will be removed (the Cross on the altar, the altar cloth, etc). The sanctuary will be lit by candles and the passion story will then be read as the candles are extinguished.

On **Good Friday** at noon we will hold a short service recalling the crucifixion. Scripture tells us that the crucifixion took place between noon and 3 o’clock. The Scripture will be read from the lectern instead of the pulpit. The pulpit represents the proclaimed Word of God and Good Friday is the day that we sought to remove the Word of God from the world. The church will remain open until 3:00 PM for those who wish to stop, meditate and pray.

## Easter Sermon Series Christian Essentials

I’ll be starting a new sermon series on Easter Sunday and continuing for the next five Sundays in Easter (The time between Easter Sunday and Pentecost is Easter). The purpose of the series is to address some of the questions common to new Christians and old alike. The sermon Titles are:

*How Can I Believe in the Resurrection?*

*Doubt is Good*

*It’s all About Christ*

*We Worship God, Not the Bible*

*God Will Not Leave You Behind*

*We Are the Body of Christ*

If you have been considering inviting a friend or neighbor to share our worship, Easter Sunday would be a good time to start. If they are new to Christianity, these sermons will be a way of opening discussion about the Church.

### Sermon Topics

It has been a while since I reminded everyone that I would like to hear from you regarding sermon topics. Not all topics lend themselves to a sermon format, even as part of a series. But, if there is a topic you

would like addressed I'd be glad to do so. If, in my judgment, we cannot fit the topic into a sermon format, we can schedule a class to study the question from a Christian and biblical perspective.

## The Poverty and Justice Bible

*The Poverty & Justice Bible* is a bible that highlights each passage of scripture that deals with the issues of poverty and justice. There are more than 2000 references in scripture to poverty and justice, as opposed to four or five on such controversial subjects as homosexual acts or marriage. Yet many Christians seem to think that helping the poor is a pointless and even harmful act. As an on-going part of this newsletter, I will be providing citations to passages from the Old and New Testaments each week that deal with what scripture tells us about poverty and justice. If you are interested in learning more about *The Poverty & Justice Bible* you can check on Amazon.com or go to [www.Justicebible.org](http://www.Justicebible.org).

*<sup>15</sup> Justice and fairness  
will go hand in hand,  
and all who do right  
will follow along. Ps 94:15 CEV*

As I read Psalm 94, I was struck by a dilemma that I encountered often in the practice of law. There is what is legal and what is just or fair, and they are not always the same. From time to time I would be called upon to exercise rights on behalf of clients that were perfectly legal but which I found personally distasteful. From time to time I would come into conflict with a client by refusing to do something that was perfectly legal but that I considered unfair. We are too often a society that only asks about our 'rights' instead of what is right and fair. According to scripture, God wishes us to focus as well on what is right and fair.

*<sup>3</sup> Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" <sup>4</sup> He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' <sup>5</sup> and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." <sup>7</sup> They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" <sup>8</sup> He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. <sup>9</sup> And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery." <sup>1</sup>*

The issue of what is legal and what is right and fair is at the heart of the dispute in the passage above. There were two schools of thought within the Judaism of the day. One was legalistic and indeed allowed divorce at the discretion of the husband. Another school, represented here by Jesus, condemns treating marriage in that manner and would allow divorce only for good cause. The position advocated by Jesus and others of like mind acknowledged the strict letter of the law that would allow divorce but found the practice of divorce without just cause unfair to the wife. In short, there is what is legal and what is right and fair. There

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Mt 19:3-9). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

are your 'rights' and there is what is right. No matter what we choose to do I believe we usually know the difference.

## **Bible Study**

For the last two years I have led a bible study on Thursday mornings. We are currently studying the Book of Psalms. There is room for as many as would like to participate. Please call me if you have questions or simply come and be a part of our study. We meet from 10:00 to 11:30 on Thursday mornings.

I believe that the study of scriptures with other Christians is an essential part of our journey as Disciples. If you would like to be a part of a bible study at another time, during the day or evening, please contact me. If we can interest four or five people in gathering at a particular time I would be glad to lead another study.

## **Disciple Bible Study Opportunity**

Disciple Bible Study is a 32 week study of the bible from Genesis to Revelation. It has guided many people to a deeper understanding of scripture and their faith over the years. Many in the Church have completed this study.

I have been approached by two people who would be interested in a Disciple Bible Study that met from 7:00 to 9:00 on Thursday evenings. I would like to get at least five more people to participate in this study. If you have considered undertaking a study of the bible before, this is a wonderful opportunity. If you are interested in being a part of this group, please contact me.

## **Prayer Ministry**

The following persons have agreed to be part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

Elva Beard	Sarah Jordan	Kenneth Stevens	Judy Richardson
Larry Eastwood	Mac McAfee	Patricia Stevens	Charles Wilson
Leslie Eastwood	Rachel Newman	Sam Richardson	

The members of the prayer ministry of Trinity United Methodist church covenant with one another to pray daily for:

- Those concerns on the prayer list of the Church and for healing of body and spirit for all persons listed;
- For each ministry of the church that each ministry would work to bring the Gospel to those within our community and most especially to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- For all the members of the Trinity UMC community that they be led and enabled to live as the Body of Christ;

- For our local community and all its needs, especially for those who are struggling with the burden of poverty;
- For our nation and our world that God help lead the people of the world to live in peace with God's Kingdom.

If you would like to be a part of this ministry (or if you have already spoken to me about it and were inadvertently left off the list) please let me know and I will see that you are added.

## Up-Coming Sermons

**April 20<sup>th</sup>: Christian Essentials: *How Can I Believe in the Resurrection?*** The resurrection is a stumbling block to many modern people. In fact it was a stumbling block to the early Christians as well. Being crucified by the Romans was not a sign that one had the favor of God, and people in the first century were as skeptical about resurrection as are modern people. Yet, belief in the resurrection is essential to our faith. My texts are 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 and Luke 24:13-35.

**April 27<sup>th</sup>: Christian Essentials: *Doubt is Good.*** Some Christians believe that having doubts is a sign of a lack of faith. Indeed, that having doubts about Christian teaching is a sin. Yet, doubt is often found as the driving engine behind the most profound faith. My texts are John 20:19-29 and Mark 9:14-24.

## Worship Leaders Schedule

### April 20

Jason Aldred, **Liturgist**

Maurice & Joyce Edwards, **Greeters**

Julia & Tom Moore, **Ushers**

### April 27

Elaine Rohrig, **Liturgist**

Betty & Herb Haynes, **Greeters**

Tommy & Jo Cotton, **Ushers**

## Announcements

**On April 22nd at 6:00 p.m.**, the ladies of our church will be hosting the annual **Columbia District United Methodist Women's Partners in Mission Dinner/Event at our church.**

This year the focus mission is **BRIDGES of Williamson County, a local Shelter and Domestic Violence Program.** Our guest speaker is **Linda Crockett Jackson, the founder of BRIDGES.** BRIDGES offers the standard core components of shelter, court advocacy, child advocacy, support groups, clinic services and outreach. We look forward to learning more about this mission and Ms. Jackson's work.

If you would like to help BRIDGES, there will be boxes placed around the church marked BRIDGES for donations that we want to begin collecting from now until **April 22nd.** Please see the list below.

Kroger gift cards in SMALL denominations, given to clients to purchase gas, prescriptions and food. Please give these to our Treasurer, Nanette.

Additional items needed by the clients of BRIDGES:

kitchen and lawn size garbage bags  
laundry detergent  
60W light bulbs

copy paper  
cleaning products - no Lysol or bleach products please  
body wash  
shampoo/creme rinse

**Please see Dana for more information.**

The dates for serving at **61<sup>st</sup> United Methodist Church** are **May 24, August 16, November 15**. These occasions are all Saturdays. Be aware that April 19 is the Saturday before Easter. Food will be purchased and taken to the 61<sup>st</sup> Street church that day but we will not be serving the food.

There are sign-up lists on the Bulletin Board for volunteers who will prepare communion as well as hosting the First Sunday meal. Please sign up!

### **April Birthdays**

**Betty Whitefield, Mary Coleman, Jo Oliphant, Jason Aldred, Houston Hartsock**

**Happy Birthday to each of you!**