

Module 5

The Discipline – Basic Principles

Introduction

Organized churches typically have some sort of manual that specifies the beliefs of that denomination as well as its key practices. At one point, the *Manual* of the Pilgrim Church was only three pages or so. The current *Discipline* of the Wesleyan Church is almost 400 pages.

As Dr. Mark Gorveatte suggests in his overview of this module, these documents provide a certain protection for the church in relation to civil governments. For example, the U.S. Constitution makes allowances for churches to have rules that are more restrictive in many ways than the laws of the land. In that sense, official documents like the *Discipline* protect the church legally.

This module is about the “Basic Principles” section of *The Discipline*. These are its chapters 1-5. These contain a section on the history of the church and one on its mission. There is a chapter on “Special Directions” that has its own unique history (chap. 5). The most important section is the Constitution in chapter 4, which includes our Articles of Religion. These provide our core beliefs. We will explore this first section of *The Discipline* in this module.

Background

In his video overview of this module, Dr. Gorveatte divides the *Discipline* into two basic parts (see chap. 3): Constitutional Law and Statutory Law. The Constitutional Law is chapter 4 of *The Discipline*, paragraphs 200-385. **This is the heart of the denomination’s identity.**

It takes a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote of the General Conference followed by a $\frac{2}{3}$ aggregate vote of all the district conferences to change it (and if changes reached a certain level, the international General Conferences would need to get involved too). By the way, an “aggregate vote” means $\frac{2}{3}$ of the *total number* of individual votes, not approval by $\frac{2}{3}$ the total number of *districts* voting.

You may initially be puzzled by some of the language in the Article called “Guides and Helps to Holy Living,” as well as by chapter 5 called “Special Directions.” These two sections in many ways reflect our denomination’s struggle to change over time as we have disagreed with each other on various issues.

The Special Directions section was created by the Pilgrim Church in 1950 because of an ongoing controversy over wedding rings. At every General Conference, the Pilgrims would vote on a resolution to ban *all* rings, which included wedding rings. But many Pilgrims also saw wedding rings as something different from other types of jewelry.

The solution was to create a “Special Rules” section that contained important traditions of the church of this sort. Eventually, rules against going to movies, dancing, and buying on Sunday would be placed in this section of the *Discipline*. What made this move work is that these strong admonitions rather than rules that were binding on the membership. The traditionalists got a statement endorsing their position, but more mainstream Wesleyans were not penalized by these instructions. This maneuvering has proved helpful over the years in navigating “disputable issues” in the church even if it might seem a little strange.

A second curiosity in the “Guides and Helps to Holy Living” section reflects the Wesleyan Church’s ongoing debate on the subject of drinking in moderation. On the one hand, we have a history in the temperance movement of the 1800s, and we strongly supported Prohibition in the 1920s. However, there is a recognition today on the part of most Wesleyans that the Bible does not teach strict abstinence, and this part of our tradition has been a barrier in some of our larger churches.

The position currently worked out is that these Guides declare abstinence to be the ideal of the denomination. However, only ministers and leaders in the church can be penalized if they drink moderately (260). Once again, the denomination has found a way – even if somewhat complicated – to indicate that it strongly values its concerns and traditions while making room for its mission and ministry in ever increasing Christian and world contexts.

Navigating change is always a challenge. On the one hand, since the Bible was inspired to address ancient Israel and the New Testament church, there may be things they could do that we shouldn’t today (e.g., polygamy in the Old Testament). And there may be things that we could do that they couldn’t (e.g., wearing hair veils in worship). In other words, it’s not as simple as simply repeating what they did because their practices may not mean the same thing today.

Inevitably, we get our historical traditions tangled up with what we think the Bible says. We cling to traditions that may not be required biblically and may even be counterproductive to the church’s mission. On the other hand, the church can also be influenced by what is considered acceptable by our surrounding culture and find itself becoming outright unbiblical (as Wesleyans would say many mainstream churches in the United States have).

If you are preparing to be a Wesleyan minister or are an invested non-minister, the future of the church is in your hands. “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

We might make a final note about the Charter of the International Wesleyan Church (Appendix A, paragraphs 6550-6770). The Wesleyan Church wisely recognized several decades ago that the principles of the gospel sometimes play out differently in different cultural contexts at the same time that the core of the gospel remains the same. It also wished to empower Christians around the world with autonomy rather than the church being under the control of North America.

The result is the International Conference of the Wesleyan Church with distinct General Conferences. At present there are three – North America, Philipppians, and the Carribean. There are also several “National Conferences” that are on their way eventually to becoming General Conferences. These include Canada, Australia, Colombia, and Eswatini in Africa.

The Articles of Religion are importantly kept in common among all the General Conferences. If any segment of the church wanted to change some of these essential beliefs, it would not only take a $\frac{2}{3}$ aggregate vote of its own General Conference. It would need a $\frac{2}{3}$ vote of *all* the General Conferences of The Wesleyan Church. The Trinity is here to stay!