

A CHURCH-WIDE STUDY IN THE
ESSENTIALS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

PROFOUNDLY
DISTINCTLY
CHRISTIAN
METHODIST

RYAN BARNETT & JASON VICKERS

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Printed in the United States of America

*Cover and page design by Nate Farro
Page layout by PerfectType, Nashville, Tennessee*

Barnett, Ryan, 1976-

Profoundly Christian, distinctly Methodist : a church-wide study in the essentials of Christian faith / Ryan Barnett & Jason Vickers – Franklin, Tennessee : Seedbed Publishing, ©2025.

pages ; cm.

ISBN: 9798888000953 (paperback)

ISBN: 9798888000984 (DVD)

ISBN: 9798888000960 (epub)

ISBN: 9798888000977 (pdf)

OCLC: 1502210496

1. Methodist Church--Doctrines.
2. Methodist Church--Doctrines--Textbooks.
3. Global Methodist Church--Doctrines.
4. Global Methodist Church--Doctrines--Textbooks.
5. Theology, Doctrinal. I. Title. II. Vickers, Jason E. III. Global Methodist Church.

BX8331.3.B37 2025

230/76

2025934612

SEEDBED PUBLISHING
Franklin, Tennessee
seedbed.com

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PREFACE

Welcome to *Profoundly Christian, Distinctly Methodist*.

You are about to embark on an exciting and essential journey in every Christian life—the initiation into or deepening of discipleship, especially in the area of doctrinal and theological foundations. This work borrows its structure from *A Catechism of Christian Faith and Doctrine for the Global Methodist Church*, a document considered normative for all Global Methodists. (Learn more at seedbed.com/gmccatechism.) That work is an essential companion to this resource. According to the Catechism, the goal of catechesis is “to train initiates to understand, recall, profess and enjoy the church’s essential teachings.” *Profoundly Christian, Distinctly Methodist* will help facilitate that experience for you.

This study is best undertaken in community. Whether that is in a small group, Sunday school class, or with friends over coffee, participants will be most enriched when joining with others during the ten weeks of this endeavor.

It is essential that each participant have their own copy of the text. This will allow each person the opportunity to daily read, reflect, and make notes. These personal observations will help seed the weekly discussions with other participants. Along with the reading, we have a weekly video teaching available to help learners claim a profoundly orthodox faith that is distinctly Methodist.

Not everyone has freckles, but more than one person does. It is their location, pattern, and density on a person that will set them apart and help make them uniquely who they are. Part A of this study examines the profoundly Christian beliefs that are embraced as normative by all orthodox Christians. Part B focuses on the Methodist distinctives of the Global Methodist Church. Note that distinctiveness is not the same thing as uniqueness. For example, the doctrine of entire sanctification, which

we will come to later, is distinctive of the Wesleyan theological tradition. This means that Wesleyans place a special emphasis on the doctrine. It does not mean that Wesleyans are the only Christians who believe in or emphasize entire sanctification. The same holds for all of the doctrines we will be examining in Part B. These distinctives are like freckles on a person. Taken together (and how we order our lives around their practice) they are what make us unique as Methodists!

This book has been written to be read daily over a ten-week period. On Day One of each week, readers will be introduced to the subject and foundational source material that help fill out our understanding of the mysteries of God. Days Two through Four offer theological commentary on the topic. Day Five offers a practical take on why the material you are learning matters and how it applies to our lives today. Day Six is dedicated to Sabbath and prayer. Finally, Day Seven outlines how the group meeting can be shared by participants for maximum impact. On most days, you will be asked to reflect and make notes on what you are learning. During the group meeting, you will have the opportunity to explore each other's thoughts in holy conversation.

In addition to this adult workbook, a suite of materials is available for churches who would like to undertake a catechetical work for their entire congregation. That suite includes sermon outlines and worship resources for the pastor, the adult teaching video, and specific resources for youth and children to participate as well.

It has never been clearer to Global Methodists that what we believe really matters. By taking up this study, you are joining with untold numbers of others who are laying claim to the grand deposit of faith and doctrine that is profoundly Christian and distinctly Methodist.

INTRODUCTION TO THE GLOBAL METHODIST CATECHISM

The word *catechesis* is the English equivalent of the Greek word *κατήχησις*, which simply means “religious instruction by word of mouth.” The practice of catechesis is as old as the church itself. In the book of Acts, we read: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42 NRSV).

The earliest Christians, including those who were baptized at Pentecost, devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. They did not simply decide what to believe for themselves! They listened carefully to what the apostles had to say about Jesus’s death and resurrection and about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (vv. 14–41).

They also devoted themselves to *fellowship* with the apostles and with each other. The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*, which also means “communion.” In the early church, religious instruction, or *catechesis*, was deeply interpersonal. It was also a deeply spiritual experience that involved eating and praying together.

The teaching we have received from the apostles—especially teaching related to the person and work of Jesus Christ—is not simply based on what the disciples perceived with their own eyes or understood with their own minds. Rather, the apostles were dependent upon the revealing and illuminating activity of God. Apart from God’s enabling them to see the truth about Jesus, they would have remained lost in the darkness. The same holds for us.

With gratitude, we believe that the same Holy Spirit who enables us to confess that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) has been at work in the life of the church from day one. The Spirit has given great gifts to the church, including sound doctrine concerning the nature and identity of God, as

well as revealing his saving purposes for human beings. Where do we find this teaching?

The primary source is holy Scripture! The Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures in such a way as to ensure not only their truthfulness but also their effectiveness as a means of grace. The Bible contains all things necessary for salvation. When we approach Scripture in a spirit of humility and prayer, and with an earnest desire to know the truth about God, the Holy Spirit is faithful to meet us there. God is present and at work through holy Scripture. Through it, he brings us to a personal and saving knowledge of himself.

The Bible is a large book that can be challenging to understand. In fact, the Bible contains sixty-six books that span many generations in the life of ancient Israel and the early church. To aid our understanding, the church developed creeds and confessions of faith. These helped people learn and contemplate the truth about God and salvation in preparation for either baptism or confirmation. These were crafted under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and developed as summaries of faith based directly upon Scripture.

The Bible, creeds, and confessions of faith are gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church. They complement and illumine one another. When received in a spirit of humility and prayer, they can make us wise unto salvation.

On the day of Pentecost and the weeks following, the church was adding to its number daily. This means that catechesis often took place *after* baptism. In the centuries that followed, catechesis often occurred as part of preparation for baptism. In the case of infant baptism, catechesis happens between baptism and confirmation.

No matter when it takes place, catechesis is essential for all believers. Whether you are just preparing to be baptized or have been following Christ for many years, it is always a good time to undergo catechesis! We can never be too well-schooled in the most essential beliefs and doctrines of Christianity.

The essential teachings that we will be covering in the weeks ahead are divine mysteries. That is not to say they are beyond comprehension! It simply means that we can never fully exhaust their meaning and significance. The study of God, his character, nature, and purpose for creation is the work of a lifetime, not a single study!

Finally, we cannot stress enough the connection between catechesis, fellowship, worship, and prayer. In the Christian life, head and heart belong together. As Charles Wesley said, we are to “unite the two so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety!”¹ Rightly undertaken, catechesis will culminate in doxology.

Our prayer for you is that this study will leave you “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”²

1. Charles Wesley, “A Prayer for Knowledge and Vital Piety” (1763). Public domain.

2. Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (1747). Public domain.

GOD AND CREATION

PROFOUNDLY CHRISTIAN

God is the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

DISTINCTLY METHODIST

God is love and all he is and all he has done reflects his nature.

1. DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?

There is a God who knows your name. He numbered the hairs on your head. He knows what lies in the deepest recesses of your heart. He even sees you now as you sit down to begin this study.

The first question of the Global Methodist Catechism asks whether you believe in God. Our answer to the question is found in the opening lines of the Nicene Creed:

I believe in God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

This succinct statement declares that God is the maker or source of reality—of all that is, seen and unseen. Whatever exists in time and space owes its life both initially and continually to God. By contrast, God does not owe his life or existence to anything else. In short, creation is totally dependent upon God, but God is in no way dependent upon creation.

Theologians and philosophers sometimes talk about the difference between God and creation using the categories of necessity and contingency. These sound like fancy and abstract terms, but they are easy enough to understand. God’s existence is a “necessary existence.” It is not possible for God to *not exist* because he is eternal! Creation’s existence is contingent upon the will of God. It is possible for creation to not exist because there was a time it didn’t. Both Scripture and the creeds declare that God “created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).

This raises an important series of questions. Why did God create anything at all? Did God have to create? Did God create the world because he lacked something? We will take up these questions in the days ahead. For now, focus on the simple reality that creation is not self-generating or self-sustaining. God breathes it all into being. The whole of creation depends upon God for its life and liveliness. And that includes you!



2. WHO IS GOD?

3. WHAT IS THE MYSTERY OF THE TRINITY?

Talk about jumping into the deep end of the pool! We are barely two days into our journey together and we are contemplating the mystery of the Trinity! And what a mystery it is! But don't let that dissuade or discourage you. The fact that something is a mystery doesn't mean that you should shrug your shoulders and give up trying to comprehend it. God's mysterious identity and nature should inspire us to pray and seek after God to the best of our abilities. The good news is that those who have gone before us have left us many resources to help us contemplate God's nature and triune identity.

Our focus today is on questions 2–3 in the Catechism. While the first question and answer focused our attention on the nature of creation, questions 2–3 focus our attention on the nature and triune identity of God.

The first and arguably most important tool for helping us to think about God's triune identity is the Nicene Creed! Notice that the Creed has a Trinitarian structure. In the opening paragraph, we confess our belief in God "the Father, the Almighty." In paragraphs two and three, we confess our belief in Jesus Christ, who is *homoousios* (of one substance) with the Father, and in the Holy Spirit, who "together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified." The word *homoousios* is the church's way of saying that Jesus is fully God in every way. Similarly, declaring that the Holy Spirit is to be worshipped with the Father and the Son is the church's way of saying that the Spirit is fully divine. After all, worshipping something or someone who is not God would be committing idolatry!

Like the Nicene Creed, the Confession of Faith is among the doctrinal standards of the Global Methodist Church. It, too, is an important resource for thinking about God's triune identity. The answers to questions 2–3 in the Catechism are taken directly from the Confession of Faith, which stresses that God is living and eternal. The triune God is not inert, disinterested, or asleep! He is the living and eternal God who



is so holy that he transcends created reality. Yet his holiness is displayed throughout creation by his presence and power in it!

Think about the places in the Bible where we see God's presence and power. In Exodus 3:5 (NRSV), we read: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." God is so holy that even the places he shows up become holy! The transcendent God is also the one who draws near to us and imparts his holiness to us!

Finally, having described God's nature in terms of eternity and holiness, the Confession of Faith insists that all three persons share in that nature. God is three persons who are "distinct, but inseparable, eternally one in essence and in power." While the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not to be confused with one another, they are also not to be separated from one another. God's nature is one (Deut. 6:4). Thus, there is one God in three persons.

REFLECTION AND PRAYER

- 1.** Read the Scripture verses for questions 2 and 3 in the Catechism. What do they say about God's nature and triune identity? Does one verse stand out? What questions do you have?

- 2.** God is a living and eternal God, holy, three divine persons who are distinct and yet inseparable. As you gaze into the mystery of God's nature, write down what is clear and what is cloudy. How does it feel to know that you only know some of who God is?

- 3.** Take time to reflect on a time you recognized God's presence and power in the world. Briefly describe what that was like and then thank God for it in prayer.

4. HOW IS GOD ALMIGHTY?

Sand on a seashore and stars in the sky. They are beyond our counting yet are not infinite. It turns out that God knows exactly how many grains lie on every beach of every coastline and has already numbered every star—even the ones you can't see.

While questions 2–3 in the Catechism focus our attention on God's nature and triune identity, question 4 emphasizes God's infinite attributes, including power, wisdom, justice, goodness, and love.

At first glance, the divine attributes may appear less mysterious than God's nature and triune identity. Whereas we aren't quite sure how best to conceive of God's being three persons in one nature, we at least have ideas about things like power, wisdom, justice, goodness, and love. We must tread carefully though. When we attribute things like goodness, justice, and love to God, we must avoid simply attributing our preconceived notions about such things to him. Our ideas about what constitutes justice may turn out to be very different from God's justice. We see this dramatically on display in Jesus's parables. Recall the parable of the workers. The workers who showed up early and worked all day were upset when the workers who showed up at the end of the day received the same pay (Matt. 20:1–16). If we are being honest, we can relate! The whole situation seems unjust. Whatever we make of this and similar parables, it is abundantly clear that God's power, justice, love, wisdom, and goodness are not identical to our ideas about such things.

Complicating matters further is God's infinite nature. Did you notice that word in the answer to question 4? It says that God is infinite in his attributes. Moreover, his infinite nature applies to all of his attributes. This means God is not partially loving or partially just. Rather, God is entirely loving, entirely good, entirely wise, and so on. The beloved hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" celebrates this aspect of God's nature when it declares:

GET READY TO JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF DISCIPLESHIP!

Profoundly Christian, Distinctly Methodist is designed to deepen your understanding of our doctrinal and theological foundations. Your journey through this guide will be both personal and communal, where your own observations and questions help seed group discussion.

DAILY: Enrich your spiritual journey with structured readings and reflections over the course of ten weeks.

WEEKLY: Dive into new topics each week, offering theological commentary, practical applications, and group discussion opportunities.

COMMUNITY FOCUSED: Best experienced with others, whether in a small group, discipleship band, Sunday school class, or informal gatherings with friends.

Join the Global Methodist community in laying claim to a faith that is both profoundly Christian and distinctly Methodist. Rooted in *A Catechism of Christian Faith and Doctrine for the Global Methodist Church*, this is more than another study book—it's a transformative experience. Our prayer for you is that this workbook will leave you "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

WEEK 1: GOD AND CREATION

WEEK 2: JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD

WEEK 3: GOD, THE HOLY SPIRIT

WEEK 4: THE CHURCH

WEEK 5: FUTURE HOPE

WEEK 6: THE WORD

WEEK 7: THE SACRAMENTS

WEEK 8: SIN

WEEK 9: GRACE AND JUSTIFICATION

WEEK 10: SANCTIFICATION AND CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

