

In Kenneth L. Carder. *Living Our Beliefs: The United Methodist Way*, 5–8.
Revised edition. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2009.
(This .pdf version reproduces pagination of printed form)

FOREWORD

It is my pleasure to introduce this second edition of Kenneth Carder's *Living Our Beliefs: The United Methodist Way*. I still remember my sense over a decade ago, on reading the first edition, that it was a major expression of United Methodists reclaiming the balance of John Wesley's wisdom about cultivating Christian life and witness. While we had kept alive Wesley's emphasis on *experiencing* the forgiving love of God, and we emulated (indeed, over-emulated) his penchant for *organization*, a variety of factors had led us to downplay the vital role that Wesley assigned to instruction in Christian *beliefs* and participation in spiritual *disciplines*.

Wesley's mature wisdom in this regard is evident in one of his last sermons, titled "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity."¹ The sermon opens with Wesley's assessment that the reason Christian communities around the globe have done so little good in the world is that they are producing so few *real* Christians. He then identified two key factors of typical church life that contribute to this lamentable state: 1) few churches expect or assist members to attain adequate understanding of Christian beliefs; and 2) of those churches which attend to Christian teaching, many lack corresponding emphasis on Christian disciplines—including the specific discipline of self-denial.

Every journey is oriented by its goal. For the early Methodists the goal was to become faithful and mature disciples of Christ. This meant far more than just affirming Christ as their Lord, or having an assurance of his pardoning love. They longed for what they saw promised in Scripture—the transformation of their sin-distorted attitudes and dispositions into ever greater conformity with Christ’s abiding love for God, for neighbor, and for the whole creation. In other words, while early Methodists celebrated the freedom *from* sin that comes in the new birth, they fervently desired that greater freedom *for* walking in God’s life-giving ways and participating in God’s saving mission.

Much of Wesley’s leadership of the Methodist movement was devoted to challenging inadequate and distorted conceptions of Christian teaching that he discerned were contributing to the inadequate (and sometimes perverse) lives of many Christians. He was equally concerned to articulate positively—for believer and skeptic alike—the central Christian convictions about the nature of God, the nature of humanity, the nature of sin and evil, and the scope of God’s salvific mission. Wesley emphasized the role of pastors as theologians/teachers in interchanges with his fellow Anglican priests, and embodied that role in his own pastoral work.

The prominence of Wesley’s concern for doctrine has been obscured for some by his sharp criticism of equating “being Christian” with *mere* affirmation of correct doctrine. But this was not a dismissal of doctrine, it was an insistence that Christian teaching is intended to shape the core convictions and dispositions that guide our choices and actions in the world. Wesley imbibed this conviction about the formative intent of doctrine from the Early Church. Their precedent also led him to appreciate the most effective means of helping to instill abiding Christian convictions and dispositions. Sporadic exhortations are not sufficient. We are shaped most deeply by recurrent practices. So Wesley made regular participation in worship, Scripture study, prayer, and the like central to the Methodist way of life—as specified in the *General Rules*. Through this participation early Methodists immersed themselves in the whole of the Christian story and allowed it to form (and reform) the breadth of their convictions and dispositions.

If recognition of the vital role of practices in appropriation of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit was central to the early Methodist way, Wesley's appreciation for the full range of these practices was its deep wisdom. He often summarized this appreciation in a saying from the early church: "The soul and the body make a [human], the Spirit and discipline make a Christian." This proverb reminds us that humans are holistic creatures, that our actions rarely flow from intellectual motivations alone. As such, renewal of our sin-distorted convictions and dispositions is most effectively nurtured within a set of disciplines that address *all* the dimensions of our nature.

Nothing drew more of Wesley's attention in shepherding the early Methodist movement than weaving together such a rich set of "means of grace" as the core of their way of life. Alongside standard practices of corporate worship he commended innovative practices such as the Love Feast and Covenant Service. While prescribing personal devotional reading and regular immersion in Scripture, he stressed the need for concurrent participation in corporate settings ("no holiness but social holiness"). Ever conscious of the value of practices that increase rational understanding of Christian truth, he put special emphasis on complementary practices where the empowering presence of the Spirit is mediated through touch, and taste, and tears. He gave particular prominence to the formative power of the faith sung, of small groups that provide support and accountability, and of regular participation in works of mercy. Finally, he recognized the crucial role of mentors, of those who are far enough along in their journey with Christ to be able to say with Paul "follow me, as I follow Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

Through his long and fruitful ministry Bishop Carder has come to share Wesley's appreciation for the importance of attending to Christian belief and practice—and to the vital connection between these two. He has also inherited Wesley's ability to speak in "plain words for plain people," combining accessibility with deep insight and affective engagement. When Wesley was asked where to turn for a reliable introduction to Anglican teaching, he consistently recommended Bishop John Pearson's *Exposition on the Creed*. When I am asked where to turn for a reliable introduction to United Methodist teaching, I am

delighted that I can point in the same way to a bishop of our church. If there is a difference, it is that Bishop Carder does not just exposit United Methodist belief; true to the spirit of Wesley, he invites us to *live our beliefs*.

Randy L. Maddox
Professor of Theology and Wesleyan Studies
Duke Divinity School

Notes

1. Sermon 122, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," *Works* 4:86–96.