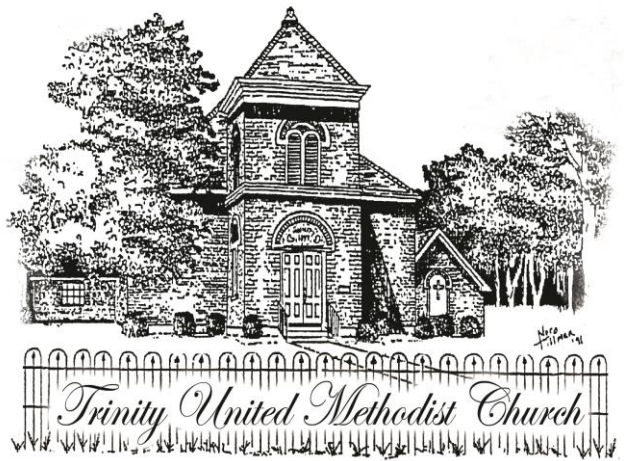




Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter



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March 2, 2016

Wesleyan (United Methodist) Theology Predestination Part Two: Free Will

¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ 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

⁶ 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

In part one of this discussion of the dispute between Reform Theology (Predestination) and Methodist theology I discussed the tenets of Reform Theology. Wesley and the Methodists rejected Reform Theology in favor of a theology that recognized the role of Free Will.

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. This was essentially the position of Reformed Theology where some are elected for salvation and some are elected for damnation. The reformed Theologians would contend that God is not responsible for the evil of the world because humankind is inherently evil and cannot do good things.

However, scripture speaks of humankind's capacity to do good things. Indeed, scripture implores us to become perfect as God is perfect. *E.g. Matthew 5:48; Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 13:9.* To have the very heart and mind of Christ. *Philippians 2:5.* Wesley believed that these statements were scriptural promises that those goals were achievable. Wesley did not think God would mock us by setting those goals if they were not obtainable.

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, the Reform view of salvation 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. As discussed last week TULIP stands for:

- The TOTAL DEPRAVITY of humankind.
- God's UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION for salvation of some of humanity.
- The LIMITED ATONEMENT of Christ for the sins of those elected for salvation.
- The IRRESISTIBLE GRACE of God that brings the elect to salvation. And
- The PERSEVERANCE of the Saints.

(See part One for a more detailed discussion of each of these tenets from a Reform perspective.)

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.

¹⁶ So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.

And Ephesians 1:3-6:

³ 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, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ 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. He contended that Election for damnation also erased the concept of sin since sin required that one has chosen to go against what is desired by God.

- **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.** Wesley rejected this concept. 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 understanding 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 to affect the world, 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.

Wesley's Advice on Voting

The English Parliamentary election in the Fall of 1773 was one of the most significant in British history. Among the candidates was the eminent Edmund Burke who was running in his first election and who would become one of the most famous legislators in British history. Another of the candidates was an American born Englishman named Henry Cruger. Among the issues being debated was how best to deal with the unrest in the American Colonies. Wesley told his Methodists to approach the exercise of their sovereign franchise thoughtfully and without rancor.

Thur. October 6, 1773.—I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them (1) to vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy; (2) to speak no evil of the person they voted against; and (3) to take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.

Although not explicitly biblical advice, Wesley is speaking about how Christians should approach any duty and how they should deal with those with whom they disagree. It is advice that we should take seriously today, especially point (3).

THURSDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

Our Thursday morning Bible Study meets between 10:00 and 11:30. Everyone is welcome to attend. It has been my practice to allow the group to decide what parts of the bible they wish to study. We have concluded our study of Mark and Matthew and have begun a study of Acts.

Prayer Ministry

The following persons are part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

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

March 6th: Sermon: No One Would Give Him Anything. Jesus told parables to make people think. They often contain conflicting ideas and attack common assumptions about the nature of God. They also contain layers of meaning. When Christians think of Hell they often think in terms of fire. But this parable offers a different concept, one with which we have become familiar. My texts are 2 Corinthians 5:16–21 and Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

March 13th: Sermon: A New Thing. One of the most intriguing lines in scripture is Isaiah 43:19. *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?* Do we? My texts are Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14.

Worship Leader's Schedule

March 6

Jason Aldred, **Liturgist**
Sam Richardon & Pat Moran, **Greeters**
Mike & Elaine Rohrig, **Ushers**

March 13

Judy Richardson, **Liturgist**
Linda Robinson & Jeanne Rybolt, **Greeters**
Sam Richardson & Larry Eastwood, **Ushers**

Announcements

Upcoming activities for the children's ministry:

Easter Egg Hunt

This year's event will take place Saturday, March 26 at 10:00 AM. We'll have a few activities indoors as the children are gathering prior to releasing them to the hunt.

Needs: 1. Individually wrapped candies with which to stuff the eggs. (No chocolate please).
2. A bounce house.

Want to help?

1. Join the fun Sunday, March 20 after church for fellowship and to stuff the eggs.
2. Come on Easter Egg Hunt day at 8:30 AM to do a little decorating and a little egg hiding.
3. Invite your friends, neighbors, relatives to join us for this great day.

Vacation Bible School

Dawn Stevens will be the leader for VBS this year. This promises to be an exciting and wonderful experience for the children. Dawn will need all of us to help in preparation for this great event.

Children's Ministries

Our church is in a period of discernment with respect to our children's ministries. The Nelsons gave us such a fantastic gift in honor of our beloved Nanette. Please continue to pray for us as we determine how best to use it in her honor and to continue Trinity's legacy of "Living as, and leading others to become, Disciples of Jesus Christ."

Easter Lilies: It is our tradition at TUMC to have beautiful Easter Lilies to adorn our sanctuary on Easter Sunday in honor of or in memory of our loved ones. Join us in helping make our sanctuary beautiful and reflect the meaning of Easter. Order your lilies today! The order forms are located on the bookshelves in the hallway just outside Rev. Meaker's office. Please place your order form and check marked "Lilies" in the offering plate. The cost is \$8.00 for each lily ordered. All orders must be in by Palm Sunday, March 20th.

The **Nanette Crowell Companions in Christ Sunday School class has begun** a new study. We are involved in a six-session study, "Fire On The Mountain" by Ray Vander Laan. This study includes a DVD that is filmed on locations including the Red Sea, Sinai and other ancient places. One of the ideas that we will be exploring is the freedom that we have and how we use it in community with God's people and in relation to God.

We enjoy fellowship beginning at 9:45 with our study beginning at 10:00. All are welcome to join us as we pursue Biblical truths and the application for our lives.

Birthdays in March

Pat Moran, Marty Bauguess, Tom Moore, Lilly Otto, Herb Haynes, Eva Fetting

Happy Birthday to each of you!