

Foundations for my Personal Doctrine as an Ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church
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Many people don't ask what the minister believes before joining a church, and many students don't ask what the campus minister believes before they get active in a college ministry. There are many reasons for why people don't do that, but I'm not writing this for those people. I'm writing this for those who want to know—because they want to be led by a like-minded pastor, because there are specific issues that they care so strongly about that nothing else matters, or maybe because they want to be challenged by thoughtful theology that is different from what they heard growing up.

You should know that I don't believe you should try to find a pastor who believes *everything* that you believe. How would you ever expect to grow spiritually if everything you already believed was merely parroted back to you? Nevertheless, I understand that some things are very important to some people, so I want to express what is very important to me. This is not intended to be a systematic theology or a comprehensive document over everything I believe, but more of an annotation that undergirds the rest of my theological understanding.

[Note: For those unfamiliar with the *Book of Discipline*, it is the United Methodist's book of church law, doctrine, and polity, and it is the definitive will of the UMC.]

First and foremost, I believe in Scriptural authority. Scripture is the measuring rod by which all Christian behavior and doctrine should be compared.

As an ordained elder in the UMC, there are doctrinal standards that I'm required to accept to be and to remain ordained. I freely affirmed these during my ordination process and continue to affirm them. These are Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church (<https://www.umc.org/en/content/articles-of-religion>), The Confession of Faith (<https://www.umc.org/en/content/confession-of-faith>), John Wesley's Standard Sermons (<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/topics/history/john-wesley-sermons>), and John Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament (<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible>).

I believe in the plain meaning of the *Articles* and *Confession*. For example, I do not interpret the Trinity as symbolic poetry, and I believe Jesus was literally raised from the dead in the same body in which he died. I am Wesleyan in my theology. For example, I believe that using Scripture (as primary), tradition, reason, and experience are helpful ways of interpreting Christian life and discipleship. I use the term "experience" similarly to John Wesley by defining it as the experience of God's acts of salvation through Jesus in my personal life, not as some have popularly interpreted it (as one's own personal filter through which they see and experience the world).

In addition, I believe other important documents accurately reflect and interpret Scripture's basic Christian tenets, namely the historic creeds. Over the last two to three decades, there has been much discussion over whether the UMC is a creedal church or not. I believe the UMC is technically not a creedal church because there is no absolute requirement to affirm any particular creed before membership is accepted. If you are baptized or ordained the UMC, you were probably required to recite the Apostles' Creed because it is in our worship

liturgy. However, if you transfer your membership from another Christian denomination and have already been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, those affirmations are not required. The only place we find a liturgy for receiving members into the UMC is nested in the baptismal covenant where the Apostles' Creed is located. However, the Apostles' Creed is not a part of the reception questions to become a member.

However, the statements in the *Book of Discipline* and the vital place of creeds in our liturgy and worship support their central nature to the UMC's theological identity. It is interesting to also note that, with the possible exception of "the communion of saints," every part of the Apostle's Creed is affirmed in the Articles of Religion, mostly even in the same order of appearance. The "communion of saints" is affirmed in paragraph 102 under "Basic Christian Beliefs," so that part of the creed is not omitted from the UM theological framework.

It is worth mentioning that the *Articles* and *Confession* of the UMC are certainly "creedal" in nature, even if they are not considered to be actual creeds. They fulfill the same function as a creed. The *Book of Discipline* states that the function of the historic creeds is to "preserve the integrity of the church's witness, set boundaries for acceptable Christian doctrine, and proclaim the basic elements of the enduring Christian message." Because our church law prohibits any modification of the *Articles* and *Confession* of the United Methodist Church, it is clear their purpose is to permanently preserve, set boundaries, and proclaim the theology of the UMC in the same way the historic creeds do for the ecumenical church.

A fuller context of paragraph 102 from the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* states:

*"Faced with diverse interpretations of the apostolic message, leaders of the early church sought to specify the core of Christian belief in order to ensure the soundness of Christian teaching. The determination of the canon of Christian Scripture and the adoption of ecumenical creeds such as the formulations of **Nicaea** and **Chalcedon** were of central importance to this consensual process. Such creeds helped preserve the integrity of the church's witness, set boundaries for acceptable Christian doctrine, and proclaim the basic elements of the enduring Christian message. These statements of faith, along with the **Apostles' Creed**, contain the most prominent features of our ecumenical heritage."* [emphasis added]

These ecumenical creeds have always been affirmed by the Methodist Church, even though they are not a part of the church's doctrinal standards. I was required to recite the Apostles' Creed during my baptism in October of 1978, and it was included in my ordination services as a deacon in 1995 and as an elder in 1998. The Apostles' Creed is on page 881 in the United Methodist Hymnal, the Nicene Creed on page 880, and I believe both are faithful expressions of biblical theology. Again, I believe in the plain meaning of these creeds and do not believe these to be poems to be symbolically interpreted. These are definitions of the faith that express the results of hundreds of years of debate on vital theological topics. Finally, I affirm the Chalcedonian Creed as I would the other two, and as is affirmed in paragraph 102 in the *Book of Discipline*.