No End Without the Means: John Wesley and the Sacraments

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The teachings of John Wesley on the sacraments, their presuppositions, their content and consequences, are so extensive that large studies and several books would be necessary for a truly exhaustive presentation of his thought in this area. Consequently, this essay will merely survey the topic, lifting up some of the main points. It is hoped that, in spite of these limitations, it will reveal some of Wesley's rich theology and whet the appetite for further Wesley studies.

Wesley has often been accused of being inconsistent, fragmentary and even confused in his theological thinking. But a thorough study of his works reveals a different picture. His theology, and thus also his sacramental theology, is unitive and systematic and not incidental and disconnected. He has one unified doctrine of the sacraments, comprising baptism and the Lord's Supper, which forms an integral part of the greater unitive structure of his understanding of the ordo salutis. The theological and practical importance of the sacraments for John Wesley lies in their functions. Within the framework of the ordo salutis they function as (1) effective signs, (2) effective means of grace and (3) effective pledges of glory to come, conjoined with the added aspect of sacrifice.

Wesley operates with a threefold doctrine of sin: first, original sin, involving guilt and loss of the image of God; second, involuntary sin, sins of infirmity, ignorance and error; third, actual willful sin against a known law (including the "law of love"), which in essence is a rebellion against God.

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All of these need the atonement of Christ, but man is only responsible and condemned for the latter, unless repented of and forgiven. Wesley wrote, "By sin I mean a voluntary transgression of a known law" and "...all guilt must suppose some concurrence of the will." Thus, it is clear that the Atonement plays an essential and decisive role in Wesley’s understanding of God’s saving work for man. "...Every man needs the blood of the atonement, or he could not stand before God." Christ is the author and efficient cause of all our salvation, and the sole meritorious cause both of our justification and sanctification. But Christ’s suffering and atonement is not just an event which happened once at a certain point in history. Its virtue extends backward as well as forward in covering all sins of the past as well as of the future. His work still goes on; as Christ intercedes before the Father, the Holy Spirit continuously and continually applies all the benefits of the Atonement to one’s life. Thus, in Wesley’s theology of the ordo salutis, the Atonement is always presupposed, always the foundation, always the spring of all God’s grace, all actualized by the power of the Holy Spirit. By virtue of the Atonement, prevenient grace (which includes “natural conscience”) is given to all. By virtue of the same Atonement, the believer gradually grows in holiness until perfected in love. And by virtue of this Atonement all sins of omission, all mistakes and shortcomings, are covered until, on the basis of the same atoning work of Christ, one shall be received in glory. Such is the basis of all grace, even the grace conveyed through the means of grace, including the sacraments.

As already pointed out, the Holy Spirit’s function as agent bringing God’s grace to persons is central in Wesley’s thought.

The author of faith and salvation is God alone. It is he that works in us both to will and to do. He is the sole Giver of every good gift and the sole Author of every good work. There is no more of power than of merit in man; but as all merit is in the Son of God, in what he has done and suffered for us, so all power is in the Spirit of God....But however it be expressed, it is certain all true faith, and the whole work of salvation, every good thought, word, and work, is altogether by the operation of the Spirit of God.

Likewise, whenever Wesley speaks of the means of grace, and the sacraments in particular, he unhesitatingly affirms that whatever is, or becomes, or happens in, with, or through any means whatever, or any action or words connected therewith, is done by God through His Holy Spirit:

Settle this in your heart, that the opus operatum, the mere work done, profitteth nothing; that there is no power to save, but in the Spirit of God, no merit, but in the blood of Christ, that, consequently, even what God ordains, conveyt no grace to the soul, if you trust not in him alone.
Wesley would not accept any automatic or ex opere operato effect of any means or sacraments. At the same time he rejects the opposite error of a “stillness” doctrine. For him there exists no difference between “immediate” and “mediate” in God’s economy of salvation: “...Every Christian grace, is properly supernatural, is an immediate gift of God, which He commonly gives in the use of such means as He hath ordained.”

Whatever means or instrument God employs, He is still active in an immediate and direct way. Thus Wesley avoids the trap of “quietistic spiritualism.” At the same time he counteracts any overemphasis on the means as such. They are means only when God employs them, and we use them because He has promised to use them as channels for His grace. Thus, Wesley’s high doctrine of the means of grace and the sacraments is actually a consequence of his full and rich doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and is not based upon the nature of the sacraments as such.

Wesley often turns to the doctrinal statements and formulations of the Church of England for his definitions. When faced with the question of a definition of a sacrament, he turns to the Church of England Catechism and directly adopts its Augustinian distinction of signum (the sign) and res (the thing signified) “...Our own Church...directs us to bless God both for the means of grace and hope of glory; and teaches us, that a sacrament is 'an outward sign of inward grace, and means whereby we receive the same.'”

Wesley’s Article 16 (Church of England Article 25) expresses the same in a little more detail:

Sacraments ordained of Christ, are not only badges or tokens of Christian Men’s Profession; but rather they are certain Signs of Grace, and God’s good Will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our faith in him.

The definition Wesley adopts here clearly demands of a sign that it be “outward” and “visible,” and ordained by Christ. Christ ordained two sacraments with certain signs suitable for the purpose, and only these are to be considered sacraments. Because of our weaknesses, infirmities and inability to understand the “heavenly and spiritual,” God has ordained outward and visible signs to aid us in overcoming these weaknesses. The natural qualities of the significative elements reveal a definite parallelism or analogical relationship with the thing signified. The cleansing and purifying qualities of water, the matter of baptism, symbolize analogically the inward washing of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, as bread and wine nourish our bodies, so the partakers of the Lord’s Supper will be fed with the body and blood of Christ.

The second part of the sacrament is the thing signified, the “inward and spiritual grace,” namely, Jesus Christ and all His benefits. More specifically, in baptism it is “a death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness.”
Baptism is a means of grace. Wesley rejects the idea of making baptism only "a sign of profession and mark of difference" (Wesley's Article 17) and refuses to accept a reductionism which makes baptism purely a symbolic act. The thing signified in the Lord's Supper is the "food of our souls...that Inward Grace, which is the Body and Blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken and received by the Faithful in the Lord's Supper." The inward grace of the Lord's Supper is:

His bleeding Love and Mercy
His all-redeeming Passion,
Who here displays
And gives the Grace
Which brings us Our Salvation.

However, the sign and the thing signified are not identical or the same. "Baptism is not the new birth: They are not one and the same thing....There may sometimes be the outward sign, where there is not the inward grace....The outward sign is no more a part of the inward grace than the body is a part of the soul." Wesley allows for no confusion of the signum with the res. The one is outward, material and visible; the other is inward, spiritual and invisible. This is a basic Protestant stand, which can be traced back beyond the Reformers to Augustine himself. Neither must the sign be separated from the thing signified. They are not identical but distinct, and yet not separated. There is a carrying over from one to the other, in baptism as well as in the Lord's Supper. Thus both parts are required.

The problems of transubstantiation and consubstantiation are, of course, relevant in this connection. Wesley is consistent and clear at this point. In his Article 18 (taken verbatim from Article 28 of the Thirty-nine Articles) he asserts, "Transubstantiation, or the change of the substance of bread and wine in the supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by holy writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions." Likewise, he also rejects the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation and ubiquity, which require a communicating of the properties of the divine nature to the human. Christ is present in the sacrament in His divinity, applying the merits of the great Atonement to each true believer. Wesley holds a view of the "Real Presence" of Christ, which may properly be called "dynamic" or "Living Presence." Where God acts, there He is. The "objective presence" cannot be thought of as the static presence of an object, but rather as that of a living and acting person working through the means.

The sacraments are thus effective when God acts through the Holy Spirit. Augustine, followed by Luther and Calvin, calls the sacraments "visible words," and claims the "word" to be constitutive of a sacrament, thus making it valid. Wesley never uses the term "visible word" and refuses to apply it to the sacraments. They must not be subsumed under the word. For
Wesley the Lord's Supper is the foremost of the means of grace.25 The validity of the sacraments are thus not constituted by the "word," although the word is a part of the sacramental celebration. Formal validity is, for Wesley, dependent upon three factors. First, the proper material elements (water, bread and wine) must be employed. Second, baptism shall be administered in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (For the Lord's Supper the pronouncing of Christ's words of institution together with an invocation are required.) Third, an ordained minister is necessary: "...Our Lord gave this commission only to the Apostles and their successors in the ministry."26 Unordained preachers were not to take upon themselves to administer either sacrament. The Church of England allowed for lay baptism; thus, Wesley was here more strict than his church. Nevertheless, for him all of these criteria are a question of formal validity. They are a matter of church order, of validity in the church's eyes. But formal validity must not be confused with efficacy. The former is related to the work of persons; the latter wholly God's gracious work of salvation.

EFFECTIVE SIGN: THE ATONEMENT REMEMBERED

Wesley holds that there are three aspects to the Lord's Supper as a sacrament. He says:

THE LORD'S Supper was chiefly ordained for a sacrament, 1. To represent the Sufferings of CHRIST, which are past, whereof it is a Memorial; 2. To convey the First Fruits of the Sufferings, in Present Graces, whereof it is a Means; and 3. To assure us of Glory to come, whereof it is an infallible Pledge?27

Wesley makes an important contribution to sacramental thought in his conception of the Lord's Supper as a memorial. The concept "memorial" is nothing new in sacramental theology. It has largely been connected with a "memorialist" conception of the Lord's Supper and, consequently, with a doctrine of what is very aptly called "real absence."

On the other hand, the "memorial" Wesley presents is a dynamic drama of worship in which both the believer and the Holy Spirit are actively involved. The memorial has, of course, a direct connection with "remember," in the sense of "calling to mind." But Wesley proceeds beyond the mere level of memory. He does not stop at the level of static signification, but operates with the existential and personal question of meaning. The meaning of the sacrament is the setting before our eyes Christ's death and suffering, and the fact that He sacrificed Himself to atone for our sins. That is, the Lord's Supper shows forth Christ's death. God appointed the sacrament, and it was His express design to revive His sufferings and expose them to all our senses as if they were present now. Not only our minds or memories are involved, but all our senses as well.

Thus the sacrament as a memorial involves a total and vital worship experience which is expressed in what is called the three degrees of devotion
or worship. In the first stage, the worshiper begins by meditating upon "the Great and dreadful Passages" of Scripture which the ordinance sets before him. When looking at the consecrated elements he says in his heart, "...I observe on this Altar somewhat very like the sacrifice of my Saviour." Employing the powerful means of analogy and similitude, the worshiper, with his whole being, empathically enters into the sufferings of Christ. Thus the Bread of Life was broken. "My LORD and my GOD, I behold in this Bread, made of Corn that was cut down, beaten, ground and bruised by Men, all the heavy Blow and Plagues and Pains; which thou didst suffer from thy Murderers." But the path of analogy leads further. The whole drama of the Atonement enters in. "I behold in this Bread dried up and baked with Fire, the fiery Wrath which thou didst suffer from above! My GOD, my GOD, why hast thou forsaken him?" Quoting Augustine, Wesley declares, "...this Sacrament duly received, makes the thing which it represents, as really present for our Use, as if it were newly done." Having thus existentially appropriated the message conveyed analogically through the consecrated elements, the worshiper naturally enters the second stage. "Ought he not also to reverence and adore, when he looks toward that Good Hand, which has appointed for the Use of the Church, the Memorial of these great Things?" The eye of meditation and worship penetrates beyond the elements to the giver of all mercy, God himself. The first two "degrees of devotion" fit, of course, perfectly into a memorialist conception of the sacrament. The memorialist operates exactly within the framework of meditation, analogy and attitudes of praise and prayer. However, the memorialist is unable to follow Wesley into the third and essential stage. It is here that we meet with what I call Wesley's doctrine of the "Eternal Now." The main intention of Christ herein, was not the bare remembrance of His Passion; but over and above, to invite us to His sacrifice, to a "Soul-transporting Feast":

Oh what a Soul-transporting Feast
doth this Communion yield!
Remembering here thy Passion past
We with thy Love are filled.

Christ invites us to His sacrifice, but He alone can give the "dreadful Power":

PRINCE of Life, for Sinners slain,
Grant us Fellowship with Thee,
Fain we would partake thy Pain
Share thy mortal Agony,
Give us now the dreadful Power,
Now bring back thy dying Hour!
Surely now the Prayer He hears:
Faith presents the Crucified!
Lo! the wounded Lamb appears
Pierc'd his Feet, his Hands, his Side,
Hangs our Hope on yonder Tree,
Hangs, and bleeds to Death for me!34

The whole economy of salvation is brought to bear upon this awesome event; looking with the eyes of faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the worshiper transcends both time and space and finds himself, as it were, at the foot of the cross, and realizes it is for him Christ dies. As one who has seen and experienced, Wesley cries out:

HEARTS of Stone, relent, relent,
Break by JESU Cross subdued,
See his Body mangled, rent,
Cover'd with a gore of Blood!
Sinful Soul, what hast Thou done?
Murther'd GOD's eternal Son!

Yes, your Sins have done the deed,
Drove the nails that fix Him here,
Crown'd with Thorns his sacred Head,
Pierc'd Him with the Soldier's Spear,
Made his Soul a Sacrifice;
For a sinful World He dies.35

Thus, there is a two-way suspension of time and place. Christ is crucified now and here; and my sins drive the nails through His hands on Calvary, then and there. But, as believers repent, almost crushed under the burden of acknowledged guilt, they also realize the full importance for them now. Christ invites them to His Sacrifice "...not as done and gone many Years since, but as to Grace and Mercy, still lasting, still new, still the same as when it was first offer'd for us."36 Actually, as Adam's sin transcends time and space and becomes mine, so the blood of the Second Adam reaches just as far. Salvation is a present reality. Until God ends all time, there is an "Eternal Now" operating in God's grand plan of salvation. No memorialist conception will satisfy one for whom this truth has become a reality. Christ Himself is present here and now to save and uphold, and His presence is as real as God is real, and, as a means, the sacrament actually conveys what it shows.
EFFECTIVE MEANS OF GRACE: THE ATONEMENT APPLIED

1. The Means of Grace in General

At Aldersgate Wesley experienced the truth in what Peter Böhler had told him: Salvation is a free gift of God. But he also knew that, although the life of faith is a gift of God, it is also true that God uses certain outward means as the ordinary channels of grace.

In his sermon, "The Means of Grace," Wesley clearly defines his topic. "By Means of Grace I understand Outward Signs, Words or Actions, ordain'd of GOD, and appointed for this End, to be the Ordinary Channels whereby he might convey to Men, preventing, justifying or sanctifying Grace." 37 The central place given the means of grace in the Church of England and, through Wesley, in the Methodist Church, is shown in Article 13, "Of the Church." Here the church is not defined in terms of its organization, hierarchy or ministry, but in terms of the means of grace: The pure Word of God must be preached, and the sacraments duly administered in a "congregation of faithful men." 38 The means are given as aids to those who should "wait upon God in all his ordinances." Writing to William Law, Wesley flatly rejects any quietist doctrine of an inward, purely mystical way to holiness:

This is most true that all externals of religion are in order to the renewal of our soul in righteousness and true holiness. But it is not true that the external way is one and the internal way another. There is but one scriptural way wherein we receive inward grace—through the outward means which God hath appointed. 39

Thus, the outward means are indispensable and a necessity for all who desire God's grace, because God has so ordained. But God is above all means. "He can convey his Grace, either in or out of any of the Means which he hath appointed. Perhaps he will." 40 Wesley clearly affirms the efficacy of God's ordinances. But, as mentioned above, he definitely warns of any ex opere operato effect:

We know there is no inherent Power, in the Words that are spoken in Prayer; in the Letter of Scripture read, the Sound thereof heard, or the Bread and Wine receiv'd in the Lord's Supper: But that it is GOD alone who is the Giver of every good Gift, the Author of all Grace. 41

All means are nothing but channels or instruments in God's hand. Their only value lies in their being actually used by him. 42

There are two misconceptions concerning the place of the means of grace in God's plan of salvation, against which Wesley fought a continuous battle. One is the pitfall of "enthusiasm." He fights this problem in his own society in Fetter Lane, from which he and his brother Charles consequently felt compelled to withdraw. After that he firmly asserts, "Enthusiasts ob-
serve this. Expect no ends without the means." Another time he sadly asks, "Why are not we more holy?...Chiefly because we are enthusiasts; looking for the end without the means." On the other hand, Wesley also attacks the opposite error of putting the means in the place of their end, of "trusting in the means."

LONG have I seem'd to serve Thee Lord,  
With unavailing Pain;  
Fasted, and pray'd and read Thy Word,  
And heard it preach'd, in vain.

But I of Means have made my Boast,  
Of Means an Idol made;  
The Spirit in the Letter lost,  
The substance in the Shade.

The solution for this misuse is not non-use, but the proper use:

I do the Thing thy Laws enjoin,  
and then the strife give o'er:  
To Thee I then the whole resign:  
I trust in Means no more.  

Wesley encouraged his people to lay stress on the "weightier matters of the Law." These matters are faith, love, mercy, holiness—that is, the end of the means. Without God's grace added to the means, these are useless. Wesley operates with three kinds of means of grace. First, the general means: "How should we wait for the fulfilling of this promise? A. In universal obedience; in keeping all the commandments; in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily. These are the general means which God hath ordained for our receiving his sanctifying grace."  

Second, there are the prudential means. They may vary according to the person's needs and circumstances. These means can be almost anything. Whatever is conducive to holiness and love becomes, to that extent, a means of grace. But the third kind, the instituted means of grace, are of the greatest importance for Wesley. For him there are five chief instituted means of grace: prayer, the Word, fasting, Christian conference (the Christian fellowship) and the Lord's Supper.  

"...All who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the way of prayer." Whatever we may desire or seek from God, we must realize the absolute necessity of using prayer as a means toward this end: "Every new victory which a soul gains is the effect of a new prayer....Prayer may be said to be the breath of our spiritual life. He that lives cannot possibly cease breathing." A Christian prays always, at all times, and in all places and
"with all sorts of prayer, public, private, mental, vocal." 49 There are four parts of all prayers: deprecation (pleading for forgiveness and mercy), petition (asking), intercession (praying for others) and thanksgiving. Prayer prepares and enables those who pray to receive God's blessings:

So that the end of our praying is not to inform God, as though He knew not your wants already; but rather to inform yourselves; to fix the sense of those wants more deeply in your hearts, and the sense of your continual dependence on Him who only is able to supply all your wants. It is not so much to move God, who is always more ready to give than you to ask, as to move ourselves, that you may be willing and ready to receive the good things He has prepared for you.50

No man is under the necessity of falling from grace, but the possibility is always present. Wesley, therefore, exhorts, "Watch, that ye may pray, and pray, that ye may watch."51

The greatest efficacy of fasting, as Wesley sees it, is in connection with prayer.

And it is chiefly, as it is a help to prayer, that it has so frequently been found a means in the hand of God, of confirming and increasing, not one virtue, not chastity only...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.52

Through fasting our bodies are "kept under," a spiritual strength from God is graciously bestowed and fruits of humiliation and real reformation of life will result.53

Christian fellowship, as Wesley understands it, has two aspects: "Christian conference" (or "conversation") and the "assembling together." The matter of conversation is never an indifferent matter. It may tear down or build up.

That it may minister grace—Be a means of conveying more grace into their hearts. Hence we learn, what discourse is corrupt, as it were stinking in the nostrils of God; namely, all that is not profitable, not edifying, not apt to minister grace to the hearers.54

The other aspect of this ordinance is the assembling together. Attending church, the public worship of God and sharing in Christian fellowship have
been shown to be essential in growing in grace. "God in answer to their prayers, builds up His children by each other in every good gift; nourishing and strengthening the whole 'body by that which every joint supplieth'".55 Christian fellowship and conversation are truly efficacious means for all who desire God and His salvation.

"All who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in searching the Scriptures."56 The Word, through the Holy Spirit, convicts of sin. Faith is given by hearing the same Word preached; and believers grow in holiness. Although private reading and meditation are important aids to a life of faith, hearing the Word preached has always remained central in Methodism. It should be preached both as law and gospel, "...duly mixing both, in every place, if not in every sermon."57 God's Word appears as a complete means of grace, conveying severally to each person God's grace according to his needs. But this means must be used: there must be regular preaching, and the Bible used, or else faith would languish and die.

How, then, are the means related to one another? If fasting and prayer are preparatory (and, as such, indispensable), then God's Word (preached, heard, read and meditated upon) may be termed a convicting, converting and confirming ordinance. At Wesley's time the Lord's Supper was considered the chief and superior confirming ordinance. But Wesley affirms it to be a converting ordinance as well: "I showed at large...that the Lord's Supper was ordained by God to be a means of conveying to men either preventing, or justifying, or sanctifying grace, according to their several necessities."58 And, finally, the "Christian fellowship" and "Conference" provide the proper environmental context within which all the other instituted means, as well as other prudential means, may be exercised.

The Word plays an important role in God's plan of salvation. But for Wesley, the Lord's Supper always remains the means of grace par excellence. Such conceptions seem only natural when it is remembered that, in a service of the Lord's Supper, all instituted means are involved: The Word of God is read, preached and meditated upon; prayers of several kinds are central to the whole sacrament; there issues communion and fellowship with God and fellow worshipers, all woven together into a mighty symphony of blessings:

This is the richest Legacy,
Thou hast on Man bestow'd
Here chiefly, LORD, we feed on Thee,
And drink thy precious Blood.

Here all thy Blessings we receive,
Here all thy Gifts are given;
To those that would in Thee believe,
Pardon, and Grace, and Heaven.59
2. *Baptism*

By water, then, *as a means*, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again; whence it is also called by the Apostle, 'the washing of regeneration.' Our Church therefore ascribes no greater virtue to baptism than Christ himself has done.60

Baptism, therefore, serves the same function as the other instituted means of grace. God has so ordained that through this ordinance His grace is channeled to the baptizand according to that person's state and needs. It parallels closely the various aspects of the Lord's Supper, with the main distinction that baptism is initiatory; its function is to *commence* what the Lord's Supper (with other means of grace) is basically ordained to *preserve* and *develop*—a life in faith and holiness. While the other means are used by God as converting as well as confirming ordinances, the task of baptism is to be the starting point on the road to salvation. We are obliged to make use of baptism, to which God has tied us, although He is free to bestow His grace with or without means. "Indeed," Wesley admits, "where it cannot be had, the case is different, but extraordinary cases do not make void a standing rule."61

In Wesley's teaching on the way of salvation, the doctrine of total corruption is a necessary presupposition for God's grace:

*This then, is the foundation of the new birth,—the entire corruption of our nature. Hence it is that being born in sin, we must be 'born again.' Hence every one that is born of a woman must be born of the Spirit of God.*62

So far Wesley follows the Calvinist position. That the guilt of Adam's sin is imputed to all, he allows. "But," he asserts, "that any one will be damned for this alone, I allow not, till you show me where it is written."

No dire decree of thine did seal
or fix th' unalterable doom;
Consign my unborn soul to hell,
Or damn me from my mother's womb.

"And none ever was or can be a loser but by his own choice."63 By virtue of Christ's atonement, prevenient grace is given to all.64 Thus no person is lost because grace has not been received, but because the grace received has not been used.

But all persons sin and stand guilty and condemned before God. They need forgiveness and finding favor with God, that is, justifying grace:
It is true the Second Adam hath found a remedy for the disease which came upon all by the offence of the first. But the benefit of this is to be received through the means which he hath appointed; through baptism in particular which is the ordinary means he hath appointed for that purpose and to which God hath tied us, though he may not have tied himself.  

That is, as Wesley sees it, baptism, generally, in an ordinary way, is necessary to salvation, but not in the absolute sense: “I hold nothing to be (strictly speaking) necessary to salvation but the mind which was in Christ.”  

But Wesley’s conception of baptismal grace consequently includes also the second “grand branch of salvation,” namely, sanctification, here expressed in terms of its inception, the New Birth. The New Birth implies a radical, inward change effectuated by the workings of the Holy Spirit. Wesley states, “By water then, as a means, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again; whence it is also called by the Apostle, ‘the washing of regeneration!’ Our Church [of England] ascribes no greater virtue to baptism than Christ himself has done.”  

He goes on to clarify what he means, in order to prevent a splitting up of the sacrament into its two parts by emphasizing the one or the other: “Nor does she ascribe it to the outward washing, but to the inward grace, which added thereto, makes it a sacrament.”  

The Spirit brings the cleansing of the soul, and effectuates the New Birth. Thus the two great parts of salvation, justification and the New Birth, are held out as the major benefits conveyed in baptism. Baptism is the “gate” into the entering seal of the covenant.  

“By baptism we are admitted into the Church, and consequently made members of Christ, its Head. The Jews were admitted into the Church by circumcision, so are the Christians by baptism.”  

This does not only mean becoming a member of the church as an institution. It involves a union with Christ:  

For ‘as many as are baptized into Christ,’ in his name, ‘have’ thereby ‘put on Christ’ (Gal. 3:27); that is, are mystically united to Christ, and made one with him. ‘For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body,’ (1 Cor. 12:13) namely, the Church, ‘the body of Christ’ (Eph. 4:12).  

Thus, although baptism admits into the visible and organizational church as well as the Church as the mystical body of Christ, nevertheless, it is possible to be a member of the former and not of the latter, because membership in the mystical body is not a formal, but a spiritual matter. As long as a person is one with this root, he will draw spiritual life from it.  

“The Baptism of young children is to be retained in the Church.”  

With this simple sentence Wesley affirms his preference for infant baptism. In or-
der to show that infants are proper subjects of baptism, he proposes to "...lay down the grounds of infant baptism, taken from Scripture, reason, and primitive, universal practice." He argues on several levels—first on the basis of the infant's need: "If infants are guilty of original sin, then they are proper subjects of baptism; seeing in the ordinary way, they cannot be saved, unless this be washed away by baptism."

Second, infants ought to come to Christ, be admitted into the church, and dedicated to God. Wesley understands this aspect of baptism to include the parents' willingness to give their child to God by bringing the child to be baptized, as well as their taking a twofold vow: In behalf of the child they promise to take up the obligation as well as the privileges of the covenant; and in their own behalf they promise to teach the child the ways of the Lord. Modern Methodism has, by and large, watered down Wesley's rich sacramental thought. Often only the aspect of dedication is left of his teachings on baptism, and sometimes not even that.

Wesley next argues from apostolic practice. There are no explicit examples in Scripture of baptism of infants, but, Wesley argues, if infants were to be excluded from baptism, Jesus must have expressly forbidden them. He also argues on the basis of probabilities: "She was baptized, and her family—Who can believe that in so many families there was no infant? or that the Jews, who were so long accustomed to circumcise their children, would not now devote them to God by baptism?" Wesley also refers to several Church Fathers, and continues, "...we may safely conclude, it was handed down from the Apostles, who best knew the mind of Christ."

But Wesley's main argument in support of baptizing infants is based upon the continuity of the covenant of grace established with Abraham. Baptism is now the "circumcision of Christ" and the New Testament seal of the covenant. He asserts, "Now, if infants were capable of being circumcised, notwithstanding that repentance and faith were to go before circumcision in grown persons, they are just as capable of being baptized; notwithstanding that repentance and faith are, in grown persons, to go before baptism....They may be saved, and may be baptized too, notwithstanding they are not Believers."

It is clear that Wesley accepts a doctrine of New Birth through the means of baptism, and that this suffices for those who die in infancy. This grace may properly be termed "objective" in that its origin is found outside the subject, in this case an infant. It must not be considered objective, however, in the sense of being impersonal and formal only; Wesley teaches that something new is born, comes into being, a "principle of grace is infused," the Holy Spirit is given, and the baptized is "mystically united to Christ....From which spiritual, vital union with him, proceeds the influence of his grace on those that are baptized." A fact which is often overlooked is that Wesley firmly believed in adults being "born again" through the means
of baptism. He only adds, with the Church of England, two conditions: that they repent and believe the gospel. "Baptism, administered to real penitents, is both a means and a seal of pardon. Nor did God ordinarily in the primitive Church bestow this on any, unless through this means." Actually, for adults baptism may function in one of two ways. If a person is already converted, that person should also be "born of the water." On the other hand, if not already converted, that person should be baptized in order to be "born again" through that means:

Either men have received the Holy Ghost, or not. If they have not, 'Repent,' saith God, 'and be baptized and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.' If they have, if they are already baptized with the Holy Ghost, then, who can forbid water?

In his Journal, Wesley gives many examples of adults who were baptized and who found that God poured out His grace according to the person’s need.

We have already mentioned that Wesley believes that infants are "born again" through the means of Baptism. But he rejects the suggestion that infants believe, aided by the faith of others, as Luther proposed. When Calvin teaches that God acknowledges infants as His children directly from their birth, that they receive sanctification from their parents, and consequently, are baptized because they already belong to Christ, Wesley differs at several points. For Calvin these privileges belong only to those born within the covenant while, as Wesley sees it, this prevenient grace is given to all. Furthermore, Wesley would agree with Luther that children are born again through baptism, and not only given the sign as seal and assurance of something which has already taken place. He would, nevertheless, agree with Calvin when he says: "Infants are renewed by the Spirit of God, according to the capacity of their age, till that power which was concealed within them grow by degrees and becomes fully manifest at the proper time." Wesley would insist that God work this "renewal," or at least its beginning, through the means of baptism. Calvin operates with a concept of "federal holiness"; that is, the children have holiness by their parents being within the covenant. John Wesley rejects this. For him it is a question of actual faith and actual holiness.

All grace, even baptismal grace, may be lost, although that is never necessary. Wesley speaks of "baptized heathens" or "baptized infidels." If this grace is lost it can still be received anew. It is, therefore, extremely important that the children be taught in order to counteract the natural corruption and make it possible for them to grow in grace.
3. The Lord’s Supper

Receiving the Bread
On JESUS we feed,
It doth not appear
His manner of working;
but JESUS is here.\(^{86}\)

“At the Holy Table the People meet to worship GOD, and GOD is present to meet and bless his people….And GOD offers to us the Body and Blood of his SON, and all the other blessings we have need to receive.”\(^{87}\) The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper conveys, first, Christ’s death and sacrifice, and, second, all the fruits or benefits flowing from this sacrifice as “present Graces.” Through the sacrament the communicant receives; Christ’s sacrifice is conveyed to that person. Communion, therefore, in this sense, becomes communication. “And by this means it conveys to me the Communion of his Sufferings, which leads to a Communion in all his Graces and Glories.”\(^{88}\) Christ there feeds our souls with the constant supply of His mercies, as really as He feeds our bodies with bread and wine.\(^{89}\) The Lord’s Supper is an efficacious means of grace.

Is it not the eating of that bread, and the drinking of that cup, the outward, visible means, whereby God conveys into our souls all that spiritual grace, that righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which were purchased by the body of Christ once broken and the blood of Christ once shed for us? Let all, therefore, who truly desire the grace of God, eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.\(^{90}\)

Thus the Lord’s Supper, in its function as a means of grace, actually communicates what is there shown, namely, Christ’s death and His intercession for the believer before God.

As for the direct content of the grace conveyed through the Lord’s Supper, Wesley is definite and clear. “I showed at large…that the Lord’s Supper was ordained by God to be a means of conveying to men either preventing, or justifying or sanctifying grace according to their several necessities.”\(^{91}\) In his Dictionary Wesley defines “prevent” as “to come or go before”; in this context it would then refer to grace “coming before” the saving grace of justification and the New Birth.

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace: including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a
deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and things of God. \(^\text{92}\)

The second great branch of the sacramental grace is justification. Since justification means forgiveness of sins and finding favor before God, it must follow that the Lord's Supper is also a converting ordinance. Wesley had seen this happen. In a versified epitaph for his mother, Charles Wesley speaks of "a legal night of seventy years," until

> The Father there revealed His Son  
> Him in the broken bread made known;  
> She knew and felt her sins forgiven,  
> And found the earnest of her heaven. \(^\text{93}\)

Therefore, unbelievers ought to communicate. "Ought every unbeliever to pray and communicate? Yes! 'Ask and it (faith) shall be given you.' And if you believe Christ died for guilty, helpless sinners, then eat that Bread and drink of that Cup." \(^\text{94}\)

Third, the Lord's Supper conveys the grace of sanctification. "When we are born again, then our sanctification, our inward and outward holiness begins: and thenceforward we are gradually to 'grow up into Him who is our Head.'" \(^\text{95}\) God not only sustains the new life in the soul, He makes one grow up into the full stature of Christ. Therefore Wesley exhorts his people, "Lose no opportunity of receiving the sacrament. All who have neglected this have suffered loss; most of them are as dead as stones; therefore be you constant therein, not only for example but for the sake of your own souls." \(^\text{96}\)

Not only is the Lord's Supper a communion with Christ. It is a communion of all believers, a union of love, holiness and perfection. "We being many are yet, as it were, but different parts of one and the same broken bread, which we receive to unite us in one body."

> One with the Living Bread Divine,  
> Which now by Faith we eat,  
> Our Hearts, and Minds, and Spirits join.  
> And all in Jesus meet. \(^\text{97}\)

**EFFECTIVE PLEDGE OF HEAVEN**

As a pledge, The Lord's Supper functions on two levels. First, the right and the title to the inheritance is actually made over to the communicant through the sacrament. Second, the holy sacrament is a pledge from the Lord that He will give to the believers His glory, that He will "faithfully render to us the Purchase." \(^\text{98}\) The Lord's Supper is a pledge and assurance that God, as it were, will keep *His* side of the covenental agreement. But this does not mean that Wesley indirectly accepts the Calvinistic doctrine of the perseverance of the saints; the possibility of falling out of grace is always
present. But God's promise is sure. In this sense only can the sacrament be considered an "infallible pledge." There is one use of the idea of assurance by means of a pledge which Wesley clearly rejects. No outward form or action is a guarantee that I am in a state of grace, or born again now. Even if a person is baptized, partakes regularly in prayers, worship and the Lord's Supper, that person may still not be a Christian. As quoted above, Wesley witnessed, "I trust in means no more." The distinction between a pledge and an earnest is crucial here:

A Pledge and an Earnest differ in this, That an Earnest may be allow'd upon Account, for part of that Payment which is promised, whereas Pledges are taken back. Thus for Example, Zeal, Love and those Degrees of Holiness which GOD bestows in the Use of his Sacraments, will remain with us when we are in Heaven and there make Part of our Happiness. But the Sacraments themselves shall be taken back and shall no more appear in Heaven than did the Cloudy Pillar in Canaan. We shall have no Need of these sacred Figures of CHRIST, when we shall actually possess it. But till that Day, the Holy Sacrament hath that Third Use, of being a Pledge from the LORD that he will give us that Glory.

The sacrament, therefore, is not an earnest. The content of the earnest is love, zeal and holiness, even Christ the Redeemer Himself. It is heaven here.

Thee in the glorious Realm they praise,
And bow before thy Throne,
We in the Kingdom of thy Grace,
The Kingdoms are but One.

Again Wesley's doctrine of the "Eternal Now" clearly becomes visible. The efficacy of the sacrament is proven by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. The ultimate test of the efficacy and, consequently, assurance, is that God actually bestows the earnest. Although both past and future, salvation is always and essentially a present salvation.

EFFECTIVE SACRIFICE: THE ATONEMENT APPROPRIATED

For Wesley there are two main branches of the Lord's Supper: namely, a sacrament, the functions of which are "memorial," "means of grace" and "pledge of heaven" and, secondly, a sacrifice. The content of sacrifice for Wesley is the believer offering up body, soul and whatever else can be given. Wesley understands Christ's "Priestly Office" as consisting of two parts: first, His life, death and suffering upon the cross (i.e., the Atonement, His dying in our place); second, Christ's continuing high-priestly office as constantly interceding at the throne of God the Father. However, although Christ's atoning work is continual and ongoing, it must not be implied that
Christ’s sacrifice can be repeated. Wesley rejects the sacrifice of the Roman Mass, whether that is said to be “bloody” or “unbloody”; if they are both propitiatory, then they are of the same virtue and serve the same end.106 For Wesley the sacramental sacrifice is neither propitiatory nor expiatory. In the direction from God to humankind it is the task of the minister to bring a clear understanding of the present efficacy and availability of Christ’s death “as still powerful for eternal salvation.” Thus the Lord’s Supper communicates the body and blood to the communicants. At the same time, in the Godward direction people present not the same sacrifice, but the sacrifice in its consequent effects, “...as bleeding and suing for mercy.” The believer receives the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice and, having received Christ, is able to “set forth the death of the Lord” before the Father, and, together with that, also himself.106 The Lord’s Supper is a means of conveying Christ’s sacrifice both ways. First, Christ’s sacrifice is received and feasted upon.107 Second, it is this sacrifice, already received, which is “set forth” before the Father as a pleading sacrifice together with the offering up of “self.”108

Thus the sacrament, as it is a sacrifice, is “the sacrifice of ourselves.” The believer offers up to God all thoughts, words and actions, “through the Son of His love, as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.”109 But the believer does not only share in the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice, but also bears the Cross of Christ and dies with Him in sacrifice.110 “I am crucified to the world, and the world crucified to me” (Gal. 6:14).111 We must bear Christ’s cross: “Prepare for the Cross; welcome it; bear it triumphantly, live Christ’s Cross, whether scoffs, mockings, contempt, imprisonments. But see it be Christ’s cross, not thine own.”112

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to close with the words with which Wesley concludes his preface to the sacramental hymns, and pray with him:

Forgive, I beseech Thee, my Sins, deliver me from my Sorrows, and accept of this my Sacrifice: or rather look in my Behalf, on that only true Sacrifice, whereof here is a sacrament; the Sacrifice of thy well-beloved Son, proceeding from Thee, to die for me, O let Him come unto me now, as the only-begotten of the Father, full of Grace and Truth!113
Notes

ABBREVIATIONS


HLS John and Charles Wesley, Hymns on the Lord's Supper (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1745).


2. Borgen, Wesley on the Sacraments, pp. 46-47; cf. pp. 36-44.


4. Works, 4:413.

5. OT Notes, 1 Chr. 21:26; Lev. 25:25; Num. 15:2, 19:2.

6. NT Notes, Rom. 9:25; 1 Thess. 1:10; Heb. 2:10, 13:20.


8. Works, 8:49.


14. Brevint (W), 3.2.9.


17. Wesley, Duty of Receiving, p. 11.
18. HLS, no. 162:1.
21. Cf. Works, 10:192, "...inward grace, which added thereto, makes it a sacrament."
22. Wesley, Sunday Service, p. 312. Wesley speaks of "...the senseless opinion of transubstantiation." It is "hurtful to piety" and goes against Scripture, sense and reason (Works, 7:64; 9:278; 10:151).
24. Wesley, Duty of Receiving, p. 8; HLS, no. 30:5; Borgen, Wesley on the Sacraments, pp. 58-69.
27. Brevint (W), 2:14.
28. Ibid., 2:7.
29. Ibid., 2:5 and 9:6-7.
30. Ibid., 2:9:7; cf. 3.2, 9-10.
31. Ibid., 2:3:5.
33. Ibid., 2:7:6; HLS, no. 94:2.
34. HLS, 22:1, 3; cf. nos. 25:2, 123:3.
37. John Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions, 2d ed. (W. Bowyer, 1754), 1:229.
40. Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions, 1:248.
43. NT Notes, 1 Tim. 4:13; Works, 8:316.
46. Works, 8:286, 323.
48. Sermons, 1:246, 248; Works, 11:437; NT Notes, 1 Thess. 5:16-17.
49. NT Notes, Eph. 6:18.
50. Sermons, 1:430-431; NT Notes, Matt. 6:8.
51. NT Notes, Eph. 6:18, 2 Tim. 4:5, 1 Pet. 4:7.
52. Sermons, 1:458.
53. NT Notes, Matt. 4:2; OT Notes, Isa. 58:5; Works, 8:364.
54. NT Notes, Eph. 4:29; Heb. 10:22.
56. Sermons, 1:248.
57. Letters, 3:79.
59. HLS, no. 42:4-5.
60. Works, 10:192. Italics added.
61. Ibid., 10:193.
63. Ibid., 6:240, 10:190; Poetical Works, 3:15, 33.
64. Ibid., 8:227-278.
66. Ibid., 10:198; Letters, 3:36.
68. Ibid., 6:509.
69. Ibid., 10:191.
70. Ibid.
72. Works, 10:193.
73. Ibid.
74. Works, 10:195; NT Notes, Acts 16:15, 1 John 5:7; Works, 8:73.
75. NT Notes, Acts 16:15; cf. Works, 10:196-198.
76. Works, 10:197-198.
77. Ibid., 10:196-197, 199.
78. Ibid., 10:191. Italics added.
79. NT Notes, Acts 22:16; Works, 8:48, 52.
81. See Borgen, Wesley on the Sacraments, pp. 161 ff., and nn. 171, 177.
86. HLS, no. 92:6; cf. no 101:2.
87. Brevint (W), 1.1:3.
88. Ibid., 4.7:16.
89. Ibid., 3:5:11.
92. Works, 6:509.
96. Letters, 4:272.
97. NT Notes, 1 Cor. 10:17; HLS, no. 165.
98. Brevint (W), 5.4-6:18-19.
99. Ibid., 2.1:4.
100. Sermons, 1:267, 295-296, 300.
102. HLS, nos. 88:4, 96:3.
104. Brevint (W), 1.1:3-4.
106. Ibid., 6.2:22.
107. HLS, nos. 35:1, 67:1; Brevint, 1.1:3-4; 4.8:16.
108. OT Notes, 1 Chr. 29:14.
110. OT Notes, Exod. 27:4, 29:36.
111. Brevint (W), 7.8:26.
112. A Word of Advice to Saints and Sinners, 11th ed. (London: Printed and sold at the New Chapel, City Road; and at the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Preaching Houses, in Town and Country, 1790), p. 11.
113. Brevint (W), 8.6:32.