

THEOLOGY OF JOHN WESLEY



MEANS OF GRACE



- ❖ If we are recipients of God's grace, how does his grace get to us?
- ❖ What is a means of grace?
- ❖ Are the means of grace necessary?
- ❖ Are the means of grace mandatory?

M.O.G. IN CHRISTIAN LIFE

- ❖ Wesley's interest in means of grace span his life
- ❖ Included: fasting, prayer, eucharist, devotional readings to class meetings, love feasts, and rules for holy living
- ❖ Various traditions debate with issues of sacraments

MEDIATION OF GRACE

- ❖ 3 questions which shape differences in Protestant and Catholic traditions
- ❖ 1st: How is a spiritual reality like grace to be mediated through physical means or human actions? Esp. eucharist

- ❖ Luther affirms early church and RC that the benefits of Christ are truly present to believers within the physical elements of the eucharist.
- ❖ Zwingli countered it can't because, "the flesh profiteth nothing!", i.e. ordinance not sacrament
- ❖ Calvin alternative: emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit conveys the benefits of Christ through the eucharist, i.e. spiritually in the act of faith vs. locally in bread and cup

- ❖ Wesley sides with Calvin rejecting a notion of unmediated or immediate grace
- ❖ Christ is the meritorious cause of grace being provided to humanity but not the efficient cause by which it is conveyed
- ❖ Rather the HS, and this presence is immediately effective even when mediated through means.
- ❖ So, Wesley encouraged people to seek God's grace through ordained channels of conveyance.

ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY

- ❖ 2nd: How restrictive are the means of grace? 2 dimensions:
- ❖ 1) is there an exclusive set of means through which divine grace is provided?
- ❖ RC 7 sacraments only official means of grace
- ❖ Reformation: reduction - against clerical control

- ❖ And then turned to say many (non-ordained) actions, such as study of scripture & prayer, were vital means through which God ministers grace to believers.
- ❖ Wesley believed effective communication of God's grace through sacraments of baptism, eucharist, (traditional) liturgy and formal prayers (Anglicanism).
- ❖ But refused to confine to these official channels, expecting his people to avail themselves of both official and unofficial.

- ❖ Wesley's bifocal concern is people experience presence of God (empower) and character of God (pattern for life).
- ❖ This emphasis continues Wesley's emphasis against antinomianism and anti-static, state
- ❖ 2nd dimension: is grace available only through specified means? More: only through proper execution of these means?

- ❖ RC concedes grace can be conveyed apart from means in extraordinary situations
- ❖ Some groups which deny ordinances convey grace insist that only those who submit to proper administration of baptism.
- ❖ Wesley shows his position through 2 statements:
 - 1) would not be a quaker (who rejected doing) and
 - 2) refusing to believe every quaker must be damned

- ❖ “Wesley refused to confine God’s grace in either direction—whether by excluding it from all created means or by restricting it to certain authorized means.”
- ❖ If grace is responsible then it must be immediate, at least initially, to those who have no access to means.

EFFECTIVE MEANS AND REQUISITE RESPONSE

- ❖ 3rd question: What is the relationship between the effectiveness of the means of grace and the presence of human responsiveness?
- ❖ Protestants (misunderstanding) charge RC sacraments intrinsically salvific apart from responsive faith.

- ❖ RC worry Protestants stress effectiveness of rites to recipient's faith so that sacrament and even grace itself become superfluous to salvation.
- ❖ Anglican middle way resulted in debate being internalized to high-church (sacramentalist) and low-church (evangelical).
- ❖ Where does Wesley fit on that spectrum?

- ❖ Scholars have placed him on both side, but unsatisfactorily.
- ❖ Wesley developed an alternative:
 - ❖ 1) He rejects sacraments are salvific intrinsically apart from responsiveness of recipient
 - ❖ 2) He was convinced our response-ability is progressively nurtured by this very grace.

“Those who expect growth in faith and holiness without regular participation in the means through which God has chosen to convey grace [are practicing folly].”

—Maddox

GUARANTEES OF PARDON OR MEANS OF HEALING?

- ❖ East: critical that West has reduced means to juridical pardon, resulting in debates who is qualified to receive, who is qualified to bestow and what procedures are necessary to make it effective?
- ❖ “Eastern Christians value the sacraments as central means by which the deifying presence of the Holy Spirit is conveyed for the healing of our sin-diseased nature.”

- ❖ Because deifying grace is the Holy Spirit they have not limited it exclusively to the sacraments - the Spirit can work wherever he wills.
- ❖ This makes sacrament responsive and full benefit of the sacrament is realized gradually and cumulatively.
- ❖ Wesley continues to be both/and with the focus on therapeutic

NURTURING GRACE AND PATTERNING EXERCISES

- ❖ Wesley's therapeutic focus shown in asking his people to meditate on the affirmation that Christ "sealed His love with sacraments of grace, to breed and nourish up in us the life of love."
- ❖ Raises the question, how do the means of grace breed and nourish the life of love?

- ❖ 1) they are exercises which gradually develop Christ-like character
- ❖ 2) they convey the “gift” of God’s character-changing power
- ❖ Early Wesley stresses the first dimension
- ❖ Middle Wesley convicted that our love is only available in response to God’s love

- ❖ This shifted Wesley to understand means to convey God's gracious empowering love to us
- ❖ Mature Wesley connected the two dimensions
- ❖ Methodist spirituality is a balance: 1) empowerment for holiness is undeserved gift of God's grace conveyed by various means and 2) same means are exercised for nurturing that holiness.

SANCTIFYING MEANS

- ❖ The Lord's Supper
- ❖ Wesley refers to it as the grand channel of grace by the Spirit, it is first step in working out our salvation.
- ❖ Personally practiced communing every week and daily during Easter and Christmas. Avg: 1 every 5 days in his lifetime

- ❖ Wesley's assumption was that his people would commune at local Anglican church - believing it needed to be officiated by an ordained elder.
- ❖ As Methodism grew many came from non-conformist traditions (non-clergy) and didn't offer it as frequently as Wesley recommended, i.e. weekly.
- ❖ This forced him to celebrating it during society meetings, when he or another ordained was available.

- ❖ His understanding was that it was a commemoration of Christ's sacrifice vs. RC repeated sacrifice.
- ❖ Not a mere memorial but but a primary way to be convinced of the love of God for us, i.e. it represents Christ's sacrifice in dramatic display, conveying salvific power.
- ❖ Wesley believed that it is a sacrament that truly conveys to believers the gracious gift of Christ.

- ❖ It does so because of the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament, not in RC/Lutheran but in Anglican understanding, “only after a heavenly and spiritual manner.”
- ❖ Wesley moves beyond even this to an understanding that the Spirit conveys Christ’s benefits to the believer.
- ❖ Thus, Spirit is present but the participant must be cooperant.

- ❖ Also, future dimension of communion.
- ❖ Eucharist becomes a celebration of Christ's resurrection and anticipation of messianic banquet.
- ❖ Note: communion takes place within a liturgical framework that creates shaping transformation, i.e. reflection and confession of sin

CORPORATE WORSHIP

- ❖ Liturgical worship provided spiritual nurture
- ❖ As people left parish he introduced liturgical worship into society meetings
- ❖ Added changes: lay preachers and extemporaneous prayers
- ❖ Thus Methodism bridged between Anglican and non-conformist worship

- ❖ Formal Prayers: “substantial food for any who are alive to God.” Can’t fudge!
- ❖ Lectionary: Ongoing reading of scripture (whole) to benefit in empowering and pattering potential.
- ❖ Church Year: Focus on season tied directly to Christ, i.e. Advent, Easter, Ascension/Pentecost
- ❖ Hymns: assume they empower and shape Christian discipleship (around way of salvation)

- ❖ Sermon: 1) Field Preaching: awakening and 2) pastoral preaching: encouragement, guidance for growth in saving relationship; inviting, convincing, offering Christ, and building up in every sermon.
- ❖ Offering Christ in his three offices: Assuring of Gods pardoning love (Priest), revealing our remaining need (Prophet), and leading further growth in Christ-likeness (King).

COMMUNAL SUPPORT

- ❖ It is difficult to follow radical discipleship in the face of societal adversity without the strong role of the community, i.e. spiritual help.
- ❖ “The gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. {} I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversion with {others}.”

- ❖ Love Feasts: monthly service focused on testimony by believers - encouraging progress in way of salvation.
- ❖ Watch-night Services: New Year's Eve tradition time of election on remaining sin and God's support in renewed obedient response.
- ❖ Covenant Renewal: New Year's day service; 1) confession of failure of living restored relationship with God, 2) affirmation of God's faithfulness and forgiveness, 3) renewal of commitments with God's empowerment.

ACCOUNTABILITY

- ❖ “Soul and body make a [human]; but spirit and discipline make a Christian.”
- ❖ General Rules: Avoid all known sin, do as much good as one can, and attend all the ordinances of God.
- ❖ Spiritual Directors: due to subtleness and deceitfulness of sin everyone needs accountability for growth in holiness.

- ❖ **Accountability Groups:** support members responsible participation in transforming work of God's grace.

PRIVATE EXERCISES

- ❖ Study of Scripture: Top of list. A portion of OT & NT each morning and evening and to meditate on them.
- ❖ Devotional/Catechetical Readings: regular reading of practical divinity to all who desire to grow in grace.
- ❖ Private Prayers: Grand means of drawing near to God.

WORKS OF MERCY

- ❖ Love of God and Love of Others: Love of God leads to love of neighbour. Failure to love neighbour demonstrates a false love for God.
- ❖ Formative Effect of Works of Mercy: they deepen relationship with God's empowering presence.
- ❖ Place of Self-Denial: regular fasting, avoid frivolous pleasures - without suffering as formation.

JUSTIFYING GRACE

- ❖ Initiating grace
- ❖ Baptism, infant baptism, confirmation, catechesis
- ❖ Communion, esp. children