

The Free Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE AND CHARACTER

The Free Methodist Church is best understood within the framework of the biblical concept of the church, the perspective provided by its historical heritage, and its commitment to the needs of man.

A. The Biblical Concept of the Church

It is clear from Scripture that the church is *of* God and *for* people. It is His creation. Christ is its head. The church is the people of God chosen for a purposeful partnership in accomplishing the will of God on earth. More than eighty metaphors, word pictures, relating to the church appear in the New Testament. Each portrays a more profound reality than does the picture it brings to mind. The pictures together make clear the nature and mission of the church. Paul speaks of the church as “body,” “building,” and “bride.” The most inclusive and perhaps the most significant metaphor is “body of Christ.” The redeemed are spoken of as “members of the body.”

What is the profound truth that the many word pictures convey? God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — takes a redeemed people into partnership to share in His activities and to realize His purposes. The church is the organic, corporate instrument God has chosen to remake men and society. It has a mission of holy love. The church exists to produce Christlikeness in men and their institutions. Thus our mission may be described as participation with God in bringing holiness and love to bear upon the sins, hurts, and needs of men. This description of our mission is both individual and social. It points to a social relationship of men to God and to each other described in Scripture as “the kingdom of God.”

The metaphors of the New Testament are made emphatic by the greatest portrait of all — the Incarnation, God made flesh. The church, enlightened by the Incarnation, continues the teaching and the ministry of its Lord on earth.

When the church is acting under the headship of its Lord and the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it continues the story begun in the book of Acts. Many are its wonderful achievements since the first century, and many more may yet be realized in the unfolding drama of the acts of the Holy Spirit through redeemed men.

The New Testament reminds us that the church visible is not the church ideal. Because the church is a divine-human partnership, sharing not only in the holy love of its founder but in the blemishes of its humanity, it is ever in need of renewal. God takes the same risk with the church in redemption as He did when He granted men freedom in creation. Just as God, the Holy Spirit, used the hands of the Apostle Paul in “special miracles” so He can use His church today. The results will be the same—the Word of the Lord will grow mightily and will prevail (Acts 19:11 and 20).

B. Historical Heritage and Perspective

Free Methodists consider the story of the church in the book of Acts and the other New Testament writings as their primary heritage. Generation after generation derives from this record their main source of direction and renewal. Followers of God have wrestled with issues both old and new throughout the centuries just as they do now. The entire history of the church is instructive for us.

Free Methodists claim a line of evangelical descent spelled out in large terms as follows: They trace their spiritual heritage through men and women of deep personal piety in all ages who have shown that it is possible to maintain the glow of spiritual fervor in the midst of paganism, apostasy, and the ofttime corruption of the established church.

The lineage of the Free Methodist Church begins with the people of God in the Old and New Testaments, and includes influences and contributions from the multitude of renewal movements in western Christianity: Wycliffe and the German Moravians (from whom Wesley learned the concept of “the witness of the Spirit”); the sixteenth century Reformation with its many counterbalancing renewal movements, not the least of which were the Arminian correctives (which taught that Christ’s salvation was for all mankind without limit, but that it must be freely chosen); the Catholic-Anglican tradition; the English Puritan influence; the Methodist tradition; and the ensuing vigorous nineteenth century holiness movement. God has used these and others across the ages to make the unchanging Christian gospel known more clearly. In sum, Free Methodists identify with the flow of history of the Christian church while maintaining distinctive evangelical and spiritual emphases.

The contributions from church history may be detailed as follows:

The Reformation heritage is reflected in their commitment to the Bible

as the supreme rule of faith and life, and to salvation by grace through faith.

The Catholic-Anglican heritage appears in their concern for church order and appreciation for liturgical form.

Their emphasis on the essentials of the faith allows for their openness towards differing views on such subjects as modes of baptism and the millennium.

The Methodist heritage is shown in theological, ecclesiastical and social concerns articulated by the Reverend John Wesley and his associates in the eighteenth century and reaffirmed through the holiness movement of the nineteenth.

Theologically, they are committed to the Wesleyan-Arminian affirmation of the saving love of God in Christ. Through prevenient grace He seeks to bring every individual to himself but grants to each the responsibility of accepting or rejecting that salvation. Salvation is a living relationship with God in Jesus Christ, giving the believer a legal position of righteousness, and therefore affirming the security of all who continue in fellowship with Him. Along with the Arminian emphasis on the universal offer of salvation, John Wesley rediscovered the principle of assurance through the witness of the Holy Spirit. He declared a scriptural confidence in a God who is able to cleanse the hearts of believers from sin here and now by faith, fill them with the Holy Spirit, and empower them for carrying out His mission in the world. John Wesley wrote of himself and his brother Charles, "In 1729 two young men in England, reading the Bible, saw they could not be saved without holiness, followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1737 they saw, likewise, that men are justified before they are sanctified; but still holiness was their object. God then thrust them out to raise up a holy people."

Ecclesiastically, the Methodist heritage is continued in Free Methodist organization. There are lines of responsibility connecting local, district, conference, and denominational ministries. Small groups of believers are accountable to one another for growth in Christian life and service. Free Methodists are concerned for the whole church, not just the local congregation. They value the leadership of bishops, superintendents, pastors, and lay leaders who provide counsel and direction to the church.

Born at a time when representative government was being developed by free societies, the Free Methodist founders reaffirmed the biblical principle of lay ministry. Free Methodists recognize and license unordained persons for particular ministries. They mandate lay representation in numbers equal to clergy in the councils of the church.

Socially, from their early days, Free Methodists displayed an awakened conscience characteristic of the early 'Wesleyan movement. Their outspoken action against the institution of slavery and the class distinc-

tion inherent in the rental of pews to the wealthy demonstrated the spirit of true Methodism. Although issues change, the sensitive social conscience remains, evidenced by continuing active participation in the social concerns of the day.

During the nineteenth century, the holiness movement, arising in American Methodism but spreading through other nations and denominations, called Christians to deeper levels of relationship with God and greater concern for the needs of hurting humanity. Within this context, the Reverend Benjamin T. Roberts and other ministers and laypersons in the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in western New York, raised a protest against theological liberalism, unhealthy compromise on pressing social issues, and loss of spiritual fervor.

Between 1858 and 1860, a number of these leaders were excluded from the Methodist Episcopal Church on various charges and allegations. In reality, the primary issue was their proclamation of the basic principles of Methodism, especially the doctrine and experience of entire sanctification. Appeals made to the General Conference of May 1860 were denied. Those excluded could not join any other Methodist body, for there was none that agreed with them on the issues on which they were thrust out. Therefore, the Free Methodist Church was organized by a convention of lay members and ministers which met at Pekin, Niagara County, New York, on August 23, 1860. The first General Conference met on the second Wednesday of October, 1862, at Saint Charles, Illinois.

The Free Methodist Church, since its inception, continues to expand around the world through missionary outreach, the development of additional general conferences, and a coordinating world organization.

C. The Needs of Persons

Free Methodists are committed to the task of understanding the most important needs of persons, institutions, and varying cultures so that it may minister meaningfully and redemptively to them. In the high priestly prayer of Jesus Christ, He called upon believers to live in this world actively and intelligently in order that the world might be led both to "know" and to "believe."

Free Methodists are aware of the demonic forces in the world which debase men, pervert the good, and lead men and institutions to ruin. They attempt to help men by restoring personal meaning in a time of depersonalizing developments.

Free Methodists openly rebuke anything in law, persons, or institutions which violates the dignity of persons created in the image of God. They are committed to taking advantage of opportunities where as individuals, local churches, conferences, and denomination they can minister

healing and redemptive helpfulness in the world.

D. Distinctive Principles

Free Methodists seek to express the concept of the church of Jesus Christ, their historical perspective, and the needs of persons in specific principles and commitments.

Free Methodists today seek to continue the mission of first-century Christianity which was recovered by John Wesley and the early Methodists who declared they existed “to raise up a holy people.”

Free Methodists are a fellowship of Christians in earnest to get to heaven and committed to working in the world for the salvation of all men. They place their commitment to Christ and His church above all others. They keep themselves free from alliances which would compete for their highest loyalty and from all which would encumber and compromise their effective witness to the Trinitarian faith and man’s dependence upon the grace of God. The Christian denies himself, takes up his cross daily, and follows Jesus. He conforms to all the will of God as made known in His Word, and believes the conditions of salvation are the same now as they were in the days of the apostles.

In doctrine, Free Methodists’ beliefs are the standard beliefs of evangelical, Arminian Protestantism, with distinctive emphasis on the scriptural teaching of entire sanctification as held by John Wesley.

In experience, Free Methodists stress the reality of an inner cleansing and power that attests the doctrine of entire sanctification, both in the inward consciousness of the believer and in his outward life.

Their worship is characterized by simplicity and freedom of the Spirit, untrammled by elaborate ritual.

Free Methodists maintain a life of daily devotion to Christ that springs from inward holiness and separates the Christian from the world, even while he/she lives in the world. They believe the best way to keep worldliness from invading the church is for the church to invade the world with redemptive purpose.

They practice a complete consecration of every power and possession to the service of God and man. They believe so strongly in the mission of the church that they are committed to responsible stewardship in finance. Therefore they do not need to resort to commercial efforts to support the cause of Christ.

Free Methodists recognize that God gives spiritual gifts of service and leadership to both men and women. Since male and female are both created in the image of God, that image is most fully reflected when both women and men work in concert at all levels of the church. Therefore, all positions in the church are accessible to any whom God has called.

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Free Methodists sense a special obligation to preach the gospel to the poor. The provisions of the gospel are for all. The “glad tidings” must be proclaimed to every individual of the human race. God sends the true light to illuminate and melt every heart. Jesus set the example. Of His ministry it was reported, “The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.” This preaching to the poor was the crowning proof that He was the one who should come. In this respect the church must follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Free Methodists are committed to the New Testament ideals of simplicity and modesty as a style of life. They wish to call attention, not to themselves, but to their Lord.

These distinctives of the Free Methodist Church from its origin are still living issues. In every era and every land these distinctives are the witnesses of the church, needing utterance clear and strong that they may be heard and heeded amidst the world’s confusing and misleading voices.