

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

July 5-11, 2020

Sermon Series: The People Called Methodists

Week Four: “Wesley and Church”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, may the transforming power of Your gospel be at work in my life today and always. Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

What makes United Methodism different? While sharing in the fundamental beliefs of broader Christianity, there are certain beliefs of “the people called Methodists” that make us unique.

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

In Methodism, the local church is part of a larger “Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.” Introducing others to Christ, helping believers progress on their spiritual journeys, and helping the helpless are the tasks of the local church.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Acts 20:20-21, 27-28, 35-36 (A group member should read the passages aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What does Paul say he did, both publicly and privately, for the people in Ephesus? (20:20)

Who did Paul testify to in Ephesus? (20:21a)

What did Paul tell the Ephesians they needed to do? (20:21b)

What exactly did Paul proclaim to the Ephesians? (20:27)

What does Paul challenge the Ephesian church leadership to do? (20:28)

What does Paul say we are to work hard to do? (20:35a)

What saying of Jesus does Paul say this lives out? (20:35b)

What did Paul do with the church in Ephesus when he finished his sermon? (20:36)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.

We might wonder what Paul's "not holding anything back" message sounded like!

We might also wonder whether there was a difference in how Paul talked about Jesus publicly versus privately, since he says he did both.

We might question why turning to God and having faith in Jesus requires a change in our hearts and lives.

We might also wonder why Paul makes a point of testifying about this to both Jews and Greeks.

We probably wonder where we can find the "entire plan" or "whole will" of God that Paul speaks of.

We could wonder what exactly it means for particular individuals to be charged with watching over, supervising, or shepherding others.

We might wonder who "the weak" are that Paul says we must work hard to help – are they physically weak, morally weak, spiritually weak, or all of the above?

Finally, we might wonder why Paul felt it so important to kneel down to pray with the Ephesians after he was done speaking to them.

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Acts 18:19-21; Acts 19:1-20:1; Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3; Acts 9:37; Romans 14:1-2; Luke 6:30-31; Luke 22:41

This week's Scriptures are excerpts from what is commonly known as "Paul's Farewell Discourse" to the church in Ephesus – specifically, to the leadership, or elders, of the church. Paul had stopped over in Ephesus on his journey back to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey. He had visited Ephesus twice before – briefly, in Acts 18:19-21, where we see he left Priscilla and Aquila there to build the church, and again, for a longer visit, in Acts 19:1-20:1. Paul knew the Ephesian church leadership quite well, and when he stopped over there on his way back to Jerusalem, he arranged to speak with them about the time he had spent there, but also about what he saw lying ahead in his ministry.

Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, intentionally portrays Paul as the human model of what living like Jesus is supposed to look like. The template for Paul's ministry was Jesus' ministry – so just as Jesus, before His death, taught His disciples by reminding them of what He had done, but also about the difficulties that lay ahead, Paul now does the same with the Ephesian elders.

Paul wants his own life and ministry to serve as an example for the Ephesian church – and us – to follow. In explaining that example, Paul describes four of the basic activities that churches must be engaged in.

In verse 20, Paul says he has “held back nothing that was helpful” to the church in Ephesus. In writing this, Luke affirms what we can see clearly in Paul’s own writing – in the letters from Paul that make up much of the New Testament. We often see words like “open speech,” “boldness in proclamation,” and “speaking frankly” attributed to Paul’s messages. Truly, he “held back nothing” in his preaching! Part of what we are to understand in Paul’s insistence that he held nothing back “in public” or “in private” is that Paul’s message had an absolute consistency to it. Whereas many of the false teachers and philosophers in Paul’s day would be hypocritical, saying one thing publicly but contradicting those teachings in their private activity, Paul proclaimed the same message in public and when he visited house to house. In doing this, he modeled Jesus frequent condemnation of hypocrisy.

Of course, Paul also emphasizes that he behaved this way with both Jews and Greeks. Throughout the stories in Acts of Paul’s missionary work, we see him relentlessly evangelizing both Jews and Greeks (or Gentiles). Again modeling Jesus own message, Paul has emphasized in his message the need for followers of Jesus to “change their hearts and lives” – in other words, to repent. (See Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15, and Luke 13:3 for repentance as the foundation of Jesus’ message.) Through verses 20 and 21 we see Paul encouraging the Ephesians to continue one his fundamental actions – to proclaim the good news about Jesus to everyone, throughout the world, regardless of ethnicity. Evangelism is a primary activity of a vital church.

Jumping forward to verses 27 and 28, we see Paul emphasizing another aspect of Christian life – teaching believers “the entire will of God,” or “the entire plan of God.” There were those in Paul’s day who believed that some knowledge of God was a mystery only to be revealed, and only capable of being understood, by an elite few, a privileged group who was permitted this “inner knowledge.” But Paul insists that he has proclaimed the *entire* plan of God. Nothing is reserved for a privileged few. Discipleship is the journey of personally grasping hold of that plan, and Paul not only affirms the need for believers to continue to learn, but for other persons to take responsibility for overseeing that it happens. The contextual image of shepherds watching over a flock is used to portray the need for vigilance in performing that task – sheep like to wander away! Paul insists it is the Holy Spirit who has appointed these leaders to that very work, helping them to see that it is not merely Paul who is asking them to lead. Rather, it is a divinely appointed role.

Again jumping now to verses 35 and 36 we find two more important functions of the church. First, Paul insists that we must “work hard” to “help the weak/” Again, Paul says that his own actions have demonstrated the model for this – “in everything, I have shown you this.” Elsewhere in Luke’s writing, the word translated here “weak” has meant “physically ill” (see Acts 9:37, for example), but in Paul’s own writing, it usually means those in the church community who are struggling spiritually (see Romans 14:1-2, for example). Most likely, Luke, in quoting Paul’s speech here, intends to communicate both ideas – the church must work hard to help those who are weak in any way, whether that is physical illness, moral laxity, or spiritual sluggishness. You might be surprised to learn that the words of Jesus Paul says to remember, “it is more blessed to give than to receive,” do not actually appear in the Gospels! There is a version of it in an ancient non-biblical writing about Jesus called First Clement, in chapter 2, verse 1. But clearly, the idea does correlate well to Jesus’ overarching message (as in Luke 6:30-31). And finally, Paul falling to his knees in prayer at the end of this final discourse, is again in

parallel to Jesus' own actions in Gethsemane after *his* farewell discourse at the Last Supper (see Luke 22:41).

In his farewell discourse to the church in Ephesus, Paul teaches that evangelism, discipleship, mission, and prayer are critical components of church life. Frequently we see churches emphasizing any one of these at the expense of the others, but the church is not complete without each and every one. We need, both as individuals and as a community, to be taking the gospel into the world, helping people to grow in their faith, working hard to help those who are weak, and always, always, always, turning to God in prayer.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Which function of the church do you feel most affinity with – evangelism, discipleship, mission, or prayer? Do you tend to focus your own faith practices on that function?

Conversely, which function of the church do you recoil against, or which puts you most outside your comfort zone?

How might you broaden the practice of your faith to include participating in all aspects of church life?

Do you “hold back” when you talk about your faith with others?

Do you feel the kind of compulsion to proclaim the gospel that Paul felt, or are you more comfortable letting people find their own truth, whether or not that includes Jesus?

Are you continuing to learn and to discern “the entire plan” or “the entire will” of God?

How do you see the role of “overseers,” “supervisors,” or “shepherds” in the church? Have you ever felt a calling to that kind of leadership role?

How are you “helping the weak”? Which kind of “weak” person do you feel most capable of helping – physically weak, morally weak, or spiritually weak?

Are you actively praying for the church and its leaders?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, we give You thanks for the church. Help us to fulfill our calling to evangelism, discipleship, mission, and prayer. Help us to conform our lives to the model set forth for us by both Jesus and Paul. We pray in the holy name of Christ our Lord, Amen.