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The Means of Grace: Wesley's Mediation between Naturalism and Mysticism

Kevin Twain Lowery

Introduction

John Wesley believed that the grace of God, in one form or another, is extended to human beings from the cradle to the grave. It is offered freely and is not merited. However, Wesley taught that there are means of grace that, when utilized, avail the grace of God to us in greater degrees. In effect, although we do not earn God's grace, we must engage in particular practices if we expect God to act in our behalf, because God has chosen to work through natural means. In this paper, I will briefly outline the way that this doctrine represents a mediating position between naturalism and mysticism, and then I will identify several implications that can be made from this view of grace.

The Means of Grace Defined

Wesley explains his use of the term. "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." He uses the term because of its use in Christian history, especially in the Anglican Church, and because he knows no better expression for describing it.¹ As Henry Knight affirms, Wesley's insistence on the means of grace stems from his belief that God will

¹ Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," §2.1, *WW*, 1:381 [J 5:187]. For the sake of reference, all citations from the Bicentennial edition will be indicated by *WW* and will also include the volume and page number from the Jackson edition in brackets, e.g. [J x:xxx]. Citations from the Jackson edition will be indicated by *WWJ*.

not grant the end without the means.² However, these means are worthless in and of themselves. “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.” They cannot achieve their end “separate from the Spirit of God.”³ In other words, although God is not limited in the way that he acts, he generally chooses to act through natural means.

The means of grace can be divided into two categories, in Wesley’s estimation. First, the *instituted means* are those which are specifically ordained in Scripture, including prayer, Scripture, the Lord’s supper, fasting, and “Christian conference” (i.e. accountability to others). These are means which every Christian is obliged to use, and they are effective to some degree in all persons. Second, Wesley identifies what he calls the *prudential means*, which are context-specific rules that help us grow in grace. These will vary from person to person and from situation to situation, because what is effective in one context may not be effective in another. However, all Christians should see some evidence of growth when they attend to the following prudential means: self-scrutiny, self-denial, “taking up our cross” (i.e. performing duties which are difficult or sacrificial), and “exercise of the presence of God” (i.e. staying focused on God and remembering that he is watching us).⁴ On the other hand, Wesley sees a progression in the means of grace with regard to their effectiveness. He asserts that the most successful way that sinners are drawn by grace is through gradual participation in the means of grace according to the

² Henry H. Knight, III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1992), 46.

³ Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” §2.3, *WW*, 1:382 [J 5:188].

⁴ Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others; From the Year 1744, to the Year 1789,” Q. 48, *WWJ*, 8:322-4.

following sequence: “hearing, reading, meditating, praying, and partaking of the Lord’s supper.”⁵

Dean Blevins states that for Wesley, grace is manifested through holiness of heart and life. Since this can occur in a variety of ways, a number of practices could be regarded as means of grace.⁶ These “prudential means” of grace “reflect God’s ability to use any means, in addition to those instituted [by Scripture], in accordance with different times and circumstances.”⁷ Wesley considers specific practices as prudential means of grace if they tend toward holiness of heart and life, mediating prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying grace. Redemptive grace can be either individual or social, so the means of grace can be focused on either or both of these ends.⁸ Ole Borgen concurs with this assessment: “Whatever is conducive to holiness and love becomes, to that extent, a means of grace.”⁹ As Blevins affirms, in the means of grace, the participant gains new self-knowledge and knowledge of God. It is logical to assume that God is active in this process of learning in some fashion.¹⁰

In formulating the rules for the prudential means of grace, reason plays a large role, since these usually extend beyond the specific guidance of Scripture. As Kenneth Collins indicates, they are “subject to change as common sense and circumstances dictate.”¹¹ This is one of the reasons why Wesley found the mystical attitude toward reason to be destructive. He said that there are many people, especially the so-called

⁵ Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” §5.1, *WW*, 1:393-4 [J 5:198-9].

⁶ Dean G. Blevins, “John Wesley and the Means of Grace: An Approach to Christian Religious Education” (Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont School of Theology, 1999), 287.

⁷ Dean G. Blevins, “Means of Grace: Toward a Wesleyan Praxis of Spiritual Formation,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32, no. 1 (1997): 79.

⁸ Blevins, “John Wesley and the Means of Grace,” 345.

⁹ Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Definitive Study of John Wesley’s Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1972), 105.

¹⁰ Blevins, “John Wesley and the Means of Grace,” 278-9.

¹¹ Kenneth J. Collins, “John Wesley and the Means of Grace,” *Asbury Seminarian* 40, no. 2 (1985): 26.

“Mystic Divines” who “utterly decry the use of reason.” They essentially “condemn all reason concerning the things of God as utterly destructive of true religion.”¹² For Wesley, the opposite is true, for he sees the use of reason as crucial to true religion. In any event, he believes that in order for the means of grace to be effective, the following principles must be heeded: 1) remember that God is not limited to particular means, 2) be aware that the means have no intrinsic power in themselves, 3) seek God alone and use the means only as a means, not as an end, and 4) do not allow the means of grace to cultivate pride in our attitude.¹³

Mysticism vs. Naturalism

Wesley’s concept of the means of grace is essentially his mediating point between two contrasting positions. On the one hand, Wesley rejects *naturalism* which does not acknowledge God’s activity or communication with us. On the other hand, Wesley also rejects *mysticism* which disdains the use of the means of grace. Wesley certainly believes that God speaks to us, but he vehemently opposes the notion that natural means can be regarded as secondary or neglected altogether. Therefore, a Wesleyan view of grace should not exclude the possibility of supernatural change and transformation.

Nevertheless, a Wesleyan account of grace will recognize that God generally works through natural means and God’s influence over us is usually subtle so as to not override free will. However, God is not limited, but can still work in ways that are out of the ordinary, but when God does work supernaturally, this can by and large be confirmed in

¹² Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” §30, *WW*, 11:55-6 [J 8:12].

¹³ Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” §5.4, *WW*, 1:395-7 [J 5:200-1].

other ways. In essence, accounts of grace in which natural means are either neglected or relegated to a place of insignificance are inconsistent with Wesley's view of grace.

Condemning Naturalism

Wesley rejected accounts of religion and morality which do not acknowledge God's activity in the world. Such accounts essentially leave no place for a doctrine of grace. For instance, Wesley specifically faulted Voltaire, Rousseau, and Hume for attempting to establish morality independent of special revelation and the concept of God.¹⁴ Likewise, he criticized Francis Hutcheson for espousing natural conscience without prevenient grace and for constructing an account of virtue that has no need of God.¹⁵

Not only does Wesley assert that God is active in our lives, he is convinced that when we attend to the means of grace we can expect God to act in our behalf. However, God is not obligated to act on account of our righteousness, but on the merits of Christ's atonement and his faithfulness to honor the means which he has ordained for us to use.¹⁶ In this way, we cannot necessarily expect God to act at a certain time or in a certain manner, so we must wait on God. However, even our periods of waiting are to be active, for we are to constantly attend to the means of grace, expecting the realization of their ends.¹⁷

¹⁴ Wesley, Sermon 120, "The Unity of the Divine Being," §§19-20, WW, 4:69 [J 7:271].

¹⁵ Wesley, Sermon 105, "On Conscience," §1.9, WW, 3:484 [J 7:189].

¹⁶ Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," §4.2, WW, 1:391 [J 5:196].

¹⁷ Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," §§4.4-5, WW, 1:391-3 [J 5:196-8].

Wesley's Rejection of Mysticism

Although Wesley had an early fascination with the mystics, it did not last. Later in life he reflected, "The Mystic Divines ... we had once in great veneration as the best explainers of the gospel of Christ. But we are now convinced that we therein greatly erred, not knowing the Scriptures, neither the power of God."¹⁸ John English states that the aspects of mysticism which Wesley found unsatisfactory were solitude, Pelagianism (i.e. works righteousness), sanctification before justification, and quietism which deprecates the means of grace, especially Scripture, prayer, and the sacraments.¹⁹ In a nutshell, Wesley believes that spirituality should not devalue the role of reason and the natural means of grace, and he feels that good works are a necessary part of the Christian life, not as an attempt to merit God's favor, but as a response to it.

According to Wesley, some mystics base justification on personal righteousness. He strongly disagrees with this, asserting, "Holiness of heart, as well as holiness of life, is not the cause of [justification], but the effect of it."²⁰ In contrast, Wesley accuses other mystics of going to the opposite extreme of antinomianism, because they believe that virtue and perfection can be attained apart from outward works. For instance, they do not stress the importance of doing good works for others. Wesley feels that this neglect is contrary to Scripture. "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness. 'Faith working by love' is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection."²¹ Moreover, these mystics trivialize outward works to the point of asserting that reading Scripture is unnecessary, because they claim to

¹⁸ Wesley, preface to *A Collection of Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), §1, *WWJ*, 14:319.

¹⁹ John C. English, "John Wesley and Francis Rous," *Methodist History* 6, no. 4 (1968): 33.

²⁰ Wesley, preface to *A Collection of Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), §2, *WWJ*, 14:319-20.

²¹ Wesley, preface to *A Collection of Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), §§4-5, *WWJ*, 14:321.

communicate with God directly.²² Wesley objects, for he feels that even the attainment of Christian perfection does not mitigate our need and duty to do good works and to attend to all of the means of grace.²³ In the end, Wesley's assessment of the mystics is rather unfavorable. "I think the rock on which I had the nearest made shipwreck of the faith was the writings of the mystics, under which term I comprehend all, and only those, who slight any of the means of grace."²⁴

Wesley reacted against this type of quietism, wherever it appeared. For example, one of the factors that spurred Wesley's break with William Law was the anti-intellectual and quietistic shift in Law's thought. According to John Tyson, "Law's ideal of separation from the things of this world" eventually evolved into "a sort of anti-intellectualism and quietistic withdrawal from society – both of which were intolerable to John Wesley."²⁵ Thomas à Kempis likewise displayed a particular leaning toward quietism. He states, "In silence and quiet the devout soul goeth forward and learneth the hidden things of the Scriptures."²⁶ Wesley does not object to the term "stillness" in the sense of being patient for God to work in our lives, and he believes that we cannot earn our salvation or attain it on our own. However, he strongly rejects the notion that we are

²² Wesley to his brother Samuel, 23 November 1736, *WW*, 25:488 [J 12:28]

²³ Wesley, preface to *A Collection of Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1745), §2, *WWJ*, 14:328.

²⁴ Wesley to his brother Samuel, 23 November 1736, *WW*, 25:487 [J 12:27].

²⁵ John R. Tyson, "John Wesley and William Law: A Reappraisal," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 17, no. 2 (1982): 72.

²⁶ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, §1.20.6 (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour, 1984); Wesley, *The Christian's Pattern, or An Extract of The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis*, §1.15.4 (reprint, Salem, OH: Schmul), p. 26. Hereafter, citations from *The Christian's Pattern* shall be indicated by *CP*.

to do nothing toward our own salvation.²⁷ As Albert Outler asserts, Wesley prefers the notion of cooperation to stillness.²⁸

Wesley recoiled from the quietistic tendencies of the Moravians, too.²⁹

According to W. P. Stephens, this split began when Philip Molther started exhorting people to abstain from the means of grace and from good works while waiting for God.³⁰ Wesley strongly contested this, because he believed not only that the means of grace are necessary for Christian growth, but also that one's inward temper must be expressed in outward life and character.³¹ The Moravians asserted that anything other than stillness causes human activity to be confused with the operations of divine grace. In contrast, Wesley believed that stillness does not isolate or stifle human nature. Rather, this type of "stillness" makes people more susceptible to the whims of their own feelings. Scripture and the other means of grace are necessary if this degree of subjectivity is to be avoided.³² As Theodore Runyon expresses it,

Wesley was forced to recognize that the advocates of this "stillness" doctrine had, in effect, absolutized their own feelings and merged them with Christ. There was no critical principle, no rational accountability to Scripture or tradition in order to judge the adequacy of feelings ... This kind of "mysticism," according to Wesley, could only undermine the genuine function of experience within Christian faith, including the legitimate but relative role of feelings.³³

²⁷ Wesley journal, 8 September 1746, §1, WW, 20:136 [J 2:27].

²⁸ Albert C. Outler, "Towards a Re-Appraisal of John Wesley," in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 45.

²⁹ W. P. Stephens, "Wesley and the Moravians," in *John Wesley: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. John Stacey (London: Epworth, 1988), 32-4. Also, see Kenneth J. Collins, "John Wesley's Assessment of Christian Mysticism," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 28 (1993): 304.

³⁰ Stephens, 32.

³¹ J. A. Newton, "Perfection and Spirituality in the Methodist Tradition," *Church Quarterly* 3 (1970): 99.

³² Knight, 43.

³³ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 155.

The Unity of the Two Spheres

Wesley does not see the natural and the supernatural as separate spheres. Rather, the two are united through God's interaction with his creation. God acts through natural means, so we must use these means if we are to be the beneficiaries of divine grace.

Wesley sharply made this point to William Law.

But how can a man "leave himself wholly to God," in the total neglect of his ordinances? The old Bible way is, to "leave ourselves wholly to God," in the constant use of all the means he hath ordained. And I cannot yet think the new is better, though you are fully persuaded it is. "There are two ways," you say, "of attaining goodness and virtue, the one by books or the ministry of men, the other by an inward birth. The former is only in order to the latter." This is most true, that all the 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.³⁴

In Wesley's mind, neither the naturalists nor the mystics understand the proper relation between the two realms, because they do not recognize the fact that although God transcends his creation, he still chooses to be immanently active in it.

Divinely Imparted Knowledge Not the Norm

Although Wesley sympathized with the spiritual ideals and concerns of the mystics, he strongly opposed their neglect of the means of grace. In particular, he is averse to implications that God supernaturally imparts knowledge to us apart from natural means. He is comfortable with praying for divine assistance, but knowledge is not received apart from natural means. This is demonstrated in Wesley's abridgement of Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. For instance, when Kempis claims that God teaches human

³⁴ Wesley to Law, 6 January 1756, §2.6, *WWJ*, 9:504.

beings more in an instant that can be learned in ten years of education, Wesley reduces the claim to the assertion that God can give even the immature a clearer understanding than can be taught by human beings.³⁵ While Kempis believes that God can “perfectly fill [us] with knowledge,” Wesley simply says that God instructs us.³⁶ In essence, spirituality for Wesley involves the acquisition of knowledge through natural cognitive processes. In fact, he believed that humanity’s general neglect of reason can be attributed in large part to its sinfulness.³⁷

The Importance of Scripture

This general principle is especially evident in Wesley’s emphasis on the study of Scripture. The Bible is not a magical tool that bypasses natural cognitive processes. In fact, we must place our interpretation of Scripture under scrutiny. Outler indicates that although Wesley defended the Protestant doctrines of *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*, he interpreted *solus* to mean “primarily” rather than “solely” or “exclusively.”³⁸ First of all, Wesley looked to Christian tradition as a measuring stick of his own interpretations. Even in matters of spirituality, he considered the ancient church fathers to be a more reliable resource than the “modern Mystics” which many of his contemporaries were following.³⁹ Wesley did not feel that any of the doctrines he taught were novel or new, for he found precedents for them in church history.

³⁵ Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, §3.43.3; Wesley, *CP*, §3.31.2, p. 87.

³⁶ Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, §3.2.1; Wesley, *CP*, §3.2.1, p. 52.

³⁷ Wallace G. Gray, “The Place of Reason in the Theology of John Wesley” (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1953), 109.

³⁸ Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford, 1964), 28.

³⁹ Wesley to Count Zinzendorf, 8 August 1741, §12, *WWJ*, 1:330.

However, the faculty of reason is perhaps the most indispensable tool for interpreting Scripture. Donald Thorsen points out that the Anglican emphasis on reason allowed Christian belief to be confirmed and illuminated by knowledge from intellectual disciplines other than theology.⁴⁰ Steven Gunter adds that evangelical Anglicans like Wesley did not regard the Bible as a textbook on all subjects. In contrast with the Dissenters, the Anglican evangelicals more often emphasized the authority of Scripture for issues related specifically to salvific knowledge.⁴¹ Indeed, the use of logic is a particularly important part of Wesley's scriptural hermeneutic. On a scale of importance, he ranks the knowledge of logic just below the knowledge of Scripture.⁴² Stressing the need for logic in understanding Scripture not only views humans as rational beings, it assumes Scripture itself to be logical and coherent.

For Wesley, we cannot love God without knowledge of God, and this requires special revelation. This is why Wesley claims that the heathen are bound to continue in the same cycles with "no possibility of any better education" than their parents can offer. They are thus consigned to living lives of "ungodliness and unrighteousness."⁴³ Nevertheless, Wesley insists that it is "rank enthusiasm" to insist that Scripture should be our only source of knowledge.⁴⁴ As William Abraham indicates, these other sources of

⁴⁰ Donald A. D. Thorsen, "Experimental Method in the Practical Theology of John Wesley," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 119.

⁴¹ W. Stephen Gunter, "The Quadrilateral and the 'Middle Way,'" in *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, ed. W. Stephen Gunter, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 17.

⁴² Wesley, "Address to the Clergy," §1.2, *WWJ*, J 10:483.

⁴³ Wesley, Sermon 69, "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge," §3.1, *WW*, 2:582-3 [J 6:347-8].

⁴⁴ Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others, 1744-1789," Q. 32, *WWJ*, 8:315.

authority should be regarded as norms “not for the truth of Scripture, but for the right interpretation of the truth given by God in Scripture.”⁴⁵

The Two-Fold Witness of Assurance

Wesley’s stress on the importance of empirical knowledge acquired through the means of grace is also reflected in his two-fold view of the witness of the Spirit. On one hand, Wesley asserts that there is a direct witness of the Spirit, and he believes that this assertion is validated both by the “plain natural meaning” of Scripture and by the experience of many.⁴⁶ However, Wesley also acknowledges the necessity of the “indirect witness,” which is essentially the witness of conscience.⁴⁷ The content of this judgment is primarily the observance of the fruit of the Spirit in one’s own life. This implies that the matter of assurance is in part dependent on the presence of natural effects, and these effects are brought about through natural causes. In other words, although God grants believers a direct and immediate sense of assurance, this is reinforced as God subsequently works through natural means to produce noticeable effects in believers’ lives and character.

Implications

When we understand the means of grace along these lines, several implications follow.

⁴⁵ William J. Abraham, “John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture (Bibliographic Essay and the 1995 Book of Scott Jones),” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33, no. 1 (1998): 10-1.

⁴⁶ Wesley, Sermon 11, “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse II,” §5.1, *WW*, 1:296-7 [J 5:132].

⁴⁷ Wesley, Sermon 11, “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse II,” §2.6, *WW*, 1:287-8 [J 5:125].

Conscience as Empirical

First, a Wesleyan understanding of grace suggests a more empirical account of conscience. Rather than view conscience as the mystical receptacle of divine knowledge, we can understand conscience as a type of reasoning. This highlights a facet of Wesley's thought which is often overlooked, namely, his strong belief in the value of education, both morally and otherwise. Again, this does not imply that the Holy Spirit does not interact with human conscience. What it denies is the claim that the Holy Spirit generally provides superadded knowledge to conscience. Instead, the Holy Spirit routinely helps the mind to reason and remember.

Consistent with his opposition to mystical, superadded knowledge, Wesley is a staunch advocate of education and intellectual inquiry. Indeed, Wesley was interested in philosophy and science so long as they did not contradict Scripture.⁴⁸ Moreover, he had no real concern about potential conflicts between science and the Bible.⁴⁹ For instance, many people of Wesley's day believed lightning to be an expression of God's anger, so they were disturbed by Benjamin Franklin's discovery of electricity. In contrast, Wesley did not view the discovery as a threat to his belief in the supernatural. In fact, he conducted his own experiments using electricity.⁵⁰

A Cognitivist View of Emotion

This view of grace is also conducive to a more cognitivist view of emotion. According to Randy Maddox, one of the key ends that the means of grace produce is the habituation of our affections, and I believe that this suggests a more cognitivist account

⁴⁸ Gray, 95.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 141.

⁵⁰ W. W. Sweet, "John Wesley and Scientific Discovery," *Christian Century* 40 (1923): 591-2.

of emotion.⁵¹ In fact, Wesley understands the real goal of the means of grace to be the attainment of holy affections.

But in process of time, when “the love of many waxed cold,” some began to mistake the *means* for the *end*, and to place religion rather in doing those outward works than in a heart renewed after the image of God. They forgot that “the end of” every “commandment is love, out of a pure heart, with faith unfeigned:” the loving the Lord their God with all their heart, and their neighbor as themselves, and the being purified from pride, anger, and evil desire, by a “faith of the operation of God.”⁵²

As Gregory Clapper points out, the affections are not merely a means to outward holiness, they are to be sought for their own sake.⁵³

Contrary to what one might suppose, Wesley’s emphasis on the role of affections in the religious life does not ignore their cognitive element. Collins points out that Wesley understands our tempers (i.e. affective dispositions) to be shaped by our beliefs.⁵⁴ When viewed in this way, the Wesleyan emphasis on love can be construed in a cognitivist fashion, noting how the affections are largely dependent upon beliefs. Runyon has expressed similar sentiments regarding the place of reason in Wesley’s understanding of the affections. He suggests that even though Wesley’s theology is best characterized as “orthopathy” (i.e. right affections), reason still plays an important function in the formation and governance of the affections.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Randy L. Maddox, “A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley’s Heart Religion,” in *Heart Religion” in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard B. Steele (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2001), 20.

⁵² Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” §1.2, *WW*, 1:378 [J 5:185-6].

⁵³ Gregory S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and their Role in the Christian Life and Theology* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow, 1989), 28.

⁵⁴ Kenneth J. Collins, “John Wesley’s Topography of the Heart: Dispositions, Tempers and Affections,” *Methodist History* 36 (1998), 166.

⁵⁵ Runyon, 164-5.

Religious experiences such as conversion must be seen as being informed by reasoned reflection. John Cobb believes that this emphasis is also a necessary element of the renewal of Wesley's doctrine of perfection.⁵⁶ Essentially, Christian perfection must be understood to be more than passive feelings. It represents a fundamental reshaping of the mind, including, among other things, the purity of one's intentions and the maturity of one's beliefs. It will also involve moral progress, and this will be achieved through natural means under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

From a cognitivist perspective, our knowledge is foundational to our beliefs, feelings, and dispositions. This implies that moral transformation itself is cognitive in nature, even with regard to our affections. Since this occurs through our natural cognitive processes, we are morally derelict if we seek transformation apart from natural means. This does not mean that we cannot hope for supernatural transformation, but it does mean that we cannot hope for such to the neglect of natural means.

Salvation as Synergism

For Wesley, salvation is a divine-human synergism, and Richard Heitzenrater points out that this can be traced back to his days at Oxford.⁵⁷ Consequently, a Wesleyan view of salvation must be synergistic, because it teaches that divine grace anticipates a human response. In general, theology always seeks to define the dividing line between divine and human activity. Every theology (or system of religion) runs the risk of setting the dividing line improperly. The naturalists believed that transformation is entirely on

⁵⁶ John B. Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 112.

⁵⁷ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1989), 103.

our part, and they left God out of the equation. In contrast, the mystics too often relied on supernatural transformation to the neglect of the means of grace.

A Wesleyan schema attempts to strike a balance between divine and human activity. Salvation begins with God's initiative, and this is what enables human response. Divine action does not obviate human responsibility, neither does it override human freedom. As Thomas Oden affirms, the will is not remade through coercion, but through gradual persuasion.⁵⁸ For Wesley, divine grace enables human freedom, and this is the source of human responsibility.

Stressing Human Responsibility

In effect, the Holy Spirit does not do for us what we otherwise can do for ourselves. Human beings must cooperate with God's grace in order to be saved from sin and damnation. Maddox thus prefers to characterize Wesley's understanding of grace as "responsible grace" because he sees grace as enabling us to respond to more grace, making us ultimately responsible for ourselves.⁵⁹ He says that this emphasis is "an abiding orienting concern" which guides Wesley's theology.⁶⁰ According to Wesley himself, to say that God's grace is at work in us implies not only that we are able to work out our own salvation, it also implies that we are obligated to do so in response to God's action.⁶¹ For Wesley, the stress on human responsibility and duty does not impugn God's

⁵⁸ Thomas C. Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 96.

⁵⁹ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 92.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁶¹ Wesley, Sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," §3.2, *WW*, 3:206 [J 6:511].

governance of the world, for in “true predestination ... promise and duty go hand in hand.”⁶²

Mildred Bangs Wynkoop opposed the model of instantaneous supernatural change which has often been embraced by the Wesleyan traditions. She contended that it cannot be the case that the Holy Spirit changes our sinful impulses at a sub-conscious level because that suggests: 1) the possibility that all impulse toward sin can be removed, but this would essentially end free will as Wesley understood it, and 2) the impossibility of changing our impulses at the level of consciousness.⁶³ Rather, she suggests,

When God’s grace begins to operate upon the person, it is at this point of moral responsibility. Grace awakens into sharp awareness everything that *moral* means. Both persons, God and Man, confronting each other, maintain personal integrity. Neither is merged into the other, nor is identity submerged in an irrational shadowland. The coming of the Spirit does not occasion an eclipse of human rationality and consciousness.⁶⁴

Stressing human responsibility within the operation of divine grace underscores the fact that God deals with each of us according to our abilities and capacities. For instance, John Culp points out that overlooking the human involvement in sanctification and focusing only on divine activity leads to excessive claims and ignores the fact that individuals will possess and express perfect love in different ways.⁶⁵ The goal of divine grace is to transform us so that we might conform to the image of God. We must be involved in our own transformation and pursue the means that are best suited to that end.

⁶² Wesley, *NNT*, I Pet. 1:2.

⁶³ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1972), 216.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁶⁵ John Culp, “Supernatural and Sanctification: Comparison of Roman Catholic and Wesleyan Views,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 2 (1996): 161.

Conclusion

In conclusion, John Wesley's doctrine of grace stresses divine initiative and human response, but it also emphasizes human initiative and divine response. It is a balanced position that seeks to maintain tension between divine and human activity, between the supernatural and the natural, between dependence and responsibility, and between faith and works. As humanity continues to progress and develop, so does its realm of responsibility, and this implies that the point of tension will need to shift if this tension is to be upheld. Wesley's emphasis on the means of grace provides a progressive theological framework for understanding God's activity in the world and our responsibility in our own transformation into the image of God.