

## The power of Godliness to know: Charles Wesley and the means of grace

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“‘Means of grace!’ he answered; ‘there are none. Neither is there any good to be got by all those you call such, or any obligation upon us to use them. Sometimes I go to church and Sacrament for example[’s] sake: but it is a thing of mere indifference. Most of us have cast them off.’” So Charles Wesley recounts a conversation with the “poor perverted Mr. Simpson...swayed by the arguments of the Moravians.”<sup>1</sup> In this one comment are all, or most, of the questions that are the concern of this paper: if there are means of grace, what they are, what obligation we have to use them, and appropriate ways to make use of them when we do.

By way of answering these questions, I am seeking to “tease out” Charles Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace. To do so is not without its difficulties. We are easily tempted to treat Charles Wesley’s work as little more than poetic interpretation of or commentary on the themes sounded in John Wesley’s tracts and sermons. As Richard Heitzenrater notes, “One practical problem in dealing with Charles Wesley’s theology as seen in the hymns is that many of them were produced in pamphlets co-published with John and were thus filtered through his ear. It is therefore difficult to distinguish a distinctive Charles Wesley theological perspective from these sources alone.”<sup>2</sup> A second problem, perhaps the opposite of the one Heitzenrater identifies, is that there has been little direct attention given to Charles Wesley’s theology of the means of grace; Henry Knight’s study of John Wesley and the means of grace barely mentions Charles.<sup>3</sup> A third problem is that Charles did not produce any tracts or sermons that provide a singular focal point for such exploration, nor, like John, did he write anything approaching a systematic theology. While these problems make a clear understanding of Charles’ theological perspective difficult, they do not make it impossible. Charles has left us a theological record in his journals, sermons, and hymns.

In developing an understanding of Charles’ theology, we want to avoid, as best we can, John’s theological filter. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to approach Charles’ work much as Randy Maddox has suggested we approach John’s—under the framework of practical theology. To this end, Maddox identified five characteristics of a practical theology that help orient our exploration of Charles’ work. A practical theology: 1) is inherently transformative, seeking to understand and to correct the Christian life; 2) is holistic, providing norms for mind, will, and affection; 3) makes praxis its starting and ending point; 4) is contextual, not searching “for universal unchanging expressions of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Journal of The Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 2 vols. (London: John Mason, 1849), I: 205-6 (April 3, 1740).

<sup>2</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Charles Wesley and the Methodist Tradition” in S T Kimbrough, Jr., ed. *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* (Nashville: Kingswood/Abingdon, 1992), 181.

<sup>3</sup> See Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace*, *Pietist and Wesleyan Studies*, No. 3 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992).

Christian faith”; and, 5) is occasional, addressing “primary issues as they arise.”<sup>4</sup> Within this framework, then, the primary resources for exploring Charles Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace emerge primarily as responses to a Moravian-influenced “stillness” movement within the Methodist societies. The advocates of this movement argued against the necessity or existence of “means of grace” in the Christian life and encouraged society members to abstain “from the ordinances (including the Lord’s Supper) until they had full assurance [of faith], thereby avoiding any linkage of works with salvation.”<sup>5</sup> His responses, reflecting on the particular practices and (mis-) understandings of the means of grace in the Methodist and pietist movements, sought to bring both understanding and correction in the midst of these challenges and to undergird the normative character of the means of grace for the Christian life. Yet, while his response is clearly contextual, he does seem to suggest that the ordinary means of grace—prayer, searching the Scriptures, Eucharist—are “universal unchanging expressions of the Christian faith.”

What is the place and purpose of the means of grace in the Christian life? Charles’ answers to this question leads him, first, to identify the problematic understandings of the means of grace; second, to argue that the means of grace are “ordinances of God” and therefore commanded to our use; and, third, that the means of grace are means to the renewal of the Christian life.

Before turning to these questions, however, it may be helpful to note what practices Charles consistently identifies as means of grace. The briefest list seems to occur in a journal entry from 1739: fasting, prayer and sacrament. The longest list appears in a hymn from 1745, “Thou meetest those that remember thee in thy Ways”: fasting, prayer, searching and hearing the Life-giving Word, the mystical bread. A similar full list appears in a journal entry from 1756: word and prayer of all kind, reading the scriptures daily, going constantly to church and sacrament.<sup>6</sup> Among the hymns and journal entries that name the means of grace (nine specific references, excluding the

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<sup>4</sup> Randy Maddox, “John Wesley—Practical Theologian?” *Wesley Theological Journal* 23 (Spring-Fall 1988): 127.

<sup>5</sup>Karen Westerfield Tucker, “Polemic against Stillness in the *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*,” unpublished manuscript (October 2006), 6. Westerfield Tucker provides a concise but thorough description of the stillness controversy as it emerged from the interaction of the Moravians and Methodists in 1739 and 1740 as well as substantial attention to the Eucharistic hymns, which I will therefore not explore in this paper. That the controversy persisted in the Methodist movement for some time is reflected in the 1745 tract *A Short View of the Difference between the Moravian Brethren, lately in England; and the Reverend Mr. John And Charles Wesley* (London: W. Strahan, 1745) and in John Wesley’s prefaces to the 1739, 1740, 1742, 1743, and 1756 editions of the Wesleys’ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (the preface to 1743 repeats that of 1739, the preface of 1756 repeats that of 1742). The tensions created by the controversy were perhaps also present in Charles’ self-understanding as well: Frank Baker suggests that stillness appealed to Charles, and that in 1741 he considered going to Germany to join Böhler, although his journal from this period suggests he became quite direct in countering this. Baker writes, “For a time at least he was in danger of forsaking all active religion, and succumbing to the appeal of ‘stillness’—the complete renunciation of human effort along the pathway to salvation, and the denial of any real value in the so-called means of grace.” Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by his Letters* (London: Epworth, 1948), 40.

<sup>6</sup> The journal entries are from October 27, 1739 (*Journal*, I: 192) and October 21, 1756 (*Journal*, II: 130). The hymn is the third of six attached to *A Short View*, 19.

*Hymns on the Lord's Supper*), prayer is included in all of them, followed by sacrament, Scripture, and fasting.<sup>7</sup>

### 1. The problem of the means of grace

The problem of the means of grace, as Charles responded to it, focused on two concerns: 1) the human inclination to rely on, to “trust in”, the means of grace not only as necessary but as sufficient expressions of the Christian life, leading to justification by works rather than by grace, and 2) the Moravian [at least John Molther's] insistence that the means were not means and were to be used only by believers, “such as *are* sanctified, have Christ fully formed in their hearts.”<sup>8</sup>

Charles repeatedly addresses the first of these problems by distinguishing between the *form* and the *power* of the means of grace. While the form is not to be dispensed with, the power is what we are to seek. Charles suggests that this confusion had been part of his own life, speaking to a Mrs. Delamotte: “Three years ago God sent me to call you from the form to the power of godliness. I told you what true religion was, a new birth, a participation of the divine nature. The way to this I did not know myself till a year after. Then I showed it to you, preaching Jesus Christ, and faith in his blood.”<sup>9</sup>

To Charles, those who focus on the form without seeking or knowing the power are little more than “Pharisees” in practice but not in faith. They remain “dead in trespasses and sins” and “baptized heathens”, as he suggests in his sermon on 1 John 3.14:

While they do no harm, that is, are guilty of no notorious vice, he [the prince of this world] tells them they are safe enough. A little outward religion, added occasionally to a worldly life is abundantly sufficient to denominate them good

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<sup>7</sup> Given the Methodist emphasis on Scripture as the primary source for theological consideration, it gives pause to note that for Charles Wesley the chief of the means of grace is the Lord's Supper:

The prayer, the fast, the word conveys,  
When mix'd with faith, Thy life to me;  
In all the channels of Thy grace  
I still have fellowship with Thee:  
But chiefly here my soul is fed  
With fullness of immortal bread.

[Hymn 54, “Why did my dying Lord obtain,” in *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1745).] Scripture is set more equally among the other means of grace, its power no more nor less than the power of those means, because they are *means*. Laurence Stookey observes, “For Charles Wesley Scripture has clear authority; but it is not in the book as such. The same Spirit who inspired the authors must apply the truth of their words to our hearts, to be received by faith. Scripture does not reveal; it is God who reveals through Scripture...” So Charles Wesley argues when he writes

Whether the Word be preached or read,  
No saving benefit I gain  
From empty sounds or letters dead;  
Unprofitable all and vain,  
Unless by faith thy word I hear  
And see its heavenly character.

[Laurence Hull Stookey, “Charles Wesley, Mentor and Contributor to Liturgical Renewal” in *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian*, 141-142. “Whether the Word be preached or read” from *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. George Osborne, vol. 13 (London: 1872), 123-124.]

<sup>8</sup> *Journal*, I: 221 (April 22, 1740).

<sup>9</sup> *Journal*, I: 238 (June 11, 1740).

Christians.... But alas, what shall it profit them to have a form of godliness while they deny the power of it?<sup>10</sup>

God knows, Charles writes, “who only bows the knee and who in heart approaches thee.”<sup>11</sup> We “think ourselves sincere” but God knows, and will show us, who is “Thy real worshipper.”<sup>12</sup> His sermon on Ephesians 5.14, “Awake, thou that sleepest”, provides his most developed statement about the distinction between the form and the power of religion. Those who trust in the form without the power are “sleepers” who must be awakened. The sleeper is a

quiet, rational, inoffensive, good natured professor of the religion of his fathers... zealous and orthodox... ‘a Pharisee’; that is, according to the scriptural account, one that ‘justifies himself’, one that labours ‘to establish his own righteousness’ as the ground of his acceptance of God... who ‘having the form of godliness, denies the power thereof’; yea, and probably reviles it, wheresoever it is found, as mere extravagance and delusion... He ‘fasts twice in the week’, uses all the means of grace, is constant at church and sacrament; yes, and ‘gives tithes of that he has’, does all the good he can. ‘Touching the righteousness of the law’, he is ‘blameless’: he wants nothing of godliness but the power; nothing of religion but the spirit; nothing of Christianity but the truth and the life.<sup>13</sup>

The sleeper who by grace has awakened to this want, the Pharisee who now knows the difference between the form and the power, might then pray as Charles seems to have encouraged those Methodists tempted by stillness to pray:

Long have I seemed to serve thee, Lord, With unavailing pain; □  
 Fasted, and prayed, and read thy word, □ And heard it preached in vain.  
 Oft did I with the assembly join, □ And near thine altar drew; □  
 A form of godliness was mine, □ The power I never knew.  
 I rested in the outward law, □ Nor knew its deep design; □  
 The length and breadth I never saw, □ And height, of love divine.  
 To please thee thus, at length I see, □ Vainly I hoped and strove; □  
 For what are outward things to thee, □ Unless they spring from love?  
 I see the perfect law requires □ Truth in the inward parts, □  
 Our full consent, our whole desires, □ Our undivided hearts.  
 But I of means have made my boast, □ Of means an idol made; □  
 The spirit in the letter lost, □ The substance in the shade.

<sup>10</sup> “Sermon 4: 1 John 3.14” in *The Sermons of Charles Wesley*, ed. Kenneth Newport (Oxford: Oxford, 2001), 136.

<sup>11</sup> “Father of omnipotent grace”, st. 1, in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge with the assistance of James Dale, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 178.

<sup>12</sup> “Thou Son of God whose flaming eyes”, st. 2, *Collection of Hymns*, 180.

<sup>13</sup> “Sermon 8: Ephesians 5.14--Awake, thou that sleepest” in *Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 214.

Where am I now, or what my hope? □ What can my weakness do? □  
 Jesus, to thee my soul looks up, □ 'Tis thou must make it new.<sup>14</sup>

The problem with the means of grace, Charles argues, is not in the means themselves (since, as he also argues, they have no power in themselves) but with the human tendency to turn the means of grace into the end of religion. On the one hand, they are necessary to the Christian life: “He is no Christian, who is not constant in the means of grace; and yet a man may use them constantly without being a Christian. Though saying our prayers be one particular duty of religion, religion does not stand in purely saying our prayers.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, when Charles takes it upon himself to “preach up the ordinances” he is also persistent in warning against trusting in them “lest God in judgment should suffer to cast [us] off.”<sup>16</sup>

The second problem, the argument from the Moravians in England that only those who have received “full assurance” should use the ordinances, required a different response from Charles. Charles summarizes the problem: “Our brethren complain, that we unjustly charge them with speaking against the ordinances. Yet they teach, that your using them before faith, necessarily keeps you out of it; and your using them after faith, necessarily makes you lose it. Particularly when you find comfort, by no means offer to pray, they say: if you pray then, you will forfeit it immediately.”<sup>17</sup> For Charles, a response to such a claim is found in the testimony of those who been brought to the love of God through the means of grace (echoing some of John’s references to the converting character of the ordinances): “Howel Harris, whom I carried to the still bands, delivered a full and noble testimony, that ‘he had been drawn to the sacrament while dead in sin, and

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<sup>14</sup> “Long have I seemed to serve thee, Lord” in *Collection of Hymns*, 188-189. While we might be tempted to think of this hymn as a commentary on John’s sermon “The Means of Grace,” there seem to be stronger connections between this hymn, Charles’ distinctions between the form and power of godliness, and Matthew Henry’s commentary on 2 Timothy 3.5. Henry writes

When, notwithstanding all this, they *have the form of godliness* (v. 5), are called by the Christian name, baptized into the Christian faith, and make a show of religion; but, how plausible soever their form of godliness is, they deny the power of it. When they take upon them the form which should and would bring along with it the power thereof, they will put asunder what God hath joined together: they will assume the form of godliness, to take away their reproach; but they will not submit to the power of it, to take away their sin.

Matthew Henry and Benjamin Andrews Atkinson, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. VI (Acts to Revelation), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6.iiTim.iv.html> (accessed June 21, 2007). As we will see, with those Scripture texts Charles uses in his “preaching up the ordinances,” his comments reflect the significant influence of, or striking resemblance to, Matthew Henry’s commentaries on these texts. While S T Kimbrough makes no mention of Henry’s *Commentaries* in his article “Charles Wesley and Biblical Interpretation” in *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian*, Winthrop Hudson argues that Erik Routley “demonstrates beyond all question that Charles Wesley often found the primary inspiration for his hymn in Matthew Henry’s *Commentaries*.” [Winthrop S. Hudson, “British Church History,” *Church History* 25.3 (September 1956): 260. Hudson is referring to Routley’s article “Charles Wesley and Matthew Henry,” *Congregational Quarterly* (October 1955): 345-351.] Whether or not it was a primary inspiration, there is a consistent similarity of argument between Matthew Henry’s commentary and Charles Wesley’s hymns and sermons.

<sup>15</sup> “Sermon 12 Luke 18.9-14--*Pharisee and Publican*,” in *Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 271.

<sup>16</sup> *Journal*, I: 213-214 (April 9, 1740).

<sup>17</sup> *Journal*, I: 233 (May 19, 1740).

received forgiveness there; *afterwards* the love of God was shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost, then given him. From *thence* commenced the fight of faith. Fears, doubts, darkness returned; and he was brought through fire and water into a wealthy place.”<sup>18</sup> Charles offers a similar example in a journal entry from 1756:

my late exhortations have stopped some who were on the point of going over to Mr. Edwards's Society, and brought others back to the Church-ordinances. A woman, in particular, after hearing me on Sunday morning, went to church, which she had long forsaken, and received a manifestation of Jesus Christ in the prayers. I earnestly pressed them to recommend to their brethren, both by advice and example, the neglected duties of family and public prayer; and to watch over the flock with all diligence.<sup>19</sup>

As these brief examples suggest, the means of grace are *means*—to experience forgiveness, to begin to know in oneself the love of God, to experience the presence of Jesus Christ. In these experiences, they become the means not only by which the sleeping Christian is awakened to the fullness of the Christian life but also the means through which the awakened Christian comes to know the fullness of assurance sought by Methodists and Moravians. And, these experiences, rather than an “end” of religion, provide a new beginning in the life of faith. Through the means of grace, Christ is *being formed* in the heart. To this end, Charles argues, the means of grace are commands that “bind all, both justified and unjustified.”<sup>20</sup>

## 2. The means of grace are commanded to our use

The means of grace are commands that “bind all, both justified and unjustified.” Unlike our present age, which resists all imposition from or appeals to external authority and which finds obedience an oppressive demand, Charles Wesley frequently made his case for the means of grace from an argument about the ways in which God had commanded them to our use—a claim contested by those in the “stillness party.”<sup>21</sup> In 1739 and 1740 he reported pressing “the use of means, as means, from Isai. lviii., which is full of promises to those that walk in the ordinances with a sincere heart. I took occasion to show the degeneracy of our modern Pharisees.”<sup>22</sup> While we do not have a text of this sermon, his apparent reliance on Matthew Henry’s commentary is suggestive of the direction he might have taken:

<sup>18</sup> *Journal*, I: 226 (May 6, 1740). The emphases on *afterwards* and *thence* are as given in Jackson’s edition of the journal.

<sup>19</sup> *Journal*, II: 124 (October 11, 1756).

<sup>20</sup> See his journal entries for May 10 and June 11, 1740, where he makes the same claim in two different settings. *Journal*, I: 228, 238.

<sup>21</sup> For example, in his journal entry for May 13, 1740, Charles reports on meeting with the “men leaders” at Bray’s, noting that they seemed to have set up an “alternate meeting” that coincided with his preaching at the Foundry: “I bore my testimony for the ordinances and weak faith. Asked whether they did not hold, 1. That the means of grace are neither commands nor means; 2. That forgiveness is never given but together with the abiding witness of the Spirit? James Hutton would not have them give me any answer.” *Journal*, I: 229.

<sup>22</sup> *Journal*, I: 192 (October 27, 1739). On June 2, 1740, Charles similarly reports that he “preached up the ordinances, as they call it, from Isai. lviii; but first with the Prophet I preached them down.” *Journal*, I: 236.

(4.) They are inquisitive concerning their duty and seem desirous only to know it, making no question but that then they should do it: They ask of me the ordinances of justice, the rules of piety in the worship of God, the rules of equity in their dealings with men, both which are ordinances of justice. (5.) They appear to the eye of the world as if they made conscience of doing their duty: They are as a nation that did righteousness and forsook not the ordinances of their God; others took them for such, and they themselves pretended to be such. Nothing lay open to view that was a contradiction to their profession, but they seemed to be such as they should be. Note, Men may go a great way towards heaven and yet come short; nay, may go to hell with a good reputation.<sup>23</sup>

A similar approach appears in his sermon on Luke 18.9-14, on the Pharisee and the Publican:

...a man may make prayers, yea, and long prayers too, and yet be a Pharisee. He is no Christian, who is not constant in the means of grace; and yet a man may use them constantly without being a Christian. Though saying our prayers be one particular duty of religion, religion does not stand in purely saying our prayers.<sup>24</sup>

...this is as far as a Pharisee can go; to abstain from open vice, to use outward means, and do outward duties. A course of services, a model of external performances, this is his highest profession and hereby he justifies himself before men.<sup>25</sup>

In this sermon Charles focuses less on the command from God and more on our obedient response to that command—we do our duty. But as is already clear from our discussion of trusting in the means of grace, obedient response is not, in itself, enough. Practicing the means of grace and a transformed heart remain mutually necessary.

In July of 1741, Charles reports that he has continued preaching on the ordinances, now drawing on Isaiah 64.5, “Thou meetest those that remember thee in thy ways,” as his primary text. He returns to this text for the same purposes as late as October of 1756.<sup>26</sup> He writes, “Hence I magnified the law of Christian ordinances, exhorting those who wait for salvation, to be as clay in the □hand of the potter, by stirring themselves up to lay hold on the Lord. God gave me much freedom to explain that most

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew Henry, Isaiah 58, *Commentary on the Whole Bible Volume IV (Isaiah to Malachi)*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc4.Is.lxx.html> (accessed June 19, 2007). One might wonder if Charles saw himself enacting the role of the prophet as a more direct response to Henry’s commentary on an earlier portion of this passage, where he writes, “[The prophet] must be vehement and in good earnest herein, must cry aloud, and not spare, not spare them (not touch them with his reproofs as if he were afraid of hurting them, but search the wound to the bottom, lay it bare to the bone), not spare himself or his own pains, but cry as loud as he can; though he spend his strength and waste his spirits, though he get their ill-will by it and get himself into an ill name, yet he must not spare.” [Isaiah 58, I.2.]

<sup>24</sup> *Sermons* “Sermon 12 Luke 18.9-14,” 271.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>26</sup> See his journal entries for October 3, 11, 18, and 31, 1756 in *Journal*, II: 124, 127-128, 138.

active, vigorous, restless thing, true stillness.”<sup>27</sup> While we lack a text of this sermon, Matthew Henry’s commentary is again suggestive of the direction Charles may have taken:

[1.] What God expects from us, in order to our having communion with him. *First*, make conscience of doing our duty in every thing, we must *work righteousness*, must do that which is good and which the Lord our God requires of us, and must do it well. *Secondly*, We must be cheerful in doing our duty, we must *rejoice and work righteousness*, must delight ourselves in God and in his law.... *Thirdly*, We must conform ourselves to all the methods of his providence concerning us and be suitably affected with them, must *remember him in his ways*, in all the ways wherein he walks, whether he walks towards us or walks contrary to us. We must mind him and make mention of him with thanksgiving when his ways are ways of mercy (*in a day of prosperity be joyful*), with patience and submission when he contends with us.<sup>28</sup>

It is Henry’s third point that seems to most inform Charles’ understanding of Christian obedience. Our obedience to God’s commands is less concerned with a juridical relationship, which might make us “Pharisees” concerned with fulfilling the law, and more with an obedience that enables us to “conform ourselves” to the ways in which God relates to us. Thus our use of the means of grace does not depend on how we feel about them, or even what we experience through them at any one time; our use is our continued obedience to God’s ordinances and our continued seeking of God through them. In the 1745 tract in which John and Charles spelled out their differences with the Moravians, Charles included a hymn on this verse from Isaiah:

1. Come, Lord, to a Soul That waits in thy Ways,  
That stays at the Pool Expecting thy Grace:  
To see thy Salvation, And prove all thy Will,  
And sure Expectation I calmly stand still.

2. With Fasting and Prayer My Saviour I seek,  
And listen to hear The Comforter speak;  
In Searching and Hearing The Life-giving Word  
I wait thy Appearing, I look for my Lord.

3. Because Thou hast said Do this for my sake.  
The Mystical Bread I gladly partake:  
I thirst for the Spirit That flows from above,  
And long to inherit Thy Fulness of Love.

4. Tis *here* I look up, And grasp at thy Mind,  
Here *only* I hope Thine image to find

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<sup>27</sup> *Journal*, I: 291.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Henry, Isaiah 64, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. IV (Isaiah to Malachi) <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc4.Is.lxv.html> (accessed June 21, 2007).

The Means of bestowing Thy Gifts I embrace;  
But all things are owing to Jesus's Grace.<sup>29</sup>

While this text might better serve as an example of the way Charles identified the “ordinary” means of grace—fasting, prayer, searching the scriptures, the Lord’s Supper—it also identifies a clear relationship between obedience to the established ways of God and the expectation that through these ways the Christian will encounter the image of God and receive God’s grace. It provides a clear summary of the argument Charles suggests in his journal entry of April 11, 1740: “The still brethren confront me with my brother’s authority, pretending that he consented not to speak of the ordinances, that is, in effect to give them up, but leave it to every one’s choice, whether they would use them or not. That necessity is laid upon us to walk in them, that ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ has the nature of a command, they absolutely deny.”<sup>30</sup> A similar concern is expressed in this hymn from *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*:

And shall I let Him go? If now I do not *feel*  
The streams of living water flow, Shall I forsake the well?

Because He hides His face, Shall I no longer stay,  
But leave the channels of His grace, And cast the means away?

...Jesus hath spoke the word, His will my reason is;  
*Do this* in memory of thy Lord, Jesus hath said, *Do this!*

...Because he saith, *Do this*, This I will always do;  
Till Jesus come in glorious bliss, I *thus* His death will *show*.<sup>31</sup>

A second hymn from the tract differentiating Methodists and Moravians also emphasizes this concern for obedience to God’s commands and ordinances.

Come ye Followers of the Lord, In Jesu’s Service join,  
Jesus gives the sacred Word, The Ordinance Divine;  
Let us his Command obey, And ask and have whate’er we want,  
Pray we, every Moment pray, And never never faint.

Place no longer let us give To the Old Tempter’s Will,  
Never more our Duty leave While Satan cries *be still!*  
Stand we in the Ancient Way, And here with God ourselves acquaint,  
Pray we, every Moment pray, And never never faint.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *A Short View*, 19. Stanzas 3-4 of this hymn are included as a eucharistic hymn in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 635.

<sup>30</sup> *Journal*, I: 215.

<sup>31</sup> *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, no. 86, sts. 1, 2, 4, and 8 of 8.

<sup>32</sup> “Luke xviii.i Men ought always to pray and not to faint,” in *A Short View*, 20, stanzas 1-2.

This hymn seems to serve three purposes: First, it emphasizes the way in which the means of grace are given by means of divine command, as reflected in the sequence “sacred Word”, “Ordinance Divine”, and “command obey” in st. 1. Second, it draws a line between the temptations offered by the Moravians and the path to be followed by the Methodists, a line between those who do their duty and those who succumb to Satan’s temptation to leave the ordained ways of God and follow the new way of stillness. Third, it calls our attention to the ways in which Charles’ concern for the means of grace is also a concern for the tradition of the Church, “the Ancient way.”

We might well ask if obeying the divine ordinance places the Christian once again in peril of “Pharasaism” and of relying on the outward form of religion without the inward substance (it does) or if it suggests some externally “forced devotion.” Two of Charles’ sermons answer these questions. The first, his sermon on Titus 3.8, “On the necessity of faith and good works,” was initially preached in 1738 before the stillness controversy became a problem for the Wesleys. Here Charles equates obedience with the holy life and, therefore, the outward “test and evidence” of faith.

Without obedience, the inward marks of faith are mere phantasm, or the effect of diabolical illusion: as on the contrary, where the inward marks are not, such as peace, love, joy in the Holy Ghost, all outward obedience is merely formal and Pharasaical. Holiness is the test and evidence, no less than the end of faith. We are God’s workmanship created through faith in Christ Jesus unto good works; which God hath ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2.10).<sup>33</sup>

Outward obedience without the inward transformation makes one a Pharisee; inward transformation without outward obedience makes such transformation an illusion. Obedience to the divine ordinances requires completion in the command to love one’s neighbor. Attending on the ordinances of God requires attending on the general rules to do no harm and to do all the good one can. As Matthew Henry suggested in his commentary on Isaiah 58, the “rules of piety” and the “rules of equity” are both “ordinances of justice.”

Charles addresses the question of “enforced devotion” in his sermon on John 4.41, on the “well of water, springing up into everlasting life.” In his introduction to this sermon, Kenneth Newport writes, “Charles’s main point about true religion is that it is marked by its spontaneity, and that enforced devotion is by definition false devotion...the true Christian will keep the Sabbath not...as a result of the external authority of the fourth commandment, but as a natural result of his love for God and his seeking after him.”<sup>34</sup> For Charles, “A formal and unprincipled Christian may force himself not only to perform some external duties...but even to imitate the more spiritual part of religion, and as it were to act over the very temper and disposition of a son of God.”<sup>35</sup> The “true Christian”, in contrast, “is freely carried out towards them without any constraint or force...but by a principle of holy temperance planted in his soul: it is the seed of God abiding in him that preserves him from the commission of sin (1 Joh. 3.9). He is not kept

<sup>33</sup> *Sermons*, “Sermon 5 Titus 3.8,” 163.

<sup>34</sup> *Sermons*, 260.

<sup>35</sup> *Sermons*, “Sermon 11: John 4.41,” 265.

back from it as a horse by a bridle, but by an inward and spiritual change made in his nature.”<sup>36</sup>

Two stanzas from Charles’ hymn “The Taking of Jericho” provide a summary of this discussion of obedience to the divine command. In this hymn, Charles describes the assault on Jericho as a kind of assault on human sin, an assault enacted through and sustained by the means of grace:

7. In sight of God process, Follow the ark Divine,  
In all the ways and statutes tread, Which He hath pleased t’ enjoin:  
Pray always, fast and pray, And watch to do His will;  
All His commands with joy obey, All righteousness fulfill.

8. With patience persevere, Still in His ways be found,  
Still to the city walls draw near, And day by day surround;  
Continue in His word, On all His means attend,  
Bearing the burden of the Lord, And hoping to the end.<sup>37</sup>

We misunderstand the character of Christian liberty, Charles argues, if we believe that we are freed from the obligations of God’s ordinances, that we are now free “to forsake the means of grace.”<sup>38</sup> The freedom we have is the freedom to obey with joy, to persevere in God’s ways, to hope to the end. The ordinances of God are to be obeyed: “What He did for our use ordain Shall still from age to age remain; Whoe’er rejects the kind command, The word of God shall ever stand.”<sup>39</sup>

### 3. Means to Renewal

The means of grace, Charles argues, are neither to be trusted in nor can they replace the inner transformation of the heart that reflects the appropriation of God’s justifying and sanctifying grace. At the same time, they are commanded to our use, but as means of grace rather than as a new legal code. How do they serve this and other purposes in the Christian life?

In a brief discussion of Charles’ theology of universal redemption, John Tyson suggests that because “in Christ’s death all people are elected to salvation...those who cannot come to God must look within themselves to find the hindrance to God’s reconciling grace.”<sup>40</sup> Charles’ arguments about our need of and the command to use the means of grace seem to suggest, then, that one of these hindrances is our refusal to avail ourselves of the ordinary means of grace. As Charles asks,

Sinners, turn: why will you die?...  
Will you not the grace receive?  
Will you still refuse to live?  
Why, ye long-sought sinners, why

<sup>36</sup> *Sermons*, “Sermon 11: John 4.41,” 261-262.

<sup>37</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1749, 241.

<sup>38</sup> *Journal*, I: 166 (August 29, 1739).

<sup>39</sup> “The heavenly ordinances shine,” Hymn 62, st. 9, in *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*.

<sup>40</sup> John Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 38.

will you grieve your God, and die?<sup>41</sup>

Similar questions might be asked of those seeking, but not attaining, Christian perfection: has the work of holiness in our lives been hindered by our neglect of the means of grace? As Charles claimed in his sermon on the pharisee and the publican, “He is no Christian, who is not constant in the means of grace.”<sup>42</sup> And, as he argued in his sermon on Philippians 3.13-14, “people of all ranks and conditions are indispensably obliged to make a constant progress and proficiency both in the knowledge and practice of true Christianity.”<sup>43</sup> We can say that rightly using, that is, practicing but not trusting in, the means of grace is what Christians do as they seek to live the Christian life. As such, the means of grace take on particular functions at different points in the Christians life: they provide the means to repentance and renewal, for “active waiting” and resisting temptation, a shield and confidence, and a way to keep the societies “steady”.

Charles provides his most developed statement about the right use of the means of grace in his sermon on 1 John 3.14, “We have passed from death to life.” In this sermon, Charles describes three states of relationship to God and to the law of God: those under the law of sin (the state of nature), the law of the mind or conscience (the almost wakened), and the law of the Spirit of life (the state of grace, of new birth in Christ).<sup>44</sup> For each of these states, he also describes the place and purpose of the means of grace.

Those who remain under the law of sin are “dead in trespasses and sins” and little more than “baptized heathens” (as we noted earlier). While they may not be guilty of any “notorious vice”, for them “a little outward religion, added occasionally to a worldly life is abundantly sufficient to denominate them good Christians.”<sup>45</sup> The means of grace serve as the “end” of religion. At best, they have some of the outward form, but know nothing of the power of godliness. Charles warns that even those who have begun the work of repentance and are endeavoring “to break off their sins,” those who “use all the means of grace, do all good works, and labour after the renewal of their souls in all heavenly tempers,” will succumb to temptation (even the temptation of stillness) and be overtaken by the way of sin and death.<sup>46</sup>

Those who are under the “law of the mind or conscience” are not far from God, but they do not yet have holiness or happiness, even if some attempt to persuade them otherwise.<sup>47</sup> These Charles exhorts to seek Christ and the “hope of glory...in all the means he hath appointed, yet not trusting or resting in any. Hunger and thirst after him. Pray without ceasing, till he is formed in your hearts by faith, and refuse to be comforted because he is in you all, despite your refusing to be comforted.”<sup>48</sup> No longer trusting in the outward form of religion, the means of grace become for them tools for the renewal

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<sup>41</sup> “Sinners turn, why will ye die,” st. 3, in *Collection of Hymns*, 87.

<sup>42</sup> *Sermons*, “Sermon 12: Luke 18.9-14,” 271.

<sup>43</sup> *Sermons*, “Sermon 1: Philippians 3.13-14,” 105.

<sup>44</sup> *Sermons*, “Sermon 4: 1 John 3.14,” 134. In his introduction to this sermon, Newport notes that Charles preaching this sermon “at least twenty-one times in 1738 and 1739” (*Sermons*, 130). It appears before the “stillness controversy” emerged.

<sup>45</sup> *Sermons*, “Sermon 4: 1 John 3.14,” 136.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-139.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

of their lives, guideposts for seeking God and the “riches of divine mercy,”<sup>49</sup> even if they do not yet know the full power of godliness.

To those under the third state, those who have been “quickened together with Christ,”<sup>50</sup> Charles recommends “a constant use of all the means of grace. He that thinketh he can stand without them, is on the brink of falling.” Even if our holiness were to exceed that of the apostles, we are not “above the use of means.” It is “possible for the holiest man upon earth to fall fully from grace, and...the surest forerunner of such apostasy is the discontinuance of the means of grace.”<sup>51</sup> The means of grace here become the means for continuing in the way of holiness, even as one continues to seek it. Although Charles disagreed with his brother about the attainability of perfection in this life, everything to this point suggests his full agreement with John’s words in the preface of the 1742 and 1756 editions of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*: “there is no such perfection, in this life, as implies any dispensation from doing good, and attending all the ordinances of God.”<sup>52</sup>

If even those most fully “quickened together with Christ” are prey to temptation, then the way ahead requires active rather than “still” waiting, active resistance rather than passivity. In his 1741 report of preaching the ordinances, he notes “God gave me much freedom to explain that most active, vigorous, restless thing, true stillness.” True stillness, true waiting is found in the temple and through the right use of the means of grace, as he argues in his hymn “The Means of Grace”:

Still for thy loving-kindness, Lord, ☐I in thy temple wait;  
I look to find thee in thy word, ☐Or at thy table meet.

Here, in thine own appointed ways, ☐I wait to learn thy will; ☐  
Silent I stand before thy face, ☐And hear thee say, “Be still!”<sup>53</sup>

It is to those “quickened in Christ” but tempted by stillness that Charles preaches on Easter Day, 1740:

At the Foundery I strongly preached Christ, and the power of his resurrection, from Phil. iii. 9, 10. My intention was, not to mention one word of the controverted points, till I had spoke with each of the seducers. But God ordered it better; and led me, I know not how, *in ipsam aciem et certamen*. My mouth was opened to ask, ‘Who hath bewitched you, that you should let go your Saviour? that you should cast away your shield and your confidence, and deny you ever knew him?’<sup>54</sup>

If it is in the heat of battle that Charles is moved to speak, it is for spiritual battle, for active spiritual resistance to temptation, that Christians are called to put on their shield and confidence, the “whole armor of God”:

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>52</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1742; London, 1756)

<sup>53</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: W. Strahan, 1740), 37-38 (stanzas 13-14). These also form the opening stanzas of “Still for thy loving kindness, Lord” in *Collection 1780*, no. 89, pp. 190-1.

<sup>54</sup> *Journal*, I: 208.

2. Stand then in His great Might, With all His Strength endu'd,  
And take, to arm you for the Fight, The Panoply of God;  
That having all Things Done, And all your Conflicts past,  
You may o'ercome thro' Christ alone, And stand entire at last....

4. Leave no unguarded Place, No Weakness of the Soul,  
Take every Virtue, every Grace, And fortify the Whole;  
Indissolubly join'd, To Battle all proceed;  
But arm yourselves with all the Mind That was in Christ your Head....

11. To keep your Armour bright, Attend with constant Care,  
Still walking in your Captain's Sight, and Watching unto Prayer;  
Ready for all Alarms, Stedfastly [*sic*] set your Face,  
And always exercise your Arms, And use your every Grace.<sup>55</sup>

As these last quotes suggest, the means of grace not only provide the means for “active waiting” but also the means for resisting the temptation of religious dissent. As Charles argues in a journal entry from 1756, the only way for Methodists to “avoid falling prey to every seducer”—including not only Moravian advocates of stillness but also Baptists “watching to steal away our children”—is by the right use of the means of grace, by “close walking with God, in all the commandments and ordinances, especially the word and prayer, private, family, and public.”<sup>56</sup>

#### 4. The power of godliness to know

I suggested at the beginning of this paper that we could approach Charles Wesley's theology of the means of grace as a form of practical theology. We see in Charles' hymns, sermons, and journal entries a persistent concern for the practices of the Christian life. This concern affirms the ways in which those practices form, support, and nurture the transformation of human hearts and minds into the way of holiness and godliness. At the same time, it challenges any temptation to rely on these practices as substitutes for the power of godliness. At times, his work provides explicit correctives to the Methodist societies and, with the growing possibility of a Methodist split from the Church of England, explicit corrective to his brother.

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<sup>55</sup> “The whole Armour of God,” *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1749. The hymn was originally published with John Wesley's “Character of a Methodist” in 1742. Although I do not think this hymn is normally read as referring to the means of grace, the way in which Charles discusses their use, especially his reference to our “shield and confidence” in the journal entry just cited, suggests the appropriateness of this reading.

<sup>56</sup> *Journal*, II: 128 (October 18, 1756). Charles provides a similar entry several days later, on October 22: “Experience convinces me more and more, that the Methodists can never prosper, or even stand their ground, unless they continue steadfast in the ordinances. The Society here used to be scattered on the Lord's day in the fields, or sleeping in their houses. This invited all the beasts of the forest to devour them. Suffice the time that is past. We are not ignorant now of Satan's devices” (*Journal*, II: 134).

Charles insists throughout his years among the Methodists that “allowing of and using” the means of grace is essential to their Christian life and to the character and identity of the societies.<sup>57</sup> As he wrote in October 1756, to a Mr. Grimshaw:

Nothing but grace can keep our children, after our departure, from running into a thousand sects, a thousand errors. Grace, exercised, kept up, and increased in the use of all the means, especially family and public prayer, and sacrament, will keep them steady. Let us labour, while we continue here, to ground and build them up in the Scriptures, and all the ordinances. Teach them to handle well the sword of the Spirit, and the shield of faith.<sup>58</sup>

Even as Charles expresses his pastoral concern for this community, he also seems to be reflecting a desire to recover something of the vision of “primitive Christianity” that led to the formation of the “holy club” with his brother and colleagues in Oxford. That vision of the early church, based on their reading of Acts 2, is reflected in his hymn “Happy the Souls who first believ’d.”

2. Meek, simple Followers of the Lamb,  
They liv’d, and spake, and thought the same;  
Brake the Commemorative Bread,  
And drank the Spirit of their Head.

3. On God they cast their every Care,  
Wrestling with God in mighty Prayer,  
They claim’d the Grace, thro’ Jesus given;  
By Prayer they shut, and open’d Heaven.

4. To Jesus they perform’d their Vows,  
A little Church in every House;  
They joyfully conspir’d to raise  
Their ceaseless Sacrifice of Praise.<sup>59</sup>

While Charles does not mention scripture or fasting in this hymn, he does focus on the Lord’s Supper, communal prayer, and obedience. These form the heart of life together. Unlike what we find to be true today of many congregations in North America, this

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<sup>57</sup> See *Journal*, I: 221 (April 20, 1740), as well as his letter to John of June 28, 1740 in *Works of John Wesley*, vol. 26, *Letters II 1740-1755*, ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 17. Karen Westerfield Tucker notes that similar concerns about the neglect of the means of grace led the 1864 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church to approve “a disciplinary solution by bringing to trial any member who habitually neglected the sacrament and the other means of grace, with expulsion from the church the alternative of last resort.” Karen Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 131.

<sup>58</sup> *Journal*, II: 135 (October 28, 1756). Note again his connection between the means of grace and the “whole armor of God.”

<sup>59</sup> “Primitive Christianity. Hymn LVI: Happy the souls who first believed,” *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), 333. This hymn was published first in 1743, when it was appended to John Wesley’s “Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion.” In the 1780 collection, John deletes most of the stanzas cited here.

primitive Christian community was neither “a society formed by persons united by their shared interest in certain religious practices” nor by those who believed “that membership in a Christian group will contribute to their individual good.”<sup>60</sup> Charles’ vision of the Church, and therefore of the Methodist societies, was of a community created by and for divine purpose, “quicken’d in Christ,” and “Join’d by the Unction from above, In mystic fellowship of Love.”<sup>61</sup> The community in Christ finds its power, the power of godliness, in one place—the grace of God in Christ, “grace, exercised, kept up, and increased in the use of all the means.” The means of grace provide the Church with the “ancient” and normal ways through which it seeks that grace and in which it comes to participate in grace. There are means of grace and there is good to be found in them. Of this, Charles Wesley was certain.

For this alone I live below:  
 The power of godliness to show,  
 The wonders wrought by Jesu’s name.  
 O that I might but faithful prove,  
 Witness to all thy pard’ning love,  
 And point them to th’atoning Lamb.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Stanley Grenz, “Ecclesiology” in Kevin Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 257.

<sup>61</sup> “Happy the souls who first believed,” st. 1, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), 333.

<sup>62</sup> “Thy power and saving truth to show,” st. 3, *Collection of Hymns*, 604.