

How is Methodism different in its beliefs from other Protestant denominations?

I'm not sure how best to tackle a question like this. I am certainly not going to run other denominations down and try to make out that Methodists are better, more correct or more godly than anyone else. All I can do in this short article is to say what is most important and distinctive in terms of our beliefs and outlook in the hope that at the end you will feel, more than ever, that you belong.

In 1903 a man called William Fitzgerald attempted to summarise the beliefs at the heart of Methodism. In a book called "the Roots of Methodism" he set out what has become known as "The Four Alls", a summary of our founder John Wesley's teaching which is easy to remember and which still defines us today. Let's look at each of the four beliefs in turn.

Firstly "All need to be saved". This is blunt and to the point. The Bible tells us that every person is a sinner, by nature and by practice. There are no exceptions. We have deeply offended the God who made us and loves us. We cannot by our own moral efforts change this or do anything to save ourselves. The first step to becoming a Christian is to recognise our condition and our plight.

Secondly "All can be saved". The New Testament says that what we could not do for ourselves God did by sending his Son. Jesus died to take the punishment that our sins deserved. He died so that we could be forgiven, set free and brought into a saving relationship with God. Our part in this is to come in repentance and surrender, reaching out in faith and claiming this wonderful gift for ourselves. Methodists say that this salvation is open to all people without exception. There are some Protestant groups who say that salvation is only possible for an elect or a chosen few and that only the elect who are predestined for salvation can get to heaven while the rest have no real chance. John Wesley strongly opposed this idea even when it brought him into public conflict with fellow preachers like his friend George Whitefield. Methodist hymns stress the idea that God's love reaches to all. Our message is for all the world and all classes and conditions of people. This explains why Methodism has always had a heart for evangelism – both by word and by social action. No-one is written off by God and therefore we must reach out to all with the Good News.

Thirdly "All can know themselves saved". Methodists have always put emphasis on experience. John Wesley taught that it was possible for a believer to experience the inner witness of the Holy Spirit giving them the assurance that they were forgiven, made clean and brought into a personal relationship with God as their Father. Sometimes we forget that there are Christians who would say that they have put their faith in Christ and have sought to follow Him but do not have the joy and blessing of this experience. Wesley described what happened to him in these words "*I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*"

Assurance is such a precious doctrine. There can be no greater peace than to know that whatever happens you belong to God. It is a personal thing. You feel His love; you know His presence with you and you notice how His Spirit acts and reacts within

you. Circumstances may go against us; our moods may vary; we may even face doubts and depression but in the bad times the reality of God's touch on our lives sustains us. We may feel at times that we have lost our hold on Him but deep down we know that, as long as we are willing, He never loses His hold on us.

Fourthly Methodists say that "all can be saved to the uttermost". This is the important realisation that salvation is far more than a one-off decision. It is a process whereby we are meant to grow more and more into the likeness of Christ. Wesley spoke of how a believer, either instantly or by means of a gradual pilgrimage could arrive at a state of "perfect love" whereby their heart could be filled with the love of God and other people. He did not teach that we could become perfect here on earth in any absolute way but that we should set our hearts on being filled with the love of God and walking in constant communion with Him. It is a teaching that reminds us that at its core real Christianity is not about rules but about relationship – with God and with people. God wants us to love Him with all our hearts and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Get this right and the rest will follow.

John Wesley believed that Methodism was raised up by God "to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land." We, like him, love the Bible. It is our source of authority and we seek to live by its teachings. Sometimes that lands us in trouble when our secular society teaches something different but we have to be prepared for that. What really matters is that we please God.

At the start of every year Methodists enter into a special commitment or covenant with God. We say.... *"I am no longer my own but yoursI willingly offer all I have and am to serve you as and where you choose"*. They are challenging thoughts. They go back to the time of Wesley but still focus the aspirations and desires of Methodist people today.

So there you are. All this is really the DNA of what we are as a denomination. You can read much more about this on the website of the Methodist Church in Ireland. Go to www.irishmethodist.org and click on "About Us" and then "Our Beliefs". Maybe an interesting exercise would be to look out for how we use our hymns to declare and teach our theology. But that's an article for another day!

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