

The Holy Communion as a Means of Grace and the Question of On-line Communion

L. Edward Phillips

By "means of grace" I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.ⁱ

Among the many themes John Wesley discusses over the course of his ministry, the matter of grace takes a central place. His theology of grace unfolds in a dialog with some of the great Christian thinkers of his day, but he also addresses some of the popular debates about grace and practices of ordinary Christian believers. As Randy Maddox among others has shown, Wesley inherited a western understanding of grace as forgiveness and unmerited pardon for sin, but he combined this with an eastern understanding of grace as healing of fallen human nature, restoring within believers the capacity for a life of genuine holiness of heart and mind.ⁱⁱ In short, in Wesley we find both a forensic and a therapeutic understanding of grace, though recent reflections of Wesley's thought have emphasized the therapeutic function of grace, especially. As such, grace does not only pertain to God's pardon and forgiveness for our sin; God also intends to heal us of our disease, to make us well.

I. John Wesley on the Means of Grace

Wesley accepted that God imparted grace to human beings through instituted means of sacraments, baptism (about which he says relatively little) and Holy Communion, but God also imparted grace by other established means such as public and private prayer, scripture reading, study and preaching, public worship, and fasting. His acceptance of means of grace set him apart from more radically-spiritual sects such as the Quakers, and his emphasis on the uses of the

means of grace set him apart from some Moravians who began to see the means as superfluous for the genuinely pious believer.

1. Means have no intrinsic power.

Wesley worked out his theology of the means of grace most carefully in his sermons. He was thoroughly Protestant in his characterization of the means of grace as utterly useless apart from the ends to which they are ordered:

But we allow, that the whole value of the means depends on their actual subservience to the end of religion; that, consequently, all these means, when separate from the end, are less than nothing and vanity; that if they do not actually conduce to the knowledge and love of God, they are not acceptable in his sight; yea, rather, they are an abomination before him, a stink in his nostrils; he is weary to bear them.ⁱⁱⁱ

The means of grace have no intrinsic value or power whatsoever:

We allow, likewise, that all outward means whatever, if separate from the Spirit of God, cannot profit at all, cannot conduce, in any degree, either to the knowledge or love of God. Without controversy, the help that is done upon earth, He doeth it himself. It is He alone who, by his own almighty power, worketh in us what is pleasing in his sight; and all outward things, unless He work in them and by them, are mere weak and beggarly elements. Whosoever, therefore, imagines there is any intrinsic power in any means whatsoever, does greatly err, not knowing the Scriptures, neither the power of God. We know that 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 received in the Lord's Supper; but that it is God alone who is the Giver of every good gift, the Author of all grace; that the whole power is of him, whereby, through any of these, there is any blessing conveyed to our soul.^{iv}

2. Means are commands, promises and gifts of God.

And yet the instituted means do have a power that are distinctive in the sense that they are promises of God. Wesley cites a standard objection to the use of means of grace in that by using them we presumably “trust” in them, which means we are not solely trusting in God, but in means. Wesley counters this argument:

But what do you mean by "trusting in them?" -- looking for the blessing of God therein? Believing, that if I wait in this way, I shall attain what otherwise I should not? So I do. And so I will, God being my helper, even to my life's end. By the grace of God I will thus trust in them, till the day of my death; that is, I will believe, that whatever God hath promised, he is faithful also to perform. And seeing he hath promised to bless me in this way, I trust it shall be according to his word.^v

Indeed, Wesley's first and most carefully argued point about why we should use the means of grace is that our Lord has given the command for us to do so; thus he argues in his sermon "The Means of Grace." Regarding prayer: "This is the express direction of our Lord himself." Regarding scripture: ""And for this very end did he direct them to search the Scriptures, that they might believe in him." Regarding the Lord's Supper he quotes from the institution narrative in I Corinthians 11:23-6. To say such means are "ordained by God," is to say that are commands, as the opening quotation illustrates.

More than commandments, however, they are promises. And while strictly speaking, they are not gifts of God, per se, they are the way (the means!) through which God imparts the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as he illustrates through his discussion of prayer as a means of receiving God's gift of the Holy Spirit.^{vi} This would suggest, however, since God ordains them, God gives them, and so in a sense they are gifts of God.

3. The means are not "works" but forms of waiting.

If the means have no intrinsic value apart from the God who gives them as promises and commands their use, they are not "works" that earn God's favor or infuse God's holiness. What then is their value?

But the main question remains: "We know this salvation is the gift and the work of God; but how (may one say who is convinced he hath it not) may I attain thereto?" If you say, "Believe, and thou shalt be saved!" He answers, "True; but how shall I believe?" You

reply, "Wait upon God." "Well; but how am I to wait? In the means of grace, or out of them? Am I to wait for the grace of God which bringeth salvation, by using these means, or by laying them aside?"^{vii}

Wesley begins the next sections of the sermon with his answer: "[A]ccording to the decision of holy writ all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means which he hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside."^{viii} The means of grace are ordained forms by which the believer waits upon God. They are not, primarily at least, expressions of the believer's faith, but are promises/commandments that we receive from God. Our first engagement is passive, but receptive. We wait for grace using the means God has provided. Wesley does not suggest that we ought to try to adapt the means to our "needs." Rather we "wait" on God through them as God has given them (commands and promises). This is abundantly clear, for example, in the sermon "On the Duty of Constant Communion."

4. They can be (are often) abused.

Wesley also acknowledges that means can be abused, and even remarks that this is a common occurrence:

We allow, though it is a melancholy truth, that a large proportion of those who are called Christians, do to this day abuse the means of grace to the destruction of their souls. This is doubtless the case with all those who rest content in the form of godliness, without the power. Either they fondly presume they are Christians already, because they do thus and thus,--although Christ was never yet revealed in their hearts, nor the love of God shed abroad therein: -- Or else they suppose they shall infallibly be so barely because they use these means; idly dreaming, (though perhaps hardly conscious thereof,) either that there is some kind of power therein, whereby, sooner or later (they know not when), they shall certainly be made holy; or that there is a sort of merit in using them, which will surely move God to give them holiness, or accept them without it.^{ix}

The chief concern for abuse here is the relying on the means for some inherent power to either impute holiness or to infuse holiness. But in other passages, we find the most problematic form of abuse not to be over-reliance on the means, but the “neglect” of them.

This is especially clear in the sermon “Duty of Constant Communion,” where Wesley refutes a list of objections to frequent reception of communion. His chief argument against objections to frequent communion is that no-where does God dispense with a commandment (specifically, “Do this in remembrance of me...”) because we might be tempted to some abuse of it (eating unworthily, not being prepared, abating reverence for the sacrament). My personal favorite line: “Has God ever told you that when the obeying his command abates your reverence to it then you may disobey it?”^x

5. God’s grace not limited to ordained means.

Protestant theologians of the eighteenth century discussed whether God’s grace came solely through means God has ordained, or whether grace is also mediated through extraordinary means. Wesley famously sided with those who believed that God used all sorts of means to impart grace. Specifically Methodist “means” such as the class meetings or society meetings, provided his chief examples for these prudential means of grace.

For that matter, God was not limited to the use of means at all. Since grace is the presence of the Holy Spirit who is not material, surely grace could be imparted without the mediation of material means:

We know, likewise, that he is able to give the same grace, though there were no means on the face of the earth. In this sense, we may affirm, that, with regard to God, there is no such thing as means; seeing he is equally able to work whatsoever pleaseth him, by any, or by none at all.^{xi}

Nevertheless, this is not an excuse to neglect the ordained means, as the quotations above make abundantly clear.

II. On-line Communion and the Wesleyan Understanding of Means of Grace

Trying to apply Wesley's understanding and practice of the means of grace to the current debate about on-line communion is full of anachronistic dangers. He is not a man of the 21st century, and we don't live in the 18th. This disclaimer noted, let us still consider how the two sermons cited above might help us understand the debate.

1. Can computer-based activities serve as means of grace?

Based on these sermons, the answer must be "yes," though we would have to discern that on the basis of the sort of holiness of heart and mind these activities produce in the believer. Since God is not limited to ordained means, obviously God can use virtually anything (or nothing!) to impart grace. Computer based activities can be prudential means of grace. We have anecdotal evidence to support this.

2. Can the practice of on-line communion be a form of obedience to God's command, "Do this in remembrance of me"?

Here the problem becomes more complicated. On the one hand, in some sense any time a Christian eats or drinks, he or she could do so remembering Jesus. Nevertheless, this lacks the historic, objective form of the means of Holy Communion as an act of public worship. The "waiting" for God must be performed in the means that God has ordained for us. The ordained means are more than our subjective expression of devotion. That is to say, while Wesley primarily focused on reception of communion, the larger question which he only hints at in these

sermons, but which are crucial for the discussion at hand, is the ecclesial setting of the Eucharist.

This entails more than communion, and we should consult, for example, the Articles of Religion:

Article XXII — Of the Rites and Ceremonies of Churches

It is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have been always different, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word. Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the church to which he belongs, which are not repugnant to the Word of God, and are ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, that others may fear to do the like, as one that offendeth against the common order of the church, and woundeth the consciences of weak brethren.

Every particular church may ordain, change, or abolish rites and ceremonies, so that all things may be done to edification.

In short, the problem of online communion is much less a problem of personal devotion (about which no authority can rule absolutely) than a problem of church order.

Wesley, furthermore, was addressing two different problems: the formal and sterile practice of communion that trusted in the means but without seeking the power of the Spirit (“The Means of Grace) and failure to receive communion as a sort of false humility, “I am not worthy...” (“Duty of Constant Communion”). The success of the liturgical, sacramental renewal of the 20th century has effectively brought an end to the second abuse (false humility), for though there may be a few tentative Methodists who still worry about “worthiness,” I do not see evidence that this is a pervasive problem.

I am less sure about whether Methodist are still tempted to rely on the outward doing as a sort of *ex opera operato*. If we accept that God’s grace is not limited to ordained mean, however, we might wonder if the push toward on-line communion indicates too much trust in the formal and minimal aspects of the Lord’s Supper, so that the barest form of practice constitutes the communion: eating something and drinking something while remembering Jesus—with the

liturgical words broadcast over an internet connection. The core of this might be a more highly formalistic view of the Words of Institution and the power of ordained (or episcopally authorized) authority to preside at services of Holy Communion. This could become a modern version of the abuses Wesley addresses in the sermon on the Means of Grace—i.e. trusting in the form without the power, or in not waiting for the Lord.” Obviously face-to-face worship settings are not immune to these abuses. However, online communion may seem to be especially susceptible to these problems given the lack of public accountability in virtual relationships.

III. What issues must be addressed going forward.

1. The relationship of Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Word and Table: how do we articulate and relate (and even prioritize from various angles?) the ecclesial ground of the Eucharist with the personal reception of communion? These issues are not merely questions of sacramental theology; they are at heart questions of ecclesiology. Though I have not argued this point above since it was not my assignment, per se, it seems to me that if we accept the validity “online communities” as “church” then we must have online sacraments, as both the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith would indicate:

Articles of Religion: Article XIII — Of the Church

The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

Confession of Faith: Article V — The Church

We believe the Christian Church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.

2. We should be careful about the use of anecdotes as justification for practice. We can always find examples of God using dubious practices to good ends because God is not bound by human limitation or human folly. As more than one judge has discovered, “hard cases make bad law.” The central issue, it seems to me, is not practice of popular piety or finding solutions to extremely difficult situations, but whether these unusual practices should be officially sanctioned as good practices more broadly.
3. Is online communion a practice for which there is, actually, little desire on the part of United Methodists? I really suspect this is motivated more by a pastoral and denominational leaders than by a deep desire on the part of the laity. Certainly if our churches received support from Church Development on a conference level to develop online congregations, we would expect them to promote online practices as well. That is to say, we may be developing a market rather than meeting a need.
4. On the problem “Some Methodist pastors are already doing this.” Some Methodist pastors continue to re-baptize adults who were baptized as infants. And some lay people even testify to how meaningful their re-baptism is. However, this is not reason to change our discipline on the issue.
5. On the issue of making the sacraments more accessible—this must be balanced (again!) with the concern for holiness. The Lord’s Supper is not equivalent to a meal program with ordinary food; rather is it a meal through which God by the power of the Holy Spirit intends to make partakers into a holy people who are the Body of Christ for the world.

The bread and wine have, to quote a Wesleyan hymn, “a power not theirs to give.” At the very least we should always be clear about the “ends” to which this meal aims us.

6. Finally, I continue to ask, how does it come about that we could even imagine that the Lord’s Supper could be conducted “online”? We surely know that some practices cannot be accomplished online. We cannot have a fellowship meal online. We cannot actually feed someone online. We might think we could conduct a wedding online, but the couple could not actually consummate the relationship in the fullest sense of that word. Some interactive activities simply cannot be done without touching hands and being physically present with others. Even the laudable practice of taking the consecrated bread and wine to those who are unable to attend the worship service, recognizes that we are taking food from the communion table to those who could not attend—and we do this as soon as possible to indicate that this is our way of including the unwillingly absent.

ⁱ John Wesley, *Standard Sermons* (1871) “Sermon 16-The Means of Grace,” II.1, (<http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-16-The-Means-of-Grace>, accessed Sept. 19, 2014).

ⁱⁱ See Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood, 1994) 65-93.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Sermon 16-The Means of Grace,” II.2.

^{iv} “Sermon 16-The Means of Grace,” II.3

^v “Sermon 16-The Means of Grace,” IV.1

^{vi} “Sermon 16-The Means of Grace,” III.3.

^{vii} “Sermon 16-The Means of Grace,” II.7.

^{viii} “Sermon 16-The Means of Grace,” III.1.

^{ix} “Sermon 16-The Means of Grace,” II.5.

^x “Duty of Constant Communion,” II.16.

^{xi} “Sermon 16-The Means of Grace,” II.3.