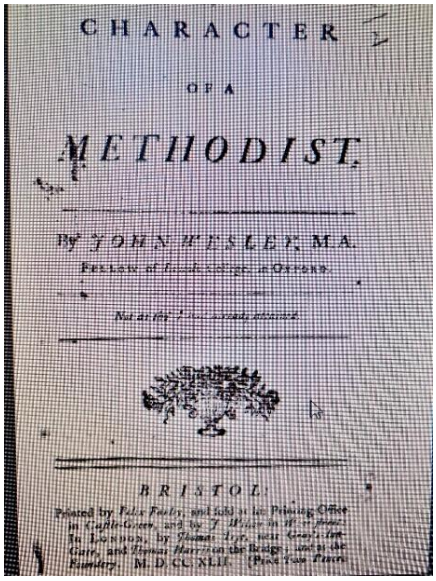
"Character of a Methodist (not as though I have already attained)"

A devotional paraphrase of a pamphlet published by John Wesley in 1742

Michael Roberts

The term "methodist" has become popular but many struggle to define it or to name the principles and practices of those who are commonly called by this name. Since I was among the first to be given this label, I feel a responsibility to give the clearest account that I can. To start, it must be acknowledged that the term was first used as a way to ridicule. It was a term of derision. And as so often happens, such name-calling and labels catch on. It may have been an allusion to an ancient sect of Physicians, studied at Oxford, who were methodical in matters of diet and exercise, but more likely, it was used as a way to make fun of our small group of students at Oxford who were trying to be more disciplined in our study of scripture, prayers, and service to the world.


CHARACTER

OF A

METHODIST.

By JOHN WESLEY, M.A.

BRISTOL

Given this origin, and my close association with the name, there is a part of me that would love for the term to be buried in oblivion. But that is not likely at this point. Therefore, the hope is to redeem the word, in support of the many who are inspired by it. And perhaps some of those who continue to use it as a way to demean may gain a new perspective.

THE (and I want to emphasize this) the distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not found in opinions of any sort, or in any scheme of religion that allows us to make judgements against others. Hear this – "all of that is quite wide of the point." It is to be grossly ignorant of the whole matter and to miss the truth entirely. And still, distinctions are to be made. A Methodist believes that all scripture is given as inspiration from God. This distinguishes us from those of other faiths and from non-believers. (And before you hear too much of a tone of judgement in that statement, please hang in there). A Methodist believes in the divinity of Christ, and this sets us apart from groups like the Socinians *(a group during the Protestant Reformation that focused on the humanity of Christ and were unitarian rather than trinitarian)* and Arians *(a group that sparked the Council of Nicaea, who believed that Jesus was created, and while the Son of God, is not co-equal with God)*. So, Methodists do embrace an orthodox view of the trinity. We also are distinguished from the Roman Church in that we see the scriptures as the only and sufficient rule for faith and practice. But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think. Such opinions, whether ultimately right or wrong, are not distinguishing marks of a Methodist.

Likewise, we do not focus on particular phrases or styles of worship. We are not distinguished by actions, customs, apparel, whether or not we abstain from marriage, or from meats and drinks, which are all good if received with thanksgiving. Again, this is all quite wide of the point.

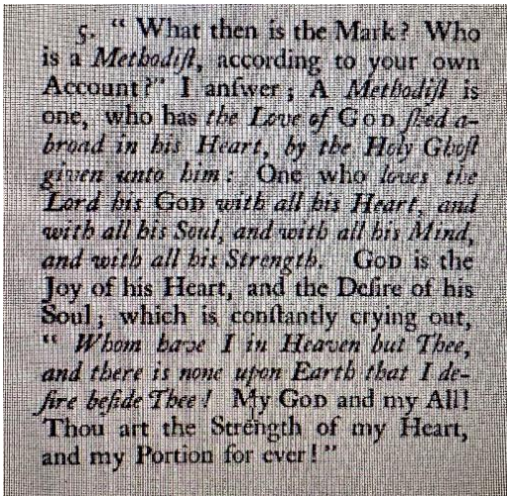
We do not use any particular expressions of Scripture more frequently than others as a way to set us apart. We may have some key scriptures to guide us but we try to use those favored within the scriptures themselves. There are key passages that provide important directions and can be used to interpret the whole of scripture. Jesus himself used this method of interpretation when he named love that the summary of all the law and the prophets.

Lastly, a Methodist is not distinguished by focusing on a part of the whole. We see this among those who stress that we are "saved by faith alone." I can use this phrase, but in light of the whole gospel, must hold to a more complete understanding of the terms. Salvation is more than a ticket to heaven. Scripturally, it points to holiness of heart and life. It is to be made whole. That's what God wants for us. And faith is more than believing. It is believing by following; it is growing in the love planted in our hearts. By this faith we 'establish the law." Our hope is that the royal law of God's love would become our reality and our witness.

On the other hand, we do not place the whole of religion into the category of good works either. The whole of religion cannot be conflated into "doing no harm" or "doing good" or "using the ordinances of God" *(the*

means/methods of grace - worship, prayer, study, conferencing, etc). We can do all of this, and in the end have no joy of faith at all. It can be like believing you are virtuous because you haven't sold your body or that you are honest because you haven't stolen from another. May the Lord God preserve us from such a poor, starved religion. If these were the marks of a Methodist, I would rather be a sincere Jew or Muslim or Pagan.

We started with what would not be the marks. Now let's turn to the positive. What are the marks of a Methodist? A Methodist is one who has the love of God planted in their heart by the Holy Spirit given to them. A Methodist loves God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. God is the joy of their hearts and the desire of their souls. These blessings overflow as if having "a well of water springing up into everlasting life." Methodists "rejoice evermore" in the peace of God and in the light of God's "perfect love which cast out fear."



5. "What then is the Mark? Who is a *Methodiſt*, according to your own Account?" I anſwer; A *Methodiſt* is one, who has *the Love of* God *ſhed abroad in his Heart, by the Holy Ghoſt given unto him:* One who *loves the Lord his* God *with all his Heart, and with all his Soul, and with all his Mind, and with all his Strength.* God is the Joy of his Heart, and the Deſire of his Soul; which is conſtantly crying out, "*Whom have I in Heaven but Thee, and there is none upon Earth that I deſire beſide Thee!* My God and my All! Thou art the Strength of my Heart, and my Portion for ever!"

Having redemption through the blood of Christ and the forgiveness of sins, we cannot but rejoice, especially when we look back on the horrible pit out of which we have been delivered. We rejoice as the spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God. We rejoice in having received, by God's abundant mercy, an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, reserved in heaven for us all.

A Methodist, full of immortality, gives thanks in all circumstances, trusting that God's good will is being fulfilled, even as the Lord gives and takes away. Methodists are content in all states, whether they are being abased or able to abound, whether in sickness or health, ease or pain, life or death. In all, we are able to cast all care unto the One that cares for us and is there for us through it all.

A Methodist "prays without ceasing." This does not mean that they are always in church, or always on their knees, or saying words – all of which is important. Methodists trust in the Spirit who intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. They attuned their hearts to this deeper reality. In all circumstances, their hearts are with the Lord. They walk with God continually, able to "see the One who is invisible."

And as we pray, rejoice, and give thanks in this way, the outcome or fruit is love. Methodists love everyone as if they are a part of one's own soul. We love every child of "the Father of the spirits of all flesh." This love extends even to enemies, even to enemies of God, to "the evil and the unthankful. This love is that big!

This love is an active transformational power in our lives, able to purify our hearts from all vengeful passions, from envy, malice, and wrath, from every unkind temper or affection. This love cleanses us from arrogance of spirit where judgment and division pervert the idea of righteousness. This love manifests itself as patience and kindness and as a humility that does not insist on its own way. It "forebears and forgives." It removes motivation for contention and seeks first to understand and to cultivate peace and reconciliation.

And, as a great blessing, this love is eternal. This love is not focused on the world or the things of the world. In this love we are "crucified to the world," and being dead to all that is of the world, the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life" We are now alive together in the one who is love. In this love, we keep the commandments, not only some but all. The motivation is to have "a conscience void of offense towards God and towards humankind." In this love, we rejoice to "do the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven." In this love, we continually present our soul and body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, to God's glory. All talents and gifts are employed in this endeavor.

A Methodist not only aims at this but actually attains it. Every prayer, every action, every word advances the glory of God and brings good-will and peace to the world. The one invariable rule is this, "Whatever I do, in word or deed, I do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God."

(*Yes, this is the vision. This is how God sees us, not only as we should be but as we are through the lens of love– as the body of Christ, as saints, as the light of the world. The scriptures say that this is who we are and*

we are invited to grow into this identity. And remember from the title that this is written by one who has yet to fully fulfill this vision – but working at it is glorious and glorifies God).

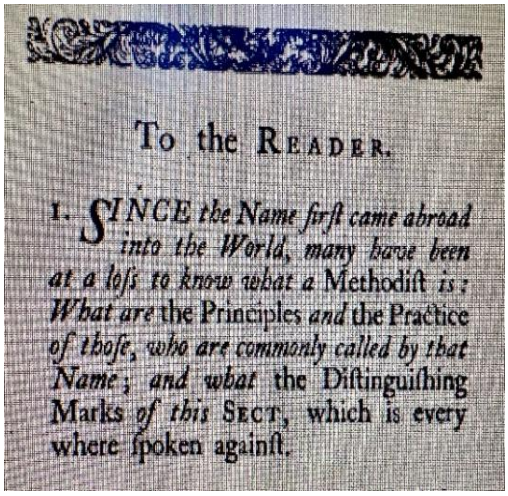
A Methodist is realistic and thus vigilant, knowing that "vice does not lose its nature." Vice easily becomes fashionable. It is tempting to "fare sumptuously every day," to "make provisions for the flesh," to "lay up treasures on earth," to adorn ourselves "with gold and costly apparel." And with majorities often leading the way, it can be hard to not follow. A Methodist resist any diversion that can lead us into such vice.

In a similar vein, Methodists know that they cannot speak evil of a neighbor or utter any unkind words. Love keeps the door of the lips closed. They do not give in to corrupt communication, the demeaning and tearing down of others, or speaking in ways that do not "minister grace to the hearers." As the scripture says, "Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, and commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things and the peace of God will be with you."

Methodists do good to all - to neighbors, strangers, friends, and enemies. They do this by "feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting those who are sick or in prison," with the hope of bringing those who are awakened to God's love and then to a recognition of sin, to the grace of justification by faith, which leads to the peace that passes understanding, and in this peace we are moved to love and good works, with the hope of growing into the fullness of Christ. Seeking this growth prepares us for the joy of heaven.

(Note the movement from Awakening, to Recognition, to Justification, to Peace, to Love, and to the fullness of Christ. This can be described as God's method in which we get to participate. From a Wesleyan perspective, this movement, with all of its challenges and in all of its messiness, is so much more inspiring than more anemic forms of faith that say, "just believe" or "just be basically good." We are called to attend to this method as whole in a disciplined and daily way).

These are the principles and practices of our sect; these are the marks of a true Methodist. And some may criticize by pointing out that these are only the fundamental principles of Christianity. To this I say "yes." I would hope that we would vehemently refuse to be distinguished from others by anything accept the common principles of Christianity. The hope of any method revealed in the revelation of Jesus Christ is the renewal of the soul after the image of God. And having the mind that was in Christ, may we walk as Christ walked, in true holiness always defined by the virtues of love.



To the READER.

1. SINCE the Name first came abroad into the World, many have been at a loss to know what a Methodist is; What are the Principles and the Practice of those, who are commonly called by that Name; and what the Distinguishing Marks of this SECT, which is every where spoken against.

(While Wesley writes often of the method of God and the methods or means that God has given us to practice in a disciplined way, this is the only direct mention of the "method" in this piece on methodism. The focus here is on the goal – the renewal of the soul in the image of God. May we keep that before us.).

While we do distinguish ourselves from the unbelieving world, we earnestly desire to not distinguish ourselves from other Christians, of whatever denomination, not from any who sincerely follow after what they have not yet attained. Whoever does the will of God is our sibling in Christ. And so, we do not give in to the arrogance of spirit that causes division among us. If your heart is as my heart, then give me your hand. Let us not destroy our witness for the sake of our own narrow opinions and terms. To love and serve God is enough. We hold words of the Apostle Paul in our hearts, as he begs us to live into the calling we have been given, with all humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing one another in love, and making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace." We remember that there is "one body, with many parts, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all." All. A Methodist is one who has the love of this God planted in their heart.

(Can you imagine that this is how God sees you?). In your heart, is this what God wants for you?) What might it look like for you to give your life to this vision?)