

What we
BELIEVE



Small Group Booklet
July 2016

#bmcjubileeyear



A 4 WEEK STUDY ON THE BASIC BELIEFS OF THE METHODIST CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

This is a 4 week teaching on the basic foundations of Methodist belief. These are the beliefs of the Methodist Church, set out in plain English. I have avoided big words, deep theological terms, and complicated sentences. I want everyone to be able to understand our faith in simple language.

Each week we will examine one of the teachings. There are Bible readings and a summary which outline the subject for the week. This is then followed by devotions for each day and small group questions which helps ground the teaching in the Bible.

My prayer is that you will discover a deeper relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And that this booklet will be a tool that helps you follow Jesus more closely.

God be with us all.

Pete Grassow



WEEK 1: EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE

All people need to be saved (*the Doctrine of Universal Sin*)

Readings: Romans 3:21-26, Matthew 24:1-14

It is not difficult to see that we live in a dark and dangerous world. We simply need to switch on our television, or read the newspapers to read of crime, terrorism, war, murder and other headline-grabbing cruelty. At the same time, we look at the relationships of people who live around us and see anger, jealousy, bitterness and deep sadness. It does not take much more than this to convince us that human relationships are capable of great evil.

It is not difficult to see that we live in a world that is rapidly exhausting its resources. We have damaged the ozone layer around the earth; we are using up our water supplies; we have cut down the trees that provide our oxygen; and we are depleting our food resources. It does not take much more than this to convince us that the relationship between humanity and our earth is precariously unbalanced.

It is also not difficult to see that we live in a world that knows very little about our Creator. We are perpetually inventing new religions; or using old religious ways to terrorise people who disagree with us; or living as if there was no God at all.

This is not what God wanted. The Genesis stories of creation speak of us being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26), which should encourage us to a deep love for our Creator, and a desire to respect God's image in our fellow human beings. Genesis is clear about our responsibility towards the earth: we are to *"till it and keep it"* (Genesis 2:15); and human beings are to take responsibility for the animals and birds of this planet (Genesis 1:28).

When we ignore these things, the Bible has a word for this; it is called 'sin' – simply defined as the condition where human beings live in conflict with one another, in conflict with their environment, and in ignorance of the ways of God. We also read in the Bible that there are ancient stories that tell us how since the beginning of time people sinned: Adam and Eve chose to live as if the teachings of God did not matter (Genesis 3). Cain became so jealous of his brother Abel that he killed him (Genesis 4). And there is a sad comment that the people of the earth lived in ignorance of God (Romans 1:20-21).



These ancient deviant behaviours have infected our planet. In this sense we inherit the consequences of the sins of those who have gone before us. But this is not an excuse for us to continue to sin. We have an opportunity to break this cycle of sin through doing three things:

1. We need to admit that we are complicit in the destruction of our planet, the destruction of our relationship with other people, and the destruction of our relationship with God.
2. We need to stop making excuses for our behaviour. While our parents might have influenced us, and our environment may have disadvantaged us, and our weaknesses may have blinded us – ultimately we have the freedom to choose right from wrong.
3. We need to stop trying to fix our planet by ourselves. Every generation sees people who think that they have the perfect plan. Any plans for changing society without reference to God are doomed to fail.

A final point: nobody is exempt from the consequences of sin. We are all affected by the sins of our society, and our actions in turn affect those around us. Our family connections, our education, our great moral actions and committed charitable donations will not change the fact that we are all flawed human beings in need of rescue for sin. And we believe that the best opportunity for this to happen is to be found in the person of Jesus Christ.



Monday:	Genesis 1:20-31 "made in the image of God"
Tuesday:	Genesis 2:7-8; 15-25 "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life"
Wednesday:	Romans 1:14-20 "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone"
Thursday:	Romans 3:21-26 "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"
Friday:	Matthew 24:4-14 "the love of many will grow cold"
Saturday:	Psalms 51 "restore in me the joy of your salvation"



1. How can I know if something is a sin? Read the verses below and discuss.

Galatians 5:19-21

1 Corinthians 6: 9-10

Proverbs 6: 16-19

Colossians 4: 5

Ephesians 4: 29

1 Corinthians 10: 31

Romans 14:23

1 Corinthians 6:12

Colossians 3: 17

2. Having discussed the above verses – did something stand out for you? Is there something or someone in your life you need to face? Discuss this with your group if you feel comfortable to share.

3. What can I do in the coming week to stop the destruction of:

- a. My environment
- b. My close relationships
- c. My relationship with God



WEEK 2:

YES WE CAN!

All people can be saved (*the Doctrine of Universal Salvation*)

Readings: Romans 5:1-8, Luke 9:51-55.

We live in a world that seeks to reward people for hard work; school prizes are given for good marks, performance bonuses are given at work, and ‘man of the match’ is given to the best player in the team. We are tempted to transfer this into our religious beliefs.

Mae West once said that “all good girls go to heaven but bad girls go everywhere”. This reflects the common idea that if we have done enough good things in our lifetime to impress God we can spend eternity in heaven. The other side of this is an idea that some people have not earned heaven and are definitely destined to a life of eternal damnation. Each of us has a list of people we hope end up in hell... and often the people on this list coincide with the people we personally do not like. (And strangely every person is sure that their own name is not on this list!).

The result of this kind of thought is that many people have divided the world into people who are ‘saved’ and those who are ‘unsaved’. It then becomes the task of Christians to reach out to the ‘unsaved’ to rescue them from eternity in hell. The problem of course is: how do I know who is saved and who is not? Some people make this judgment on whether the person says they are a Christian. However, there are some who say they are Christian, but behave in ways that are very un-Christ like. In World War Two Christian Germany and Christian Britain were at war with each other – and both sides committed great atrocities in the name of God! Then to complicate matters more – I know some people who say they are Christian, but their kind of Christianity is not the same as mine: and so we have Christian disagreements such as Catholic vs Protestant; conservative vs liberal; Charismatic vs Liturgical; gay-friendly vs gay-rejecting. Because of this I have discovered that mostly I judge whether someone is ‘saved’ based on whether that other person thinks like me or not.



Jesus comes into this world with a simple message: *that all people can be saved!* He does not distinguish between those that we find acceptable and those we do not; He does not love some and reject others; in fact He specifically reaches out to those who are rejected by His community to reassure them of the love of God. Jesus reaches out:

- to women - who were thought by men to have an inferior spirituality (John 4).
- to children - who were not thought to be fully human (Matthew 19:13-15).
- to the outcasts of society like the sick (Matthew 15:29-31), the tax collectors (Matthew 9:9-12); the insane (Mark 5:1-15); and those of other religious views (Luke 9:49-50).

The early Christian Church struggled with this. They wanted to keep Christ's message for Jewish people only. And any non-Jewish people who wanted to join needed first to become a Jew. But Acts 15 tells us that the Church leadership decided that the message of Jesus was to be available to anyone, irrespective of their background. St Paul reminds us that the Gospel "... is the power of God for salvation to everyone..." (Romans 1:16). And so the first Christians refused to shut anyone out, teaching instead that "*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:28).

For this reason the Methodist Church welcomes everyone to be with us. Because we believe that "All people can be saved" we will not shut the door on anyone. We are an inclusive fellowship, which is committed to welcome all who seek the Lord Jesus. Obviously this challenges the way our society works, and there have been moments when we have disagreed with the world we live in. During the years of the racial segregation of Apartheid in South Africa, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa insisted that all races were welcome to worship together. And more recently, we have responded to the exclusion of foreigners through xenophobic prejudice by opening our churches to shelter foreign nationals.



We have also publically welcomed other excluded people, such as HIV positive people. For this reason, although members of the Methodist Church struggle with our diverse opinions on homosexuality, we are glad that gay/lesbian people are welcome to worship in our churches.

We are clear that no one earns the 'right' to worship God. St Paul points out that we are all "*justified by his grace as a gift*" and not of our own effort (Romans 3:24).

People come to God in response to the call of God on their lives. And any response to the love of God in someone's life is the work of the Holy Spirit in the person's life. For this reason the Methodist Church practices 'an open table' for Holy Communion: all who seek to love the Lord Jesus are welcome to the Table of the Lord. John Wesley was convinced that people could come to a new experience of their faith as that communion rail, and always made sure that there was a steward available in case someone needed counselling after encountering the presence of God in the Sacrament. Methodist people welcome anyone who wants to worship God – for all people can be saved



Monday:	John 4:1-24 "the Father seeks such as these to worship Him"
Tuesday:	Matthew 19: 13-15 "do not stop them"
Wednesday:	Matthew 15:22-31 "Woman, great is your faith!"
Thursday:	Mark 5:1-20 "what mercy he has shown you"
Friday:	Luke 9: 49-50 "Do not stop him"
Saturday:	Psalms 8: "out of the mouth of babes and infants"



1. Would you feel comfortable sitting next to a dirty beggar, murderer, thief, homeless or socially outcast person in church? Explain why or why not to your group?
2. Do you have a list of people you definitely want to see if heaven? What are you doing to make sure they know that they can be saved?
3. If someone asks you if you are going to heaven one day – what would your immediate answer be? Why?



WEEK 3:

CAN YOU FEEL IT?

All people can know that they are saved (*the Doctrine of Christian Assurance*)

Readings: Romans 8:9-16, Luke 18:18-30.

Christianity is more than believing the right things. Our faith is more than saying the right prayers or performing the right religious rituals. And our faith is more than living the right way. While these can all be part of the life of a Christian, Methodist people believe that Christianity can be experienced as an inner assurance of our faith.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, taught that Christian faith grows out of an experience of the assurance of God's forgiving love. He insisted that it was possible to feel this assurance as a consequence of the inner promptings of God's Spirit. This understanding is grounded in the writings of St Paul, who points to the 'witness of the Spirit': "*For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God*" (Romans 8:15-16).

This belief arises out of Wesley's own spiritual experience in an Aldersgate Street home group. He writes that he knew that he was loved by God: "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken my sin, even mine" (Wesley's Journal: 24 June 1738).

Methodist people believe that the Spirit of God touches our lives and changes us – and that this is an experience that can be felt. We affirm that the Spirit of God cannot be manipulated into one particular experience, or confined to one specific moment. This means that the Spirit can encounter us in a variety of ways: these can range from specifically religious activities such as reading the Bible, prayer, or worship, to life encounters with God in nature's beauty, or meeting a person in need, or in an experience of silence.

It is the Spirit of God who lifts the words of the Bible off the page and into the life of the reader: it is the Spirit of God who changes silence into spirituality; it is the Spirit of God who brings life into sterile liturgy; and it is the Spirit of God who nudges us into action in the face of injustice and oppression.

Methodists believe that we can approach God "*with a true heart in full assurance of faith*" (Hebrews 10:22). This is a hope-filled conviction born out of a personal encounter with the

Spirit of God. This encounter is not something we can engineer through using the 'correct' prayer, or the 'right' religious ritual. This is an encounter that is initiated by God, an encounter of which we are the recipients. This is a moment of Grace, which we do not deserve, but which we receive with gratitude. This life-changing moment provides an assurance of salvation that becomes a touch-stone for building a reflective and critical faith.



- Monday: Romans 8:9-16 "Spirit bearing witness with our spirit"
Tuesday: Luke 18:18-30 "There is still on thing lacking"
Wednesday: Colossians 2:1-10 "that they may have all the riches of assured understanding"
Thursday: Hebrews 6: 1-12 "to realise the full assurance of hope"
Friday: Hebrews 10: 15-24 "a true heart in full assurance of faith"
Saturday: Hebrews 11:1-3 "faith is the assurance of things hoped for"



1. Have you had your own 'Aldersgate' moment – knowing that God loves you without a shadow of a doubt? Please share with your group why you know, or what is stopping you from knowing, in your heart that God loves you.
2. Where do you feel God's presence most? In nature, silence, worship, other places? Share with your group.
3. What is your favourite song/hymn of Praise! Sing it or find it on you tube and play it to your group. Use this time to pray for each other (in silence).

WEEK 4: WHEN YOU ARE PERFECT IN EVERY WAY

All people can be saved completely (*the Doctrine of Christian Perfection*)

Readings: Romans 12:1-3, 9-18; Matthew 5:43-48

In Matthew 5:48 we read the instruction of Jesus to “*be perfect*”. This has placed great pressure on some Christians, who attempt to live life without mistakes or faults of any kind. Some Christian leaders give the impression that a commitment to following Jesus automatically makes a person do the right thing. It is a difficult moment to discover that even someone who has made a Christian commitment can make mistakes. Becoming a Christian is not a protection against sin. People are still tempted, and Christ-followers are still capable of sin.

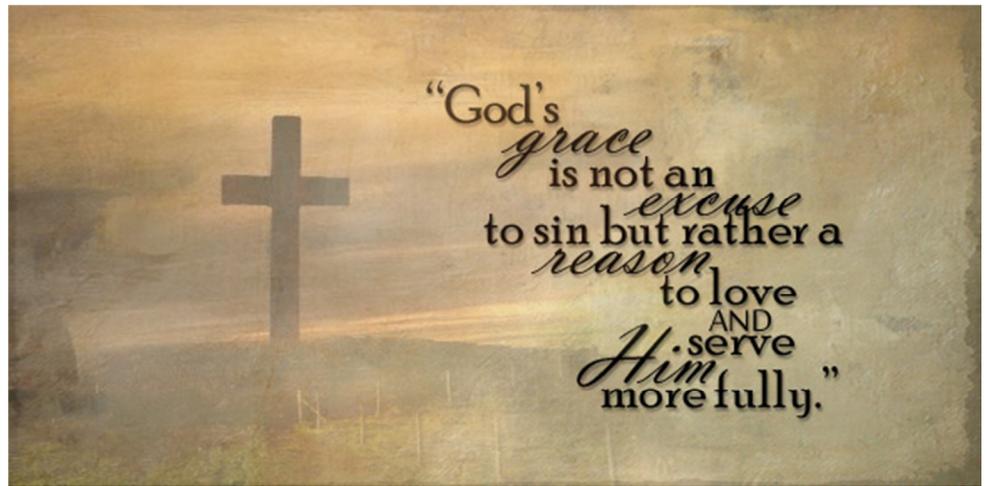


Some people therefore become disillusioned and give up expecting any change – and so give the familiar response “Well, nobody’s perfect”. This can lapse into a life of a continual cycle: sin, conviction, repentance, and confession. What is lacking is a real commitment to growth beyond the present spiritual condition.

Methodist people are not content to leave it here. We are convinced that the invitation of Jesus to be perfect is to be taken seriously. It is our belief that God is continually at work in our lives. We are made perfect in Christ with the forgiveness of our sin. This forgiveness is then

worked out each day in the life of a Christian. The perfect will of God is discovered in a Christian’s life as a present reality that draws us into the future (Romans 12:2). This is a process of spiritual growth, which moves us from imperfection towards perfection. St Paul puts it this way: Philippians 3:12-14 “*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus*”.

Here is someone who understands that this life is a process of growth. He is not instantly perfect, but is striving towards the perfect will of God in his life. And as each moment of each day is lived faithfully before God, so God's perfect will unfolds for the life of the believer.



The very real possibility exists that what is perfect for today will not be perfect for tomorrow. God invites us to grow beyond today's perfection to a new perfection tomorrow. The salvation of God is therefore not one moment in our life, but is rather every moment of every day. In this way, the perfection of God is worked out in each moment of each day. Charles Wesley puts this into a hymn:

*Finish then thy new creation
Pure and spotless let us be
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place... (from the Hymn "Love Divine")*



- Monday: Romans 12:1-3 "be transformed by the renewing of your minds"
Tuesday: Romans 12:9-18 "hold fast to what is good"
Wednesday: Matthew 5: 43-48 "so that you may be children of your Father in heaven".
Thursday: Philippians 3:12-14 "I press on toward the goal"
Friday: 2 Corinthians 7: 1-7 "making holiness perfect in the fear of God"
Saturday: 2 Corinthians 12: 1-10 "power is made perfect in weakness"



1. Is there something in your life that has a stronghold over you? Gossiping, lying, shopping, eating excessively, bad habits, addictions? Do you do this by default, and although you try not to do it – it is very difficult to stop? Discuss what you have tried in the past? Having been through the Bible study, will you do anything different from today?
2. Pray for each other's revelations. Also pray that God will show each one the things that they cannot see that is coming in between him/her and God.
3. Can you explain to someone what Methodism is all about after these 4 Bible studies? Please explain to the person next to you what you understand the 4 Methodist teachings to be.



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