

Wesleyan Ecclesiology: Methodism as a Means of Grace  
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At the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in 1962, Albert Outler raised a few eyebrows with his lecture, “Do Methodists have a Doctrine of the Church?” The audience was not expecting the esteemed speaker to answer his own question with the hedging comment, “The answer ‘yes’ says too much; ‘no’ says too little. ‘In a manner of speaking,’ which is more nearly accurate than the other two, seems nevertheless equivocal.”<sup>1</sup> But the audience on that occasion and two generations of Methodists since that day, have been intrigued and challenged by his and various other attempts to outline the manner in which Methodists understand themselves as a church.

Outler tried to outline what he called “the classical Methodist or Wesleyan ecclesiology” in four categories: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, focusing on the acts of the gathered community of faith. This direction reached its logical conclusion in a 1987 consultation in Switzerland with the topic, “The Church is Mission.” There is a sense in which the Wesleyan movement in the eighteenth century was understood primarily as a particular mission within the structure of the Church of England. But the question remains whether Methodism as a church itself has a clearly understood separate ecclesiological identity.

The question was raised again forty years later at the Oxford Institute of 2002 by your own dean, Dr. Thaarup, in a lecture on “The Praxis of Wesleyan Ecclesiology and the Effectiveness of the Methodist Mission in Scandinavia.” He contrasted the background of the Wesleyan movement in England with the subsequent development of the M. E. Church in America, and then asked some probing questions about the nature of Methodism in Sweden. His paper looks at three defining elements of Methodism: its shape as a church, its nature as a small group movement, its role as a mission to the world. Part of the problem, of course, is that Swedish Methodism is a derivative of the nineteenth-century American scene but planted in a context more similar to that of eighteenth-century Great Britain. The basic difference is the presence of an established church in Great Britain, which changes the social and ecclesiastical context and relationships.<sup>2</sup>

During my teenage years, my father was pastor of the former “First Swedish M.E. Church” of Jamestown, N.Y., which historically has a largely Swedish population. Our Methodist Church sat on a street corner one block away from the huge First Lutheran Church, part of the Augustana Synod, which was Scandinavian (the church in which my wife was raised). As you might guess, many of our Methodist members were Swedish. We had a Confirmation Class, just like the Lutherans. We had a Juletta Service just like the Lutherans. We occasionally sang hymns in Swedish, just like the Lutherans. Karen and I sang in the A’ cappella choir in high school, which was directed by the Lutheran choir director, and we sang a lot of religious works. That is as close as I have ever lived to an established religion on the

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<sup>1</sup> Dow Kirkpatrick, ed., *The Doctrine of the Church* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 11.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oxford-institute.org/pdfs/WorkingGroup8/pap8thaarup.pdf>

American scene. But that situation does not come close to the actual situation in England, or Sweden, or Austria, or Spain, or many other places in the world which have a religion that is politically or practically established.

The history of Methodism in America is not uniform, of course, and to characterize it as such is to miss the very real influence of regionalism on the North American culture. The transition within Methodism from **movement** to **church**, from society to congregation, has been as variegated as the different regional environments into which the church has moved, just as is the case within the spread of the Wesleyan movement around the globe. In every case, however, one common element in the transition from movement to church (often incomplete, one might add), is the tension, if not confusion, between a theological view of what the church **is** and a functional view of what the church **does**. One would assume that the theological view would have primacy, would be the grounding for action. There is a certain awkwardness in trying to move from function to principle, from activity to theological rationale. Contrary to appearances, however, I would suggest that in our heritage, there actually is a theological rationale that lies behind the functional view of the Methodist movement in the eighteenth century.

My purpose today, then, is to suggest a Wesleyan view of the church and of Methodism that helps bring closer together the view of what the church is and does, but focusing on the “is”: Methodism as a means of grace.

First we have to say a few words about the traditional understanding of “church.” Then a few definitional comments about “Methodism.” And finally, an examination of the meaning of “grace” and “means of grace.”

## CHURCH

It is certainly true that Wesley spent very little time on the subject of ecclesiology, for (as he constantly reiterated) he was not interested in setting up a new church. He grew up in a traditional country parish church; he attended Christ Church Cathedral and St. Mary’s University Church at Oxford; he went to St. Paul’s Cathedral when he was in London—all of which were very good examples of the English understanding of what the church was like. Wesley considered himself a faithful Church of England man until the day he died. In his mind, Methodism had loftier goal. As he explained it, God raised up the Methodist preachers to reform the nation, especially the Church, and spread scriptural holiness across the land. The goal was to reform and renew the given institutions, not to replace them.

Wesley therefore generally accepted most of the Anglican tradition as the framework for his own thinking about the church. When talking about the nature of the church, he was often inclined to quote Article XIX, “Of the Church,” from the Anglican XXXIX Articles:

The visible Church of Christ is a **congregation** of *faithful men* in the which the *pure word* of God is preached and the **sacraments** be *duly ministered* according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.<sup>3</sup>

This definition combines, to some extent, a view of what the Church is with what the Church does.

IS—a congregation of faithful people

DOES—the true Word is preached, and the Sacraments are duly administered

This definition, from the XXXIX Articles of Religion, provides the traditional principles for Wesley's adopted ecclesiology. But, as we saw in this morning's lecture, Wesley's principles do not always correlate precisely with his practice. One can almost always be assured that his praxis will take into account many contemporary cultural contextual conditions not necessarily anticipated by the framers of particular standards of doctrine, such as the XXXIX Articles. He always managed to stretch, emphasize, heighten those elements of the matter that he felt needed special implementation to meet specific needs of the time.

And I would suggest that determining one's ecclesiology bears a methodological similarity to determining one's ethical perspective: that what one does in practice reveals what one actually holds in theory. Just as doing is related to being (what one does derives from who one is), so the church's actions derive from what the church considers itself to be.

The traditional Protestant doctrine of the church, then, is somewhat limited in its conception of itself as a congregation of faithful who worship together (hear the Word and participate in the Sacrament). Most churches consider themselves as more than just a worshiping community, though what they do may grow out of their common devotional practice, even if not consciously. But even within this somewhat minimalist and bare definition of the church, Wesley seems to have a slightly variant understanding. While Article XIX talks about the visible church as a congregation of the faithful, in practice Wesley seems to have taken that view a bit further and considered the **true** church as the **fellowship of believers**, a slightly more radical ecclesiology. Granted, when Wesley adapted the XXXIX Articles for the establishment of a Methodist Church in America, he replicated Article XIX, Of the Church, nearly verbatim.<sup>4</sup> But the more radical view is implied in much of Wesley's practice within Methodism and is actually found now in Article V of the United Methodist Confession of Faith (dating from 1960 in the EUB tradition): "We believe the Christian Church is the **community** of all *true believers* under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive **fellowship**. . . ."<sup>5</sup> This view seems to lean toward a more sectarian view of the church (such as is found among the Mennonites and Amish) than the more catholic Anglican or Lutheran view. To have these two definitions side by side in our Book of Discipline—in the Articles of Religion and in the Confession of

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<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Wright and Gill, 1767), un. (Z1v-Z2r).

<sup>4</sup> See Article XIII of the Articles of Religion, in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: UMPH, 2000), 62.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

Faith—illustrates some of the present-day ecclesiological confusion and theological apathy in our denomination.

But before leaving the Anglican/Methodist definition, let us ask what “faithful” meant to Wesley—the congregation of faithful people. I recently spent a sabbatical leave trying to figure out the nature of “faithfulness,” a term that we use frequently but seldom define. One obviously can understand what it means to be faithful to one’s spouse, but what does it mean to be faithful within or to one’s religious tradition? It obviously means more than not leaving it, in the negative sense, and more than just going to services, in a more positive sense. To assume that the phrase “faithful people” is equivalent to “true believers” (as found in the Confession), presents a much more sectarian view of religion, to which Wesley was opposed, in spite of the fact that he constantly made reference to the idea of “real Christians” as distinguished from “almost Christians” (a sometimes confusing distinction on which Wesley himself changes positions). Wesley comes very close to identifying faithful in a very literal sense: people who are full of faith. He refers to “faithful men” as “men endued with living faith,” or “holy believers.” In this sense, Wesley sees no apparent tension between an understanding of the church as the congregation of faithful, or as the fellowship of believers, regardless of whether we see important differences in the two definitions.

Some of Wesley’s lack of concern for precise definition on these matters can be explained by a careful examination of his conception of the nature and design of Methodism.

## METHODISM

The real tension in the eighteenth century was manifest in the way the church lived out its ecclesiology. In order to affirm one’s acceptance of membership in the Church of England, one had to subscribe the XXXIX Articles as the list of their own beliefs. One could not vote, attend university, hold public office, or generally participate fully in the civic life of the nation without subscribing the Articles. But Wesley had no subsidiary list of beliefs that were required of Methodists in order to join the movement. All that people had to profess, in order to join a Methodist society, was a “desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.”<sup>6</sup>

This simple desire was all that was required to join; but the requirements to keep one’s membership in the Methodist society were a bit more complicated. Members must exhibit their desire for salvation by following three rules (the “General Rules”): avoid evil in every kind, do good of every possible sort to all people, and attend upon all the ordinances of God—that is, use the means of grace whenever possible.<sup>7</sup> During the early years of Methodism, Wesley was adamant in his assertion that true religion entailed more than being a good person, avoiding evil, and going to Church, etc. But he never denied that these represented the minimal expectations of a person aspiring to be a Christian. True

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<sup>6</sup> “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” in *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 9:79.

<sup>7</sup> “The Nature, Design, and General Rules” lists examples of the ordinances of God: “the public worship of God; the ministry of the Word, either read or expounded; the Supper of the Lord; family and private prayer; searching the Scriptures; and fasting, or abstinence.” *Ibid.*, 73.

religion might entail more than simply attending to the ordinances of God, but it cannot exist without that. (Just as he said that he was “a man of one book,” yet later argued that one could not be a good preacher and read only the Bible).<sup>8</sup>

These requirements for joining and maintaining one’s Methodist status do not imply a doctrinal test but rather an eschatological focus with present implications. That is to say, Methodism had a basic soteriological intent with specific expectations of the believer, including one’s constant attention to using the means of grace. This soteriological focus was spelled out clearly by Wesley’s statement in the Large Minutes of 1763, in answer to the question, “What was the purpose of God in raising up the Methodist preachers?” (Notice that the attention is focused on the preachers here.) The answer is well known and often repeated by Methodists in every cultural context: “to reform the nation, especially the Church; and spread scriptural holiness across the land.”

This design presents an ambitious goal—reforming the nation and the Church. And it presents a very specific method—spreading scriptural holiness. This task is the primary responsibility of the Methodist preachers. In another place, Wesley presents the same focus in different terms. Listing his rules for the preachers in 1745, he says, “You have nothing to do but to save souls, Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those who want [i.e., need] you, but to those who want you most.”<sup>9</sup> Wesley spent a great deal of time focusing the work of the leadership of Methodism into what he considered the most efficient and effective possible organization to meet its soteriological goals.

One of the issues that became apparent in this organization was the nature and role of the preachers. In his sermon on “Prophets and Priests,” or the nature of ministry in the church, Wesley makes it clear that the Methodist preachers do not displace the ordained clergy of the Church of England.<sup>10</sup> Sacramental leadership requires ordination, and the Methodist preachers under Wesley did not have the educational certification required for the ordained priesthood in the Church. He thought they were certainly qualified, though not certified—his intent for and training of them was that they be “learned” in divinity. A well-furnished mind was one of Wesley’s expectations for his preachers.

Prophetic ministry, however, had somewhat different requirements. The questions asked of those who felt they were called by the Holy Spirit to be Methodist preachers reveals Wesley’s expectations rather succinctly: do they have the gifts, grace, and fruits necessary for the work?<sup>11</sup> Charles and John had some differences of opinion as to which of these requirements held priority over the others. When in doubt, John preferred that a preacher exhibit the grace of God in his life, while Charles was much more concerned about the talents and gifts of the prospective preacher. Both were convinced that the person

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<sup>8</sup> See preface to his *Sermons on Several Occasions* for the earlier comment (*Works*, 1:105), and the “Large Minutes” for the latter (*Minutes of the Methodist Conferences* [London: Mason, 1862], 1:518-19).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:28.

<sup>10</sup> Sermon 121, in *Works*, 4:75-84.

<sup>11</sup> See Wesley’s understanding of the nature and role of ministry in the Church of England in his “Address to the Clergy,” which reflects his expectations and requirements for Methodist preachers. See also Richard Heitzenrater, “‘Take Thou Authority’: Ministerial Leadership in the Wesleyan Heritage,” [http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/heitzenrater\\_paper6\\_26.pdf](http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/heitzenrater_paper6_26.pdf)

should be able to exhibit the fruits of their calling in the lives of persons who had been changed by God working through their various ministries.

This view of ministry represents a more radical, spiritual view than that of the Church of England. Again, the Wesleyan view is quite ably stated in our definition of the church in the Confession of Faith: it is the fellowship of believers in which the Word is **preached by persons called of God**. This specific reference to the movement of God's Spirit in the life of the believer, calling them to a vocation of preaching, is an essential part of a Wesleyan ecclesiology. And when Wesley talks about the role of the Holy Spirit in this process, and asks if these persons have exhibited the grace of God in their lives, he is calling attention to the most basic element of his ecclesiology, a focus on God's **grace**—as we have already seen in the expectation that the members use the means of God's grace at every opportunity.

We should remember at this point that Wesley's expectations for Methodism were not separate from his hopes for the Church of England. He was simply trying to help the Church fulfill its role and mission in the world. We can see this clearly in the basic point of his treatise, *The Character of a Methodist*.<sup>12</sup> He raises the question, what is the defining mark of a Methodist? (i.e., what is it that sets Methodists apart?). He then runs through several obvious possibilities: their view of the Trinity? Their view of Scripture? Their view of Jesus? Their view of worship? Of course, none of these things sets the Methodist apart from other Christians. Then comes the answer to his own question. The Methodist is one who loves God and loves his neighbor. Okay, he says, anticipating the reaction of the reader—but aren't these the normal expectations of all Christians? Why yes, he says, you have it right. And these are the things that the Methodists actually do: love God and love their neighbor. What he is saying is that the genuine Methodist is simply a real Christian—he obeys the Great Commandment, by loving God and neighbor. Methodists actually do it.

Now we should remind ourselves that love of God and love of neighbor is the heart of what Wesley calls "holiness." So that by defining the Methodist as one who loves God and neighbor, and the Methodist preacher as one who spreads scriptural holiness across the land, Wesley is saying that Methodism is simply trying to fulfill its role in renewing the Church in light of its basic intent. For Wesley, holiness was the heart of religion itself. As you know, he constantly equated happiness, or the goal of our creation, with holiness, and defined holiness as love of God and neighbor. In describing the "three grand doctrines" of Methodism, he described repentance as the porch of religion, faith as the door of religion, and holiness as "religion itself."

Love of God and love of neighbor become evident in the life of the church through two basic avenues: Love of God through works of piety (worship, devotion) and love of neighbor through works of mercy (social concern). These are not to be understood as simply activities of individual Christians. Wesley recognized no solitary religion, that is to say no solitary holiness. Methodism is sometimes misunderstood as maintaining a focus on individual piety or individual holiness. But this is not Wesleyan. Wesley coined the term "social holiness" in order to counteract this misunderstanding of religion as simply individual piety. "Solitary religion," he says, "is not to be found [in the Gospel of Christ]. 'Holy solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows

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<sup>12</sup> *Works*, 9:32-46.

of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness. ‘Faith working by love’ is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. ‘This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God [should] love his brother also;’ and that we manifest our love ‘by doing good unto all men, especially to them that are of the household of faith.’”<sup>13</sup> (This statement is a very good summary of Wesley’s ecclesiology.)

Wesley was also opposed to another view that is common among Protestants today. He despised what were called “gospel sermons” and the “gospel preachers” who preached them: “Let but a pert, self-sufficient animal that has neither sense nor grace, bawl out something about Christ, or his blood, or justification by faith, and his hearers cry out, ‘What a fine gospel sermon!’ Surely the Methodists have not so learned Christ. We know no gospel without salvation from sin.”<sup>14</sup> He goes on to say that preaching of the gospel must be accompanied by preaching the law—the expectation that the Christian obey the will of God.<sup>15</sup> Christ came not to overcome the law, but that the law might be fulfilled by him. Grace does not do away with the law, but helps us to fulfill the expectations of God. Every command of God is a covered promise.<sup>16</sup> If God asks us to do something, God will help us fulfill that command. So when Christ says, “Be ye perfect,” that is a promise that God will help us become perfectly loving.

## GRACE

When we say “grace,” what are we actually talking about. We use the term with great facility but with little actual understanding. It is often used in such a way as to imply some gift that God presents us to help cure problems or help us through hard times, such as medicine or a health diet supplement. But grace is not a substance, a thing. Grace is relational—it is God’s relationship with us, his activity in our lives, grounded in his loving attributes that are directed toward us. Wesley puts it very succinctly: grace “means that power of God the Holy Ghost which ‘worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.’”<sup>17</sup>

Grace is God’s presence (that is to say, power) active in our lives. God’s presence is always experienced (felt)<sup>18</sup> as power of some sort or other—not necessarily the ways in which we usually think of “power”—the exhibitions of might and glory and strength that humans equate with things powerful. But think also of other ways that power is evident—the powerful expressions of soft music in the final movement of Faure’s Requiem, the power of a mother’s hushed lullaby as she rocks her baby quietly in her arms. God’s power can be experienced in a myriad of ways.

If we understand God’s grace in this way, it helps us understand Wesley’s soteriology more clearly as a theology of grace, as traditionally taught. God’s presence/power enlightens us at the

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<sup>13</sup> Preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: 1739), par. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Mary Bishop, Oct. 18, 1778.

<sup>15</sup> See his two sermons. 35 and 36, on “The Law Established by Faith” in *Works*, 2:20-43.

<sup>16</sup> Sermon 25, “Sermon on the Mount, V,” in *Works*, 1:554-55.

<sup>17</sup> Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” in *Works*, 1:309.

<sup>18</sup> See Wesley’s letter to his mother in 1725, where he expresses a conviction that if one is forgiven of sins by God, one must surely sense or feel it.

beginning (prevenient grace); God's presence/power judges our sinfulness (convicting grace); God's presence/power forgives our sins (justifying grace); God's presence/power empowers us (sanctifying grace). But these are not "four graces" or four different kinds of things. All of these are part of one reality—the grace of God, the power/presence of God working in our lives, to inform, convict, liberate, and strengthen us.

There are many other ways that we also experience the grace or presence/power of God in our lives: redeeming, assuring, comforting, sustaining, directing, perfecting us. We can also see how Wesley would say that we can only have faith through the grace or presence of God, which leads us into a sure trust and confidence and provides the evidence of things not seen, the assurance of which Wesley calls, "the witness of the Spirit with our spirit." This witness of the Spirit is yet another manifestation of God's presence/power (grace) in our experience.

## MEANS OF GRACE

When we ask, what are the means by which we experience God in our lives, Wesley has two main categories: instituted means and prudential means. The instituted means are those traditional works of piety instituted by Christ and the church through which we are brought into the presence of God: the Lord's Supper, fasting, prayer (and Wesley lists "religious conversation" in this group). These are the experiences that most Christians consider when they think of the "means of grace." But there are many more experiences through which we come into the presence of God, and Wesley refers to these as "prudential" means of grace, including those works of mercy through which we can experience the power of God in our lives, as Christians, as Methodists, as preachers, and as leaders. Wesley lists a few examples of these prudential means of grace:

As Christians, following the arts of holy living (by rule, to grow in grace)

As Methodists, attending class and band meetings regularly

As preachers, meeting every society, leaders, and bands

As Assistants, executing every part of your office

Wesley goes on to explain: "Some means result in no fruit, but some means always result in fruit: watching, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, **exercise of the presence of God**" (another way of expressing the reality of experiencing the power of God, grace, in our lives).<sup>19</sup>

To these examples of prudential means of grace, we could add many other ways that people experience the presence and power of God: studying, preaching, teaching, singing, visiting the sick, the poor, the prisoners, and the elderly. Wesley explained the importance of understanding this aspect of Christian living as a means of grace very clearly to Miss March in 1776. She was a well-to-do woman whose upper class prejudices led her to be hesitant about actually visiting the poor, instead of simply sending them food, clothes, or money. She would much rather spend her time in improving her mind, which Wesley generally would not discourage. But he saw an opportunity for her to grow in grace in new

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<sup>19</sup> *Minutes*, 1:548-57.

ways. He advised Miss March to value improving her knowledge, but that is nothing compared to love.<sup>20</sup> He writes to her rather forcefully:

Aim at love and you will not stop at the threshold of perfection. There are many blessings in life, but how do you improve them to the glory of God? And are you willing to know? Then I will tell you how. Go and see the poor and such in their own poor little hovels. Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off the gentlewoman. You bear a higher character.”<sup>21</sup>

Christ will go with you. Such visiting will be a means of grace to you as well as to them, for Christ will go with you to them. The presence/power of God will become known in your experience.

Methodism is designed by Wesley to help people experience the presence of God in their lives in many different ways. Both the organization and the program of their mission is designed with this purpose in mind. The organization of small groups in the Methodist societies, the classes and various kinds of bands, were designed to encourage prayer, bible study, confession, and other works of piety to supplement the instituted means of grace found in the Church (the Sacraments). The activities of the Methodist societies also promote the prudential means of grace, seen in preaching, studying, helping the poor, visiting the sick, etc.

When we say that the Methodists helped the poor, we must remember that about two-thirds of the Methodists themselves were poor, about the same percentage as in British society as a whole. So the Methodists had a major task simply in taking care of the poor in their own societies. The one fact that is not often noticed is that about 4 percent of the members of the Methodist societies were in the highest economic level of society as a whole—namely, the rich. This percentage represents about twice as high a proportion as found in society in general. So that when Wesley talks about collecting food, money, or clothing for the poor, he is talking about asking those of the Methodists who had the means of providing these materials if they would give of their means to those who could not afford them. When he went “begging” on the streets, it meant that he was going to the homes of the rich in the society to help the poor. And his well known rule as to money—earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can—was applied in such a way that anyone was responsible for helping anyone else who was worse off than they, no matter how rich or poor they were. This approach was a way to express a communal approach to social problems, both within the Methodist societies and in the larger society.<sup>22</sup>

The list of activities that Wesley organized shows that these are not just individual efforts. They include a whole program of institutional programs: medical clinics, loan programs, schools for children, subsidized housing for widows and orphans. These are community works of mercy, organized by Methodists, first for their own members but also for other people in the larger society of the time. In this

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<sup>20</sup> See Wesley’s comment, “Knowledge without love is but learned ignorance.”

<sup>21</sup> See Wesley’s letter to Miss March, June 9, 1775.

<sup>22</sup> For more on these activities, see Heitzenrater, *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2002), 15-38.

very real way, Wesley's view of holiness, love of God and love of neighbor, works of piety and works of mercy, using the means of grace, becomes embodied in Methodism, which he views as the place where the Church can experience the grace, presence, power of God in ways that represent genuine Christianity in its organized form—the Church. Thus, Methodism itself became a means of grace, a religious community in which people could experience the power and presence of God's love, the part of the Church that was experiencing what the Church was intended to be.

We could give other examples of ways that people experience God's presence and power through means that are not traditionally understood as "instituted" means, but must surely be understood as "prudential" means of grace. Listen to a great performance of Handel's *Messiah*, with such magnificent sections as the soprano solo, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth." You will find it difficult not to be moved by the presence of God. My wife and I sing in the 140-voice University Chapel Choir, and every year we sing the *Messiah* three times. A choir member told me an incident that happened a few years back on the Friday evening of *Messiah* weekend. A young Marine from Camp Lejeune, a few miles east of us, was visiting a friend on campus, who talked him into going to the performance—the soldier said he could only stay until eight o'clock, since he had to catch a bus back to the base. But once the performance started, he was captured by the power of the music and the message, and sitting there in the pew, was transformed by the power of God's loving presence and became a Christian. He subsequently went to Divinity School and is now a Methodist minister in Florida. He discovered in the experience that God can work through music—music can be a means of grace—and God's presence and power can change a person in such a circumstance.

Wesley often speaks of the reality of grace in their midst of the Methodist activities, recording often in his Journal, "and God was with us." Methodism was and can be a means of reforming and renewing the Church, not just by what we decide to do, but by our becoming channels of God's grace and responding to God's presence and power in us and in the world. Wesley saw Methodism itself as a means by which God's presence could become more vital in the lives of individuals, in the fellowship of believers, in the Church, and in the Nation or the world

Wesley himself, more than anyone I know, tried to live constantly in the presence and power of God, attending always to the ordinances of God, understood as widely as possible. This approach is evident in the question he asked himself every hour—have I said or done anything without a present or previous perception of its direct or remote tendency to the glory of God? His constant attempt to remain open to the grace of God in the life of the church can be seen in his encouraging people to "exercise the presence of God." And Methodism, as the extended shadow of Wesley himself, can be seen as a movement organized to be a collective means of grace to members and to the world.

Wesley would be one to admit that he (or we) might not always feel the constant presence of God, especially when we become solitary or prideful in our religious experience. But he also was aware that even in those moments, we remain a member of the community of faith and that God does not abandon us.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See his letter of June 224, 1766, to Charles: "This is the mystery..."

At end of life, we see his final testimony to the reality of grace at the heart of the Christian life in the community of faith. His lifelong spiritual pilgrimage in the presence of God lies behind his witness to the reality and priority of God's grace, encapsulated by his last words,

“The best of all is, God is with us.”

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