

The Meaning of Wesley's General Rules; An Interpretation

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REFLECTIONS ON A METHODIST ECCLESIOLOGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

John Wesley was interested in a "Christianity according to the Scriptures." To that end he produced the sermon "Scriptural Christianity."¹ The question concerning the validity of a thought, an admonition or a teaching was always answered by Wesley in such a way that was authenticated according to the Scriptures. Scripture is the final court of appeal.

In the introduction to his fifty-three doctrinal sermons, Wesley beautifully described the purpose of an exposition of Scripture:

I have accordingly set down in the following sermons what I find in the Bible concerning the way to heaven with a view to distinguish this way of God from all those which are the inventions of men. I have endeavored to describe the true, the scriptural, experimental religion, so as to omit nothing which is a real part thereof, and to add nothing thereto which is not. And herein it is more especially my desire, first, to guard those who are just setting their faces toward heaven (and who, having little acquaintance with the things of God, are the more liable to be turned out of the way), from formality, from mere outside religion, which has almost driven heart-religion out of the world; and, secondly, so warn those who know the religion of the heart, the faith which worketh by love, lest at any time they make void the law through faith, and so fall back into the snare of the devil.²

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In emphasizing conformity with Scripture, he relied upon the doctrinal norm of his church which stands as Article V in the Articles of Religion. "Concerning the Sufficiency of Holy Scripture for our Salvation," "Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation, so that whatever is not contained within it or cannot be proved by it should not be required of anyone as an article of faith or be considered necessary for salvation."³ What Wesley says in the context of his sermons is just as applicable for the concise, terse text of the General Rules. They are intended to help us stay on the road to heaven, to learn to distinguish clearly the way of God from all human devices, especially from a merely external religiosity. They are also intended that we might grasp with understanding and with concrete experience that living faith which is active in love and is precisely the fulfillment of the law (Gal 5:6 and Rom 13:10).

What assertions concerning the church are contained in the General Rules? We turn next to the definition of the church that is contained in Article 13 of the Articles of Religion, that has in its entirety been derived from Article 19 of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England. It reads as follows: "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance." In this terse sentence the objective aspect of the being of the church is described. It lives because God creates it through His living Word and His sacrament and it is preserved through the very same influences. In the General Rules Wesley emphasizes the response of humans. It can be stated concisely that the church is a *fellowship of the responders*. In the terminology of the Articles, this aspect would be expressed as the "fellowship of the faithful." They answer in the doing of good, in the avoidance of evil and in the regular use of the means of grace. Wesley makes an interesting comment upon Acts 5:11 in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*. This verse states, "And a great fear came upon the entire church [*ekklesia*, translated *Gemeinde* by Luther] and upon all who heard this." Wesley's notation states:

The church--this is the first time it is mentioned. And here is a native specimen of a New Testament church; which is, a company of men, called by the gospel, grafted into Christ by baptism, animated by love, united by all kind of fellowship, and disciplined by the death of Ananias and Sapphira.⁴

The ideas of fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*) and discipline that are expressed here are of major significance for the conception of the church. In both ideas the human response to God's actions is expressed in a distinct manner.

First, the term "church" is understood in the General Rules as an *open church*. The church is clearly seen in such a way that it does not understand itself as a fellowship of believers which has no place for seekers. A fullblown conversion is not expected as a condition for participation in the association, nor is required the consent to an explicit confession, to a specific form of worship or to a definite understanding of baptism. The determinative sentence

reads "There is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these societies--a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins." In the next place, this means that persons who are seeking and are only able to attain a vague notion of faith are still welcome. The statement about desiring "to flee the wrath to come" is drawn from John the Baptist's sermon on repentance (Matt 3:7), but here it is given a positive turn of meaning. What John the Baptist missed among the Pharisees is anticipated here--that is, not a religious security, but rather a seeking and a longing for the holiness of God.

Second, through this concept of an open church, the church demonstrates that it is *God sent*. It seeks contact with persons, wherever they find themselves inwardly and outwardly. Therefore, the only condition for entrance into the fellowship is called the longing for salvation. However, that is understood as a point of departure, and so it says "...is expected *at first*..." That means more must yet follow. However, that which would be learned should be learned in fellowship with believers. At the same time, a very important principle of Wesley's comes to expression in this formulation, and this is the rejection of every form of coercion and persuasion in matters of faith. In his enthusiastic letter to his former student James Hervey, against whom he vindicated his evangelistic activity in England outside the bounds of an appointed parish, there stands a famous statement:

Suffer me to tell you my principles in this matter. I look upon all the world as my parish - thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear me the glad tidings of salvation.⁵

This statement is ordinarily cited as justification for the worldwide mandate for the proclamation of the gospel. I might call attention here to what Wesley constantly expressed in many other contexts: that he was dependent upon the willingness of persons to hear him in his proclamation. He expressed this idea in another way in his sermon on enthusiasm, where he admonished,

Never dream of forcing men into the ways of God. Think yourself, and let think. Use no constraint in matters of religion. Even those who are farthest out of the way never compel to come in by any other means than reason, truth, and love."⁶

That is, each particular person is encountered where that person lives. The freedom to accept or reject the gospel is taken quite seriously. Moreover, the fact that this interaction takes place through the ongoing life of persons is also implicit in this statement. The meaning of law and gospel are rendered understandable and deepened not only by means of the sermon, but also in conversation that is sought out ever anew. Wesley gives a marvelous example of this process in his letter of 1751 to Ebenezer Blackwell. "Therefore, it is only in pri-

vate conversation with a thoroughly convinced sinner that we should preach nothing but the gospel.”⁷

In this letter he sets forth how law and gospel must be preached together. He concludes with the moving appeal that brings to expression the exemplary law and gospel: “God loves you, therefore love and obey Him. Christ died for you. Therefore die to sin. Christ is risen: therefore rise in the image of God. Christ liveth evermore: therefore live to God, till you live with Him in Glory.”⁸

Third, in the General Rules the church is understood further as a *church in expectation*. A clear distinction should be made between that which we can do as humans, and thus that which we should do, and that which only God can do, but concerning which we are permitted to petition and expect. In the General Rules, persons who belong to the fellowship are described as those “having the form and seeking the power of godliness.” This formulation is derived from the sentence in 2 Tim 3:5, which refers to, “...those holding the form of religion but denying the power of it.” Wesley responds positively to the ideas under consideration. In various points of his sermons he explains wherein the form of godliness consists and how a person can gain it and thereby possess it. A person can learn to attend worship regularly, hear the Word of God, pray, investigate the Scripture for oneself, receive the Lord’s Supper, fast and live in Christian fellowship. Even if one does all that, the power of a godly life is still not conferred automatically, because God alone can give this. With this formulation, Wesley wants to make clear that it commences in this way, and that a person undertakes the form of godliness not as a goal but rather as a way given to one by God, whereby one should learn to expect God. Above all, then, if one learns to do these things in the anticipation that God will grant power at a point in time which pleases Him, then the right tension comes into one’s life. Only God can give power, but we are allowed to seek it and thereby request it.

Fourth, the church in the General Rules is described as an *alive and committed fellowship*. The foundational statement speaks of those persons who have united themselves in this fellowship as those who are ready “to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help one another to work out their salvation.”

Such a fellowship has a purpose for which it is to live. This is to attain the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). Above all, in such a committed fellowship the fundamental truths of Christianity are not carried forward in a theoretical manner, but they are experienced and in the experience they are recognized as being true. Hence, holiness is certainly not the way of a pious eccentric or recluse; rather, it is a way pursued in fellowship. Holiness is experienced and attained in community, in the bearing of one another’s burdens and in watching in vigilance over one another in helpfulness.

What assertions concerning the *Christian life* are contained in the General Rules? For one thing, the notion of discipline does not denote a military drill or other coercive pedagogical measures. Instead, it refers to a manner of obedience. The English term is associated with its Latin root (*discipulus*, disciple) and means the manner of living that the student receives from his teacher. In

the Christian tradition, that means a disciple is not above his master. We live in discipleship to Jesus. Three aspects of this insight are to be noted.

First, an earnest desire manifests itself through *corresponding fruit*. Wesley formulates his thought in the General Rules quite moderately: "But wherever this (the desire to flee the wrath to come and to be made free from sin) is really fixed in the soul, it will be known by its fruits." That is quite a liberating insight. We do not have to investigate people's hearts. Moreover, only God knows their actual condition. Hence, it is rightly said that He "will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart" (1 Cor 4:5). However, we can see the mode of life (*Wandel*) of a person and discern whether it concurs with that which he confesses. As we have already indicated, there should therefore be a readiness to allow oneself to be admonished. Indeed, it can be observed if a person turns from evil and does good, and uses the divine means of grace. To that end believers can inquire and they are permitted to admonish one another.

Second, an earnest Christian life distinguishes itself through *consistency*. At any rate, that was the conviction of Wesley. Consistency was another instance of Christian discipline. The longing for blessedness should *continually* be brought to expression. Wesley thereby emphasized that the important things of our life and faith need to be accomplished and exercised regularly, without looking back upon our states of feeling and circumstances. People continually say, "I will do this if I feel like it." It is precisely this kind of hesitation that needs to be attacked. Wesley referred to that as an "enthusiastic (*schwaermerische*) doctrine" and he recommended that it be trampled under foot.

Third, the General Rules shed light on the *importance of rules*. They are not understood as brazen law, but as aids to living. They appeal to conscience and may encourage deeds of love unto God. All of the rules that are compiled here, that have been set forth in a succession of formulations, have been inferred from Scripture, and they seek to demonstrate what we mean when we speak of the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments as the "guide given to us by God for faithful living." And they are only properly understood if we hear them not only as commands but also as promises and a privilege granted by God.

THE MEANING OF THE GENERAL RULES: THE EVIL TO BE AVOIDED; THE GOOD TO BE DONE

First, the evil to be avoided has much to do with *the righteous fruit of repentance* (Matt 3:8). In his *Notes upon the New Testament*, Wesley comments on verse 8 by saying,

Repentance is of two sorts; that which is termed *legal*, and that which is styled *evangelical* repentance. The former, which is the same that is spoken of here, is a thorough conviction of sin. The latter is a change of heart (and consequently of life) from all sin to all holiness.⁹

In another connection, he offers a description of repentance that resembles his terminology in the General Rules. In his "Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," Wesley wrote,

By repentance I mean conviction of sin producing real desires and sincere resolutions of amendment; and by 'fruits meet for repentance' forgiving our brother, ceasing from evil, doing good, using the ordinances of God, and in general obeying Him according to the measure of grace which we have received.¹⁰

The formulation of avoiding evil and doing good is not a discovery of John Wesley. The acknowledgment and emphasis upon this admonition indicates the extent to which Wesley thought and argued from the Scripture. His emphasis is supported by such significant passages as Job 28:28; Ps 34:15, 37:27; Prov 3:7, 14:16, 16:6; Isa 1:16-17, 7:15; Jer 4:22, 13:23; and 1 Thess 5:22.

The biblically-grounded rule that Wesley erects here is conceived for that person who is setting out upon the way and who has the desire to be saved from the wrath to come. It also remains suitable for the one who has already entered into living fellowship with God. The difference lies in the fact that, at the beginning of the way, the rule is held somewhat out of fear and uncertainty. Whenever fellowship with God is embraced, the rule is maintained out of thankfulness, joy and love. At this point Wesley distinguishes between the faith of a servant and the faith of a son. These ideas are drawn from his sermons. In his sermon, "The Almost Christian," and in the first four sermons from his series on the Sermon on the Mount, the concept of the good to be done and the evil to be avoided appears under different aspects.¹¹ It appears to him that a person manifests an interest not only in an external obedience of this rule. Rather, one is not at peace until the power of godliness has been received. In discussion with his critics, Wesley holds firmly that God changes the life of people and that this transformation may be confidently expected. In one letter he bears testimony of such experiences: "The drunkard became sober and temperate; the fornicator refrained from adultery and avoided fornication, the unrighteous refrained from oppression and evil. He who was accustomed to curse and swear and did this for a decade, does no longer swear today. The idler began to work with his hands, in order that he might be able to eat his own bread."¹²

Second, the admonition to do no evil, but to avoid every manner of evil, *appeals to the conscience of the individual and his or her competency to make judgments*. Behind this rule stands the expectation that a person who seeks God becomes competent to discern evil and to desist from it. The list of evils that Wesley then presents is clearly deliberate and it is also thereby relativized, so that he stresses such "sins that are most often committed," and certainly those that are most cited in his time. Therefore he clearly says that there are specific actions appropriate for each era that are evil, and that many things are evil that do not become known at all.

Only two of the fifteen examples Wesley cites refer directly to the relationship with God: the misuse of the name of God and the hallowing of the Sabbath. The remaining ones refer to social, socio-political (as in the treatment of slaves) and economic sins. This list is to some extent still topical, though the actual congregations in annual conferences are challenged to use their own judgment as directed by the Holy Spirit. They are also challenged to candidly delineate ways of suppressing actions deemed evil and to encourage members to avoid them. In our day, few appear to be interested in the truth. The French poet George Bernanos states in one of his novels that “the crime was not detectable because no one was interested in the truth.” This kind of reservation is widespread and if there is no frank explanation in conformity with what is obviously evil, then that evil becomes tolerated and even comes to acquire a right to existence.

In Hebrews 3:12 there is the statement “Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” Wesley comments on that in his *Notes upon the New Testament* by saying “An evil heart of unbelief--Unbelief is the parent of all evil, and the very essence of unbelief lies in departing from God, as the living God--the fountain of all our life, holiness, happiness.”¹³ This forsaking of God finds expression in various kinds of denials. One may refuse to be oneself and flee from one’s identity. In an extreme case that can only lead to spiritual illness. To accept oneself means that I receive who I am from God’s hand. Further, the denial is manifested in that a person does not accept a fellow human being as a “thou.” Then one’s neighbor is not thankfully received as a brother or sister. Instead, that person is treated as an enemy or as an object that can be disposed of like a thing.

Denial may also have to do with the fact that *the world is to be received as creation*. Instead, it becomes a purveyor of raw materials that people misuse according to whim and convenience. The refusal to recognize God as Creator and Lord is without doubt the source of all evil deeds. The admonition to refrain from doing evil is not spoken in a vacuum. Wesley always has in mind those things that we have actually recognized as evil. We may certainly be able to expect that God will assist us in this endeavor. God has directly involved Himself as a partner with us in the struggle against evil, whose power is already broken. In his book entitled, *Who Trusts in God*, Professor Albert Outler defends the view that Christians ought not abandon the struggle for reasons of selfishness and anxiety. After all, the book was written in 1968 when a whole series of uprisings and demonstrations were breaking out. He was challenging Christians not to remain disengaged from the suffering and anxiety in the world, and he concludes with this significant sentence: “The unanimous ‘answer’ by the saints and heroes of the faith to the problem of evil is disconcertingly simple: evil is overcome by the intelligent, competent concern of people willing to pay the price of conflict.”¹⁴ Precisely to that end, the General Rules impel us to take the Christian’s existence seriously, to register a challenge to that which is evil and not to avoid conflict.

It may be expected that a person who seeks to be related to God receives the power of judgment and discernment of evil, even where it is disguised, and thereby is able to expose and avoid it. It is certainly to be expected that this person does not remain at the level of negation. Instead, he makes evident that, since he "does good," the "no" to evil comes from a "yes" to life. The answer comes from the love of God that has been received. Living faith was described by Wesley with the words of the apostle Paul as a faith that is "active in love" (Gal 5:6). And he always sought the balance between justifying faith and good works. Faith and good works--this tension persists throughout life. An important place where Wesley clearly tells how he poises these emphases is in his comment upon the statement in James 2:22, "You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works." About that statement Wesley observes,

...that faith wrought together with his works--therefore faith has one energy and operation; works, another! And the energy and operation of faith are before works, and together with them. Works do not give life to faith, but faith begets works, and then is perfected by them. And by works was faith made perfect....Faith hath not its being from works, (for it is before them), but its perfection."¹⁵

The question of *law and gospel* is naturally at stake in this connection. As is evident from his explanation of James 2:22, Wesley distinguishes carefully between faith and good works and bears in mind that this distinction, as well as the inner connection, is to be seen and understood. Regarding the relation between law and gospel, he also emphasizes that there is to be no opposition nor contradiction, but that the claim of the law is to continue as the good and holy will of God, and the gospel points the way whereby this divine will is fulfilled. In the fifth discourse of his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley argues that:

There is no contrariety at all between the law and the gospel; that there is no need for the law to pass away, in order to the establishing the gospel. Indeed neither of them supercedes the other, but they agree perfectly well together. Yea, the very same words, considered in different respects, are parts both of the law and of the gospel: if they are considered as commandments, they are part of the law; if as promises, of the gospel. Thus, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,' when considered as a commandment, is a branch of the law; when regarded as a promise, is an essential part of the gospel--the gospel being no other than the commands of the law, proposed by way of promise.¹⁶

Should it not thereby be concluded that "poverty of spirit, purity of heart, and whatever else is enjoined in the holy law of God, are no other, when viewed in a gospel light, than so many great and precious promises?"¹⁷

Finally, it becomes evident that the person who abandons himself to God in faith, becomes willing to live in complete obedience out of love for God. However, the purpose of faith is nothing other than that there be such love between God and human beings as corresponds to the will of God. "Love is the end of all commandments of God."¹⁸ Therefore it is fit to incite people to do everything that lies within their ability.

Now then do all diligence to walk, in every respect, according to the light you have received! Now be zealous to receive more light daily, more of the knowledge and love of God, more of the Spirit of Christ, more of His life, and of the power of His resurrection! Now use all the knowledge, and love, and life, and power you have already attained; so shall you continually go on from faith to faith; so shall you daily increase in holy love, till faith is swallowed up in sight, and the law of love is established to all eternity.¹⁹

In doing good we *exercise ourselves in the realization of our true humanity*. Hence, the rule tolerates no rashly drawn limitations. The vocation of doing good is defined in terms of "each opportunity," allowing the good to reach "all persons, so far as our strength permits." Less cannot be said concerning the gospel that we have witnessed and the expectation of complete obedience through God. We have not received just some things or even several things from God. Rather, all things have come from Him and therefore we ought to serve Him with everything.

The first place where doing good is to be seen is the world, and not the congregation. The words of the apostle make reference to this with his statement to the church which says "especially to them that are of the household of faith." In the final analysis, the world remains the place of trial. Along with the reference from Gal 6:10, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men..." Wesley briefly commented, "At whatever time or place, and in whatever manner we can. The opportunity in general is our lifetime; but there are also many particular opportunities. Satan is quickened in doing hurt, by the shortness of the time, Rev 12:12. By the same consideration let us be quickened in doing good."²⁰

In the second guiding principle concerning the doing of good, Wesley distinguished between two levels of the deed, with regard to the good of the body and of the soul. In the first case, he merely enumerates the works of mercy, as Jesus our Lord enumerates them in His parable concerning the judgment of the world (Matthew 25). This summation is known to us, yet it is important always to be reminded of it anew. In our modern world, in which the welfare state has undertaken distinct duties, people have forgotten to see these works of mercy as their duty.

In Wesley's time, people were astonished to conceive of good deeds with regard to the soul, and this is a reaction that is still encountered in our day. Wesley held firmly that it is good to instruct, to reprove and to exhort each per-

son "with whom we have any intercourse." What stands behind this is not moralistic arrogance, although it is wrongly passed over again and again for that reason. Instead, there is the insight, so deeply based in Scripture, that I am in need of the continual help of my brethren in the faith in order to remain on the right path. However, that is a basic matter for every human relationship. In the Old Testament, it is reported, "...reprove a wise man, and he will love you" and "...he who rejects reproof goes astray" (Prov 9:8, 10:17). In the New Testament, it is reported, "I *appeal* to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God," (Rom 12:1), and "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal 6:1), and "Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Col 3:16). Throughout Scripture there are numerous places that support this interpretation, so that it is good to do other good things through correction, reproof and admonition.

Once again, it is exactly at this point where a moralistic misunderstanding has occurred. All three ideas are understood correctly only if they are viewed in light of their biblical context. Only someone who lives with the Bible and constantly seeks the face of God and walks in the light of God will be able to carry out this kind of doing good in a "gentle spirit." However, we can also observe here that this manner of doing good to one another has well-nigh disappeared, even in Christian congregations. It is appropriate and important to stress the importance of this renewed pastoral approach. Wesley certainly emphasized quite realistically and moderately the duty of Christians to support and encourage one another in their temporal affairs.

The conclusion to his discussion of "doing good and avoiding evil" may be surprising to some, but it calls to mind a once significant mode of living. In Wesley's thought, anyone who lives with God and therefore avoids evil and does good, *must reckon with suffering*. Perhaps he has in the background such Old Testament passages as "He who corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury" (Prov 9:7), and "blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matt 5:11). The foregoing formulation particularly takes up the words of the apostle Paul. In a longer passage concerning the suffering that he encounters as an apostle, he writes "...we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscorning of all things" (1 Cor 9:13 and the entire context).

The encouragement to avoid evil and do good becomes realistic first of all in connection with the knowledge of the possibility of suffering. Whoever has first gone through the school of this suffering and still has not grown weary in doing good and avoiding evil in every form (1 Thess 5:22; Gal 6:9), has comprehended the mind of Christ. Such a person also knows that moral presumption has nothing at all to do with the disposition found in Jesus Christ.

THE USE OF ALL THE MEANS OF GRACE ORDAINED OF GOD

Our desire and longing for the "power of godliness" should come to expression without interruption. The desire for godliness should not only continually

come to expression through the avoidance of evil and the doing of good, but also in the fact that all the means of grace ordained of God are used. "For faith and love grow only through the existing contact with God. And only from faith can good be done and evil avoided."²¹

The following beautiful passage stands in Wesley's second discourse on the exposition of the Sermon on the Mount:

They who are truly meek can clearly discern what is evil; and they can also suffer it. They are sensible of everything of this kind, but still, meekness holds the reins. They are exceeding zealous for the Lord of hosts; but their zeal is always guided by knowledge, and tempered in every thought, and word, and work, with the love of man, as well as the love of God. They do not desire to extinguish any of the passions which God has for wise ends implanted in their nature; but they have the mastery of all: they hold them in all subjection, and employ them only in subservience to those ends. And thus even the harsher and more displeasing passions are applicable to the noblest purposes; even hatred, and anger, and fear, when engaged against sin and regulated by faith and love are as walls and bulwarks to the soul, so that the wicked one cannot approach to hurt it.²²

Wesley has had to establish a boundary on three sides in his effort to present effectively the correct and regular use of the means of grace.

1. He had to distinguish himself from those Anglican Christians who were at peace with the *purely outward use* and had no further expectation at all.

2. He had to distinguish himself from the Herrnhuters (Moravians) and those Christians like them who feared a false confidence in the means of grace and shunned their use as "*works righteousness*."

3. He had to distinguish himself from those Christians within and without his own fellowship, who described the means of grace as a *virtual magical operation*.

Wesley allowed himself to be determined and influenced by none of these attitudes. Rather, he determined to commend the means of grace quite emphatically because he believed they were appointed by God. He regarded them as means of grace given by God, in which God wants to meet persons. In the first part of his sermon on the means of grace,²³ he said "By means of grace: I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby He might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."²⁴

In this sermon, he amply expressed how he understood the reality of the means of grace. Over against recurring misunderstandings and erroneous interpretations, he expressed four points at the end of this sermon.

1. God is above all means. He has certainly instituted these means and His promise rests upon them, but He is not bound to them. We as humans need to take care not to confine God in His freedom. However, we are indeed permit-

ted to accept these means with gratitude and, while we use them, to wait upon God's action.

2. The means of grace have no power within themselves. Without God they are poor, dead and empty, like a parched leaf or a shadow. No one who uses them earns merit or a special advantage with God. Even that which God has instituted does not mediate God's grace in itself, if the recipient does not trust God alone.

3. Whenever you use the means of grace, seek to find in them God alone. Reach out for the power of His Spirit and the merit of His Son. No one and no thing can satisfy your soul as God alone can. Never forget that the means of grace are not means that are instituted for our own sakes but rather they are to renew your soul in righteousness and true holiness.

4. Whenever you use them, take care how you regard yourself. If you are proud that you used them, you transform everything into poison. Without God, everything is to no avail. Therefore, fall on your knees and praise God alone.²⁵

The reflections concerning the use of the means of grace are needed to be seen by Wesley in the context of his interpretation of *rational religion*. He values sobriety and reason quite positively and considers life realistically. Wesley was certainly always again being reproached by his contemporaries as an enthusiast. However, in his interpretation of the means of grace and their use he made it clear in what enthusiasm consists. He coined a short formula: Enthusiasm is to desire the goal without using the means; that is, to desire the goal, without following the way. He wrote a sermon on enthusiasm²⁶ and there he described four forms. They each have to do with a broken relationship with reality, and hence with self-deception. In brief, they are the following:

1. One form of enthusiasm consists in presuming that one has received grace without it really being so. It often expresses itself either in fanaticism or in religious instability.

2. A second form of enthusiasm consists in presuming that one has received gifts from God. Many lift up the presumption of having the gift of healing or having received dreams or visions. Enthusiasm and pride are often tied to these.

3. A third form consists in despising the means of grace. For example, some persons claim to understand the Bible even without reading it and without having meditated on biblical texts.

4. The fourth form consists in attributing to divine providence matters of experience that cannot be so attributed.

Trust not in visions or dreams; in sudden impressions, or strong impulses of any kind. Remember, it is not by these you are to know what is the will of God on any particular occasion; but by applying the plain Scripture rule, with the help of experience and reason, and the ordinary assistance of the Spirit of God....Beware, lastly, of imagining you shall obtain the end without using the means conducive to it. God

can give the end without any means at all; but you have no reason to think He will. Therefore constantly and carefully use all those means which He has appointed to be the ordinary channels of His grace. Use every means which either reason or Scripture recommends, as conducive (through the free love of God in Christ) either to the obtaining or increasing any of the gifts of God. Thus expect a daily growth in that pure and holy religion....²⁷

In using the means of grace it is possible to find a nearness to God, of which Wesley spoke in one sermon in terms (naturally to be viewed in a figurative sense) of a divine vision. In explaining the text from the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God," Wesley wrote,

But in a more especial manner they see God in His ordinances. Whether they appear in the great congregation, to 'pay Him the honor due unto His name' 'and worship Him in the beauty of holiness'; or 'enter into their closets,' and there pour out their souls before their 'Father which is in secret'; whether they search the oracles of God, or hear the ambassadors of Christ proclaiming glad tidings of salvation: or, by eating of that bread, and drinking of that cup, 'show forth His death till He come' in the cloud of heaven, - in all these His appointed ways, they find such a near approach as cannot be expressed. They see Him, as it were, face to face, and 'talk with Him, as a man talketh with his friend,' a fit preparation for those mansions above, wherein they shall see Him as He is.²⁸

From these citations it becomes sufficiently clear that Wesley commended the regular use of the means of grace very soberly and rationally, yet still in the justified expectation that, because God promises it, His action is to be experienced.

THE MEANS OF GRACE ORDAINED BY GOD

In the General Rules, Wesley names six means of grace:

- 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 Scripture
- Fasting or abstinence

In certain other connections, he presents yet a seventh means of grace, the "Christian Conference," that is another term for the Methodist class. Let us consider here some observations and reflections concerning these particular means of grace.

The Public Worship of God

In the center of the service of worship there is the meeting with God that does not occur as an individual experience but rather in association with other believers. The service is public; that is, every person who has the desire to meet God is welcome. The public aspect pushes back the private concerns. Yet, the personal concerns are certainly not wholly eliminated in a Christian service of worship. They may be permitted to find expression in quiet prayer or also in a fellowship of prayer.

The meeting with God sets the standard. A person does not stand at the center of the event, but rather God Himself. The book of Revelation offers helpful insight here. Right in the midst of all turbulent events on earth, God is enthroned in silence. He speaks according to His time. The worship here upon earth is united with the worship in heaven before the throne of God. Where the Christian church celebrates worship in truth and with great expectation of God, it does more for the stability of the world than is generally recognized. We permit ourselves to gather each Sunday in the expectation that God speaks to us and meets us in some manner that He considers proper.

The Ministry of the Word

The emphasis in this means of grace lies upon hearing. And the text clearly holds very firmly that the interpretation consists not only in the form of the sermon or in a hymn or exegetical meditation. The readings in a service of worship have their own particular form. By the hearing of the text of holy Scripture we are permitted to listen in the expectation that God speaks to us directly through the words of the Scripture. By listening patiently, the ear is instructed until there gradually happens what Jesus described by way of confirmation and promise: "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27). We are thereby permitted to reckon that there is an increase in the capacity of truly awakened Christians to hear clearly the voice of the good shepherd out of all the voices that are perceived in this world.

The Supper of the Lord

In the well-known letter that John Wesley wrote in the year 1784 to "our brothers in America," stand the following sentences:

I have prepared a liturgy little differing from that of the Church of England...which I advise all the traveling preachers to use on the Lord's Day in all their congregations, reading the liturgy only on Wednesdays and Fridays and praying extempore on all other days. I also advise the elders to administer the Supper of the Lord on every Lord's Day.²⁹

In his sermon on the means of grace, Wesley holds firmly to a view of the Lord's Supper that all who earnestly desire the grace of God should participate, because God allows "...all, therefore, who truly desire the grace of God," to

participate in the Lord's Supper, and because God allows one to receive in this Supper "all that spiritual grace that righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost"³⁰ that has been won for us through the death of Jesus Christ. He also stressed, with the reprimand of 1 Cor 11:28, that participation in the Supper is not merely allowed but commanded. An additional important aspect concerning the understanding of the Lord's Supper in the tradition of the church is that here our devotion to God is renewed. This is very beautifully expressed in the liturgy of worship for the "renewal of the covenant with God." There it says "From time to time we renew our vows of consecration, especially when we gather at the table of the Lord."³¹

Family and Private Prayer

Prayer is possible because the door is opened to the Father's heart in His Son Jesus Christ. It can be stated definitively, as our Lord Jesus Christ said, "...ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you" (Matt 7:7). Here prayer is described as a means of grace as well as the means through which we receive His grace. Several of Jesus' parables illustrate the meaning of prayer. It is important to observe that prayer is first of all seen in the small context of the family and then as conversation with God in the secrecy of the small chamber. Both belong together in all sobriety and openness before one another. We are able to comprehend in depth the great privilege of childlike intimacy with God and grow into the form and mind of Jesus Christ.

Searching the Scripture

Personal intimacy with Scripture has another quality beside the hearing of the Word in the assembled congregation. I am with the Word alone and can leisurely and with concentration read, consult, check cross references and pursue major themes through the various books of Scripture. What John Wesley considered to be very essential was that persons learn to read the *entire* Bible. He regarded that which stands in 2 Tim 3:16f. to be suitable for the entire Bible. "All Scripture is inspired of God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." In the Large Minutes of the conferences, the following entry stands under the heading "The Study of the Bible":

1. To read: The Bible in an orderly way, constantly, at any time, every day, and continuously; attentively, with the help of 'annotations'; earnestly, with prayer before and after; productively, in that you immediately do what you have learned in it.
2. To meditate: At the determined times. According to some rule."³²

The intimacy with the Holy Scripture in this manner is a lifelong business. The more one reads, the more one will grow into an extensive understanding of the biblical message, provided that the entire Scripture be read.

Fasting or Abstinence

John Wesley devoted an entire sermon to this means of grace. It is the seventh discourse in his series of expositions of the Sermon on the Mount. Here he enumerates the various reasons why people decide to fast. For him, fasting belongs together with prayer. Whenever there is fasting, it is always to take place in relation to prayer and works of mercy, with reference to Acts 10 and Isaiah 58. However, he maintains firmly that fasting is:

...a means, in the hand of God, of confirming and increasing, not only virtue, not chastity only (as some have idly imagined, without any ground either from Scripture, reason or experience), but also seriousness of spirit, earnestness, sensibility and tenderness of conscience, deadness to the world, and consequently the love of God, and every holy and heavenly affection.³³

In his estimation of fasting, Wesley has remained very sensible, and he repeatedly notes that the exercise of fasting should be used within the limits of healthy possibilities.

CONCLUSION

In our day, in which it has increasingly become fashionable for Christians to "pick and choose" which of the means of grace they will observe--often based on quite subjective and private considerations--Wesley's exhortation confronts us plainly: *all* the means of grace that have been treated here are to be used. It is not possible to choose. They are not simply ways that have been contrived. Instead, they are rules, as it says in the General Rules, "all [of] which we are taught of God to observe, even in His written word--the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these, we know, His Spirit writes on every truly awakened heart."³⁴

In his sermon on the means of grace, Wesley says quite simply, "I do expect that He will fulfil His word, that He will meet and bless me in this way."³⁵

That is exactly the way it happens.

Notes

1. John Wesley, *Sermons On Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1975), Sermon on "Scriptural Christianity," pp. 32-49. John Wesley, *Die 53 Lehpredigten, Lehpredigten 1-5*, (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1986), pp. 69-88.
2. Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Preface, p. vi.
3. *Kirchenordnung der Zentralkonferenz für Mittel und Sudeuropa* (Zürich: C. V. B. Buch & Druck, 1974), p. 20.

4. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1977), p. 411.
5. John Wesley, letter to James Hervey dated March 20, 1739, published in Albert Outler, *John Wesley*, (New York: Oxford, 1964), p. 72.
6. Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, p. 427.
7. John Wesley, letter to Ebenezer Blackwell dated Dec. 20, 1751, published in Outler, *John Wesley*, p. 233.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
9. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, p. 23.
10. John Wesley, *Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion*, ed. Gerald Cragg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 106.
11. Wesley, *Sermons On Several Occasions*, Sermon on the Mount, Discourse II, p. 209: "Lass nichts dich zufriedenstellen also die Kraft der Gottseligkeit, als eine Religion, die Geist und Leben ist; dein Wohnen in Gott und das Wohnen Gottes in dir...."
12. John Wesley, *Letters (Briefe)*, exact page references not found.
13. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, p. 818.
14. Albert C. Outler, *Who Trusts in God* (New York: Oxford, 1968), p. 108.
15. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, pp. 862-863.
16. Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, p. 255.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 411.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 415.
20. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes*, p. 699.
21. Wesley, *Sermons On Several Occasions*, Sermon on "Righteousness of Faith," p. 73: "...*Sehender Glaube selbst ist die alleinige Wurzel von allem, was gut und heilig ist.*"
22. Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Sermon on the Mount, Discourse II, p. 202.
23. In the sermon on the means of grace, he considers as means of grace, in distinction from the General Rules, only prayer, the study of Scripture and the Lord's Supper.

24. Wesley, *Sermons*, "The Means of Grace," p. 136.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 150f.
26. Wesley, "The Nature of Enthusiasm," *Sermons*, pp. 410-428.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 428.
28. Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Sermon on the Mount, Discourse III, p. 221.
29. Wesley, Letter to "Our Brethren in America" in Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford, 1964), pp. 82-84.
30. Wesley, *Sermons*, p. 144.
31. *Liturgie der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche*, (Zürich: C. V. B. Buch-Druck, 1981), p. 16.
32. Wesley, *Konferenzgespräche über Lehre und Ordnung* (Linz: 1976), p. 38.
33. Wesley, *Sermons*, p. 294.
34. John Wesley, "The General Rules of the Methodist Church," *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, The Methodist Publishing House, 1984), par. 68.
35. John Wesley, *Sermons*, p. 145.