

Search for the Free Methodist Soul
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March 14, 2005

It's a bit presumptuous of anyone to attempt to describe, let alone prescribe the "soul" of Free Methodism. I am just one pastor whose days are spent like many of you - staying ahead of the calendar and the constant flow of human need. I can relate to the story of the man on the airplane who responded to the inquiring woman sitting next to him, "No, I am not a minister, I've just been sick for a few days." It is a joy to be here with people who have cared for me at various stages of my life and ministry. I trust this has been a stimulating time of renewal for you as it has been for me. The best I can do today is to share with you out of my own laboratory of ministry. Beyond that, I can only speak anecdotally on what I have observed.

I am, as Donald Joy would say, a "blown in the bottle" Free Methodist. On the Van Valin side, my Free Methodist roots go back four generations before me. On the Imhoff side, they go back two. The network of friends and family across the church continues to be a great source of strength and blessing to me. I am indebted to the church. For me, it has always been loving, affirming, and gracious, seasoned with the smell of potluck macaroni and cheese.

The Free Methodist church that nurtured me was a homogenous, ethno-centric culture. Every Sunday, from California to New York, everyone sang out of the Hymns of the Living Faith. All my friends vacationed at the campground. The majority of the leaders graduated from Greenville, and intermarriage was the only dance allowed. It was cause for celebration but you had to watch your step.

I have pastored full time since 1983. I have lived in every holy city in the Midwest. I have served the church at a number of levels. Much like my own discovery of Jesus, I am still working my way out of the paper bag of my youth to re-covenant with my church in maturing love and loyalty.

The FM "Soul" Found in our Original Mission

Over the last two decades, many of our churches have expended great energy and resources in writing and re-writing mission and purpose statements. I do not believe, however, that we can improve much on the earliest denominational mission statement. The preface to the 1866 Book of Discipline states:

"All their churches are required to be as free as the grace they preach. They believe that their mission is two-fold – to maintain the Bible standard of Christianity – and to preach the Gospel to the poor."

This two-fold mission has helped bring clarity to the mission where I currently serve. It has a vertical as well as a horizontal focus. The "Bible standard of Christianity", as stated, is our historic doctrine of holiness of heart. We are to live

and love like Jesus did. This is our vertical mission. To “preach the Gospel to the poor” is our horizontal mission. It, too, is to live and love like Jesus.

In his presentation to the Board of Administration a number of years ago, Dr. David McKenna connected this original mission to a vision for the future of Free Methodism. He proposed a new vertical-horizontal slogan for the 21st century – “a Passion for One and a Compassion for All”¹

Our Lord’s Great Commandment reflects the same dual thrust – To “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength” – this is our vertical mission. The second is like it, “to love our neighbor as we love ourselves” – our horizontal mission. Vertical and horizontal, personal and social holiness, deep and wide - However we package it, it carries historical and Biblical precedent, and, as I will try to prove, it remains as our most compelling witness to the world.

The Pebble in Our Shoe

I am thankful for the leadership of our Bishops these past few years. I was on the Board of Administration when they composed the document, “Working Together in the 21st Century”² They identified eight expected “outcomes” for our denominational mission along with 10 statements that defined our community “culture”. Without attempting to prioritize these outcomes and characteristics, I would still suggest two things about the two original “pillars” of our mission.

First, in the US church, these two pillars of our original mission - the doctrine of holiness and our special care for the poor – have become the most neglected of the eight outcomes. What Albert Outler said about the United Methodist Church’s neglect of holiness teaching could be said of us, “The keystone doctrine has become a pebble in her shoe.” Likewise, the gospel to the poor has been relegated to a token seat at the table, overlooked among more pressing issues.. We have a hand in charity work, but this is not what the founders had in mind when they spoke of preaching the Gospel to the poor.

Second, I would suggest that it is precisely these two ideals that have the most potential of capturing the imagination of an unbelieving world. The world is not impressed with our organizational image, our denominational heritage, our communication savvy, or even our cultural relevance. It is our life together in the radical way of Jesus that presents our most compelling witness.

The First Pillar - Holiness

Over the course of my life, I have sat under various streams of holiness teaching. To be honest, I have often struggled to make sense of what I heard and witnessed. In a Seminary class on the doctrine of Entire Sanctification, we memorized flow charts and lock-tight stages of faith. I remember the frustration I felt at the time, thinking, “Could something so wondrous be so easily defined?” “Could something so dynamic be so easily ‘possessed’”? I also wondered, “Could something as life-giving as this so easily lend itself to dysfunctional religion?” Twenty five years later, I still have not found our classic and formulaic

language to be very helpful. The gradual neglect of the doctrine across the church may indicate that there are others who have had the same difficulty. To their credit, our Bishops have worked to bring the doctrine back into focus in the last few years. They might admit the task is a challenging one. In exchange for an unsatisfying holiness, we seem to have inherited, over time, a confusing mix of traditions. In the past century, our loosely defined Wesleyan camp has adopted nuances of western Calvinistic propositional evangelicalism (“believe this and this and pray this prayer and you are saved”), popular market consumer religion, charismatic revivalism, ancient mysticism, fundamentalist legalism, passive universalism, and even modern pluralism. I wonder how many of our pastors, let alone our people, can discern the differences?

John Wesley described the work of salvation in comprehensive terms – he saw it as the “healing of the soul”. The Hebrew vision was captured in the term, “shalom”. The Apostle Paul used the relational terms of “reconciliation” and “adoption”. Jesus simply called it “love” - love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself”. The metaphors he used were relational in every way - sheep to a shepherd, bride to a bridegroom, a child to a Father.

Beyond Abstinence, Status, and Separation

Allow me to generalize a bit After all, conferences such as this depend on generalization! In the form in which it has been passed down, I would summarize the doctrine of holiness in three words – Abstinence, Status, and Separation. I will briefly try to define them and then suggest a dimension of holiness that goes beyond them.

Beyond “Abstinence”: Free Methodism is still holding to a strong cultural value of abstinence. I would not argue against the importance of abstinence. Since our inception, we have stood against alcohol and drug use, all forms of gambling, sexual sin, etc. Abstinence has served our community very well. It has provided the first line of protection for many. You will remember that the issue of abstinence was what gave heat to the membership debate in the 1995 General Conference. The problem with abstinence, however, is not its value in setting behavioral boundaries for the community, but rather in its equation with the deeper work of holiness. As such, holiness becomes defined by what it is “not”, rather than what it so profoundly “is”. The holiness we inherited was defined by the cleansing of the heart from all that we are “against”!

Any recovered addict will tell you that abstinence is a vital component to recovery, but abstinence is not the ultimate goal of recovery. The opposite of addiction and likewise, the goal of recovery, is not abstinence. It is something more. The opposite of abstinence and the goal of recovery is “community”. More than that, if we take it to its spiritual and psychological core, the opposite of sin and addiction is “*intimacy*” – reconciliation and intimacy with God and reconciliation and community with others. Hints of this are found in Genesis

2:25, the last word of pristine creation where the man and woman are fully known and yet completely safe. We heed Jesus' warning of the demons who return to the house that is swept clean. (Luke 11:24-27) We also find it in Peter's word about "love" being the antidote to sin (I Peter 4:8).

Beyond "Status"

The Holiness we inherited was described as an experience to be possessed, or a "state" to be achieved. Others can unpack the finer points of the doctrine better than I. I only suggest that this is where we find the breach in the doctrine where religious toxicity creeps in. The "state" to be achieved is a state of sinless perfection, yet we have constantly backtracked on the words and the definitions. "Perfection" does not really mean "perfection". "Entire" is not entirely "entire". The "crisis experience" is both "instantaneous" and gradual, etc. We are good at painting ourselves in and out of semantic corners.

The problem is this. We simply cannot contain the dynamic of salvation in static terms. Jesus said "follow me". Jesus continues to be a moving target! If we take note of the relational metaphors of Jesus in defining salvation, and if we see "intimacy" as the antidote to sin, then we can see that holiness is relational as well. In a relational context, new and helpful light is shed on the doctrine. A relationship can not be defined as static, nor can it be arrived at "instantaneously". Wesleyan theologian, Randy Maddox describes it more like a "dance", in which "God takes the first step but we must participate responsibly, lest the dance stumble or end."³

A few years ago, I was teaching a class of ministerial students. One raised his hand to ask if I thought we would be "free" to sin once we were in heaven. It was a good question. I told him I could not presume to fully predict the nature of a mystery as great as heaven. According to my limited understanding of relationship, however, I can know that the goal of relationship is always love. What is more, the nature of love is always, by definition "free". Anything less than "freedom" is less than "love". So, after some thought, I said "Yes. I could be proven wrong, but it seems we will be free in heaven". The class went on to consider the possibility that we will likely be more free than we are now. It is sin that diminishes freedom, not holiness. It is to sin and the degenerate life that all static definitions belong. Holiness, however, is something else. It is a "freedom" in the fullest sense – freedom to do right, to love God – yes, that's easy enough. I would also add, however, that holiness might allow us the freedom to fail, freedom to more readily recognize sin in our hearts (How can you get better from something you're not allowed to have?), freedom to confess, freedom to make restitution, freedom to learn from our past rather than be incapacitated by guilt or locked in denial, freedom to try again, freedom to grow, freedom to "walk in the light as he is in the light", freedom to have "fellowship with each other", freedom from the nothingness of sin. John Wesley himself suggested, at least once, that growth in grace would continue throughout eternity.⁴

Beyond "Separation"

I have been trying to find out whether there is any truth to an intriguing rumor that I heard about the small college/church community in which I currently live. Many decades ago, as it was told to me, the college and church once marketed their utopia with the catch phrase, "Six Miles from the Nearest Sin"! No reliable source has verified the story, and the truth is probably not as interesting. Yet we would not find it difficult to believe that the sentiment, at least, was held by more than a few. For more than two-thirds of the past century, holiness was defined among Free Methodists as "separation" from the world. Who can argue with that? After all, "separation" is the root meaning of the word.

A few years ago, I was browsing through the archived copies of the Young Peoples' Missionary Society (YPMS) newspaper in our Historical Center. The cover story and picture in one issue featured a high school sophomore who refused to play the clarinet in her school band because they were to perform a Benny Goodman tune. I think the year was 1949. Her act of non-violent resistance was celebrated as an exemplary witness for Christ. She was touted as a guardian of holiness among the up and coming generation. In 1949, there would have been little debate that this girl was the embodiment of the Free Methodist "Soul".

Just 13 years later there was another group of believers gathered in the deep south, engaging in non-violent resistance at the risk of their lives – not to protest a style of music, but to evoke the necessary "creative" tension to bring the cause of justice to the attention of an entire nation. Which act of protest best captures the Free Methodist "Soul"? Which cause would have engaged the imagination of our Founders?

The answer might be contained in this brief but most profound statement found in the preface to our Book of Discipline – "Free Methodists believe the best way to keep the world from invading the church is for the church to invade the world with redemptive purpose." If only we did.

Abstinence, Status, and Separation, left to themselves, have weighed down the message of holiness. Together they provide a gravitational pull away from healthy community and towards a privatized, isolationist religion. It is precisely at this point that the two pillars – holiness and a Gospel for the poor - are joined together. Allow me to make the transition.

The Second Pillar - Gospel for the Poor

Jim Wallis, in his new book, "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It", offers a provocative review of the last Presidential election. Both political parties went to their corners in the campaign year and raised the flag of moral values. The Republican platform focused on abortion and gay marriage as their "moral issues". The Democratic platform was less defined and they lacked the rallying spiritual component so evident among the

Republicans. They defined their “moral issues” as well - championing the environment as well as issues of inclusion. Neither ticket provided any forceful challenge to the concept of pre-emptive war in Iraq and neither ticket provided any intelligible program to advocate for the poor. They perceived that these positions would not capture the interest of the electorate.⁵ Yet the cause of the poor is the predominant moral value in scripture, just as the loss of thousands of lives to war in Iraq is a legitimate “life” issue.⁶ What is most troubling is that the Republican party banked on having the conservative Christian majority in its corner. They guessed right. Moral and pro-life issues such as advocacy for the poor, caring for the environment, and challenging our nation’s new policy towards war are not the main concern of the conservative Christian majority in America. On the issues of abortion and the sanctity of marriage, we may be on task, but regarding the explicitly Biblical issue of care for the poor, we have lost our soul.

In his 10 page “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, Martin Luther King, Jr. responded to Birmingham clergy who made a public request to call off the civil rights marches in their town. He scribbled these prophetic words about the church in the margins of a newspaper –

“The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.”⁷

The second pillar of our early mission was to “preach” the Gospel to the poor. The founders would not have defined this as charity, but rather as inclusion and engagement on our part towards those whom society has left behind. The rental of pews, though now extinct in practice, still lives in principle. The rental of “pews” was an issue of “access”. The simple design of our places of worship and the insistence of simple yet inspired worship without professional musicians were seen as issues of accessibility to the poor. Our early dress codes and aversion to jewelry had nothing to do with the sin of adornment with bright colors (as was the case just 40 years later), but only so the poor could worship inconspicuously among us. Free Methodists were to serve, worship, and fellowship among the poor. The poor were not to receive alms as a sidelight to the church’s mission, but were to receive preferential care and special sensitivity.⁸ Their accessibility and proximity to the poor clearly meant that they were to eliminate all separation and distinction among their churches. It was not charity that they were to offer, but fellowship, advocacy and justice. It is one thing to be a Good Samaritan. It is another thing altogether to take in a beaten man to become your brother in Christ.

Most of our conversation about ministry to the poor today is confined to charity. This is the best we can do simply because we and our constituency, with our acquired social mobility, have effectively removed ourselves from the margins of

society. Go to any metropolitan area and see churches tripping over each other to keep up with the green edges of suburban sprawl. Review the financial books of our churches and see the growing percentage of our resources given to staff and house our ministries. There are certainly a host of other dynamics behind the data, but what can account for the dramatic increase in spending on staff and facilities among our U.S. churches in the first years of this decade? Compare this trend with our relatively flat membership and convert growth, along with the minimal increase in our world missions giving.⁹

If there is such a pattern, what does it say about us? What does the increase in resources needed to staff and house our U.S. ministry reveal about our “soul”? Does it expose a materialism/consumerism among our people that is indistinct from the unbelieving population? Where is our “separation” from the values of the culture? Does it reflect the quality of our discipleship in helping our people astutely challenge the predominant culture? Do our values and lifestyles stand in any way apart from the world? Have we lost our “soul”?

Robert Lewis, pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock, AR, has built a remarkable tradition of community service and redemptive influence as part of his church’s small group DNA. The church’s philosophy of servant ministry is based on Matthew 5:16. It is a philosophy of engagement –

“In the same way, let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

In a culture that is increasingly cynical about the self-serving motives of the institutional church, Lewis’ call for the Body of Christ to expend its energies and resources to selflessly and genuinely bless the surrounding community is a powerful witness.¹⁰ What the Fellowship Bible Church does goes far beyond the “Conspiracy of Kindness” model of the Cincinnati Vineyard Church. The latter can too easily be a cover for yet another form of marketing – a ploy that is not lost on critics of the church. Instead, “common cause” groups at Fellowship Bible Church are advocating for the poor, starting businesses, creating scholarships, providing housing, and mentoring young people.

Could this be the Free Methodist Soul that we have lost? To love God in transparent humility, with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors *as much* as we love ourselves? Could we become a church that exists not to promote our own cause, ensure our own survival, or market our own distinctiveness? Can we instead become a church that exists solely to bless the world - to bring the preserving salt and light of the Gospel and the “shalom” of justice and peace wherever our people live, work, and play?

This is just one pastor’s rather myopic and hastily constructed opinion. Would it be possible to ever gather Free Methodists across the country, let alone the world, around any semblance of a consensus vision - a common “Soul”? And if such a thing were possible, could we then submit ourselves to the radical transformation necessary to see such a “soul” take shape?

Probably not, but at least you and I are talking about it today. The Spirit comes and goes as it pleases, but what pleases the Spirit is certainly much the same today as it was 145 years ago. Through the careful reading of the scriptures, a thorough study of the lessons of history, and the astute analysis of our time - we may find the main path again.

May the Lord lead us together to a better vision than what any one of us can prescribe here today.

¹ Dr. David L. McKenna, "Timely Heritage, Timeless Hope", address given to the Board of Administration, Indianapolis, IN, October 28, 1997.

² Working Together in the 21st Century, pamphlet published by Free Methodist Communications, 2002

³ Randy Maddox. *Responsible Grace*. (Kingswood, 1994) p 151-152 Maddox goes on to say that such a "dance" conveys a process that takes place over time. Wesley embraced both an eastern as well as a western view of salvation. The eastern view of salvation as a therapeutic transformation. Western understanding of salvation focused more on a legal act of pardon, a momentary transaction. In his later years, Wesley avoided the term "conversion". In his opinion, "God's typical manner of working in all areas of providence and grace was gradual." (p. 152). The controversy of instantaneous sanctification vs. gradual process has been debated for generations. The point here is, when seen in its proper relational context (as opposed to a "static" one) the dynamics of salvation become quite clear.

⁴ This point is also cited by Maddox in the same discussion (Maddox, p. 152) John Wesley, "Father Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection", Q. 29, Works (Jackson), 11:426.

⁵ Jim Wallis. "God's Politics". (Harper, 2005) In 2004, Republicans as well as Democrats voted overwhelmingly according to "moral issues". Same-sex marriage and abortion were the predominant "moral issues" of the conservative vote. In a number of key states, a same-sex constitutional amendment was placed on the ballot – a strategic device that greatly aided the Republican turnout vote. A week after the election, however, a poll conducted by Zogby International found that when "a broader and more specific list of moral issues was presented, the results were quite different. When asked 'Which moral issue most influenced your vote?' 42 percent chose the war in Iraq while 13 percent said abortion, and 9 percent said same-sex marriage. When asked to choose the most urgent moral problem in American culture, 33 percent selected greed and materialism; 31 percent, poverty and economic justice; 16 percent abortion; and 12 percent, same-sex marriage. The 'greatest threat to marriage' was identified as infidelity by 31 percent, rising financial burdens by 25 percent, and same-sex marriage by 22 percent." p. xvii.

⁶ Ibid. pp. xix.

⁷ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail". April 16, 1963 (Taken from www.historicaltextarchive.com, 2003)

⁸ B.T. Roberts. "Free Churches", article in the The Earnest Christian, Vol. 1, No. 1, January, 1860. pp. 6-10

⁹ From the Free Methodist Yearbook (US conferences only):

	2000	2001	2002
Membership*	72,425	71,308	71,225
Attendance	90,303	91,376	94,053
Sen. Pastor	15,517,541	15,642,404	16,096,123
Sen. Housing	6,710,039	6,963,714	7,469,294
Sen Benefits	6,491,554	6,709,625	6,972,061
Other Appt. staff	4,323,356	4,778,250	4,984,941
Staff Housing	2,024,655	2,317,167	2,693,841
Staff Benefits	1,616,248	1,877,204	2,140,720
Cap. Improvement	15,576,060	21,640,926	29,049,741
Total Exp.	\$52,259,453	\$59,929,290	\$69,406,721
**World Missions	3,128,499	3,314,793	3,369,943

Note: The 2003 and 2004 yearbooks revised the categories of their data. The trend from 2000 to 2002, however, shows a 33% increase in spending on staff and capital improvements across the U.S. church. In the same time period, UMC giving increased 7.7% while total membership in the U.S. decreased by 1.7%.

*Membership includes all lay adult, preparatory, junior, and ministerial membership

**World Missions UMC only

¹⁰ Robert Lewis, The Church of Irresistible Influence. (Zondervan, 2001) pp. 63-64