

Deep and Wide

The Perfecting Love of Jesus Christ



*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.
God's love was revealed among us in this way:
God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.
In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us
and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.
Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.
No one has ever seen God;
if we love one another,
God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.*

1 John 4:7-12

Nickolas J. Campbell

Prelude

Deep and wide, deep and wide,
There's a fountain flowing deep and wide.
Deep and wide, deep and wide,
There's a fountain flowing deep and wide.

Many of us have sung this children's spiritual with great enthusiasm, often adding motions to the words and verses. The group-building fun begins as we drop a word and hum in that word's place: *hmm* and wide, *hmm* and wide, there's a fountain flowing *hmm* and wide. At the last verse, there is a lot of joyful humming: *hmm* and *hmm*, *hmm* and *hmm*, there's a *hmm*, *hmm* flowing *hmm* and *hmm*.

The words of the last line of the last verse are: "there's" "a" "flowing" "and." I have often told the congregations that I have served that the word that perhaps most identifies a Christian, particularly within the Wesleyan tradition, is "and." We love God *and* neighbors. We practice vital piety *and* social holiness. We believe in discipline *and* grace. Our faith is evangelical *and* catholic, personal *and* corporate, solitary *and* communal. Christ has died, *and* Christ is risen, *and* Christ will come again. We are saved from the wrath to come *and* for life in the kingdom of God now. The perfect love of Jesus Christ is deep *and* wide. When the grace *and* love of God is flowing in our lives, when we know that the love of God is so great that we are not limited by the world's choices of either/or, there is a flowing *and*.

Too often, though, it is our temptation to choose "either/or." We can *either* love God *or* we can love our neighbors. We can *either* emphasize vital piety *or* social holiness. We *either* believe in discipline *or* grace. We are *either* evangelical *or* catholic. Our faith is *either* personal *or* communal. We seek God *either* in solitude *or* in community. The faith is *either* about this life *or* the next. And in our sin, we judge something as *either* good *or* evil to us, which makes the way we live out our faith *either* "true faith" *or* "heresy." We end up with a caricature of Christianity, since those who critique our "good" as "evil" will see a faith that is *neither* deep *nor* wide.

My prayer for this little book, and those who make use of it, is Paul's prayer, found at Ephesians 3:16 (NRSV):

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Foreword

Towards the end of his life, John Wesley was asked about Methodism, the movement that he and his brother Charles has been so instrumental in forming and leading. His response was that **Christian perfection** “is the essential heart of Methodism and the chief thing for which it stands.” This doctrine is the “grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodist; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.”

In that reply are the two grand movements in faithful Christian living – God’s actions and our response. God acted in raising up a people, and the Methodist response was to propagate Christian perfection. This little book comes out of my attempts to respond faithfully to that calling from God to propagate Christian perfection.

This calling sometimes gets lost in today’s world. There are loud callings to be conservative or liberal; to be reconciling or confessional; to be right-thinking or right-acting; to pursue vital piety or to seek social justice. Whichever way we choose, we then struggle between choosing “deep” or choosing “wide,” between choosing radical faith or choosing popular faith. God is speaking through all of these voices; yet none of these voices speaks without the influences of the world and our sin creeping in.

The work here reflects several vessels of grace in life that have brought me to the understanding of Christian perfection that I will share in this book. I have been loved and influenced by the local church, both the congregation in which I was raised and those in which I have served as a pastor. I have been loved and influenced by my family of origin; my family of choice that includes my spouse, Pam, and our children, Susan and Wesley; and my extended family within the Church. My professors at Saint Paul School of Theology, particularly Dale Dunlap and Larry Wagley, who were the advisors for my doctoral work, have influenced me. Much of that work, “Going on to perfection: implications for pastors and congregations,” (1994) is woven throughout this book. And, of course, John Wesley’s writings and ministry have influenced me.

It is my hope that, after living with these influences for a number of years, and with the additional time for me to be worked on by God, I can present here a glimpse into the perfect love of Jesus Christ that is accessible, understandable, and inviting. The great truths that you may find here have been gleaned from others; the failings and mistakes will be mine; and the promise of the perfect love of God revealed in Jesus Christ and enabled in us by the Holy Spirit is ours.

Nick Campbell

Introduction and Invitation to a Struggle

“There is scarce any expression in holy writ, which has given more offense than this. The word *perfect* is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them; and whosoever *preaches perfection* (as the phrase is), that is, asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by them worse than a heathen man or a publican.”

So begins John Wesley’s sermon on Christian Perfection. The “offending” scripture is from Paul’s letter to the Philippians (3:12): “*Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.*” It was clear to all reasonable Christians of his age that perfection was impossible, but Wesley valued scripture too highly to just dismiss those verses that called for disciples to be perfect. Indeed, this calling to perfection is found on the lips of Jesus himself, at the apex of his Sermon on the Mount: “*Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” (Matthew 5:48)

The word *perfect* today is understood differently than it was by those who, in John Wesley’s day, were to ignore the scriptural commandments and calling for perfection. We are more likely to hear this word attached to something we believe someone else has, but which we cannot have. Some examples would include:

A perfect life. A perfect wedding. A perfect job.
A perfect evening. A perfect diamond. A perfect house.
A perfect lawn. A perfect body. A perfect record.

As an adjective, the word “perfect” gets used frequently to describe a desirable, yet unattainable, standard. We reflect this tension in the old joke: He’s a perfect fool. *Oh, nobody’s perfect.*

The standard for this kind of perfection is almost always based on a subjective scale that can change as more information is gathered. We learn more about life style choices. We hear about other wedding practices. We see someone making more money, or having more fun, or wearing a bigger ring. Someone else has a nicer home, or garners more admiring glances – and what we once considered perfect is no longer.

Perfection may even be thought to be a bad thing in a capitalistic culture that is always trying to sell us “new” and “improved.” If something is perfect, there is no room for improvement, no means of offering a better competing product, and therefore no need for us to buy the seller’s latest version of their product.

As a culture, we are more comfortable thinking in terms of getting better and better – by whatever standard we may be willing to be judged – rather than being good, or perfect. And yet, we are still tempted by the idea of perfection, even if it is for all the wrong reasons. Perfection may become for us the standard by which others will finally have to

accept us as worthy of love and relationship, instead of exploiting our perceived weaknesses and shortcomings. Or perfection may be the basis for separating ourselves from others that we choose not to recognize as our neighbors, in order to preserve our “perfect” life.

Yet in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded those who would be his disciples to be perfect. Do we accept this as a claim on our lives, or do we try to find a way to dismiss or diminish it? In fact, there is a long tradition within the church that, if not entirely dismissing this command, seeks to at least dilute its authority. The arguments that were used to oppose John and Charles Wesley are still used today. Some have taken the position that Jesus advocated an impossible standard in order that we might acknowledge our sin and need for forgiveness and atonement. Others have insisted that perfection is a minor theological point, reserved for the full-time religious and saints, but not a concern for the ordinary disciple. Both of these positions have held influence in the thinking and practices of the church; both have shortcomings that were made evident through the work and ministry of John and Charles Wesley.

In the Bible, Jacob’s name was changed to Israel (cf. Genesis 28-33). Behind his two names is a bit of wordplay that suggests who we are called to be before God. Jacob means “grabber,” or someone who was always looking to take something in order to gain an advantage. Jacob grabbed his brother’s heel at birth, and later would grab the birth rite blessing away from Esau. Israel means “one who struggles with God.” It was this struggle to live out a loving relationship with God, revealed in the practices of hospitality *and* the covenant of accountability, which distinguished the people Israel from others.

That struggle continues today within the Christian faith community. We are constantly torn between society’s calling for us to be “grabbers” and Scripture’s calling for us to “struggle with God.” How are we to live out a loving relationship with God, as well as a loving relationship with the neighbors that God gives to us and through whom Christ still comes to us, when the world calls for us to “look out for #1,” “to go for the gusto,” and “to be all that you can be”? If we can faithfully answer that question fully, then we will be fulfilling the law (cf. Matthew 5:17) and living in the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus – we would be living in a perfect world.

But what does perfection look like? There is still within the Church little agreement and much dissension concerning what a perfect world would look like. Is it primarily a worshipful experience as indicated in John’s revelation (7:9-12) and by the disciples’ actions immediately after the resurrection (Luke 24:53)? Is it primarily a world where every person’s needs are met (cf. Acts 2:44 and following)? Or is it all together something else?

In a book titled “World Perfect: The Jewish Impact on Civilization” (Simcha Press, Deerfield Beach FL, 2002), the author, Rabbi Ken Spiro, surveyed over 1500 respondents who listed “the fundamental principles and values which they felt we needed to uphold in order to make our world as perfect as is *humanly* possible.” (*emphasis mine*) These values included *Respect for Human Life, Peace and Harmony, Justice and Equality,*

Education, Family, and Social Responsibility. Noble virtues, to be sure, but the emphasis is on what humans do to create the perfect world. And that stands in contrast with what Jesus taught: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

At about the same time, author Debra Trione asked selected persons to describe their perfect world, and collected their writings and artwork in a book (“A Perfect World: Words and Paintings from Over 50 of America’s Most Powerful People,” Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2002). The answers and visions included such observations as:

What I hope for plausibly is the continuing realization of the Copernican principle, which asserts in its simplest form that we are not special in this universe. No matter how special you think you are, you are not. – Neil De Grasse Tyson

My most fundamental hope is for a worldwide attitude of tolerance, which I think will only come through education and an awareness of other cultures and religions. The more people are exposed to other philosophies and thoughts, the more possible it becomes to resolve world conflicts peacefully. Education builds tolerance for other points of view. – John Hendricks

I guess in my perfect world I’d like to know what I know now but have the heart and lungs and body weight, and teeth, of a twenty-year old. – Robert Richardson

I hope for a world in which we have come to our senses, and children do not have to live in fear of weapons of mass destruction. Fear causes deviant behavior. The next thing I wish for is a society in which gender and cultures and race do not cause the dashing of hopes for young people. I’d like opportunity not to know bounds by race, or culture, or gender. The third thing I hope for is that the young people of this country will always be able to have the same dreams and hopes that I had in the 1950s. That was a decade of incredible excitement in this country. Parents knew their children would have a better life than they did; children knew there were tremendous possibilities for them. There seemed to be no limits, no stops. And finally, in this perfect world, the driving force for all of this will be unbelievable technological achievements that will allow people to live healthier, fuller lives with economic opportunity – technologies that provide energy and products of economic value without consuming valuable resources or spewing poisons into the air. Sustainable development is the term I prefer. – Daniel Goldin

Philosophers have strived to define perfection as ideals in society, in forms, and/or in persons. Humanists have described their ultimate visions as communities that accept and live by certain precepts. Storytellers speak of Elysian fields and Shangri-la valleys. John Milton wrote of “Paradise Lost,” while Thomas More wrote of “Utopia” found. Advertisers offer their definitions of perfection for persons made well aware of their deficiencies and imperfections, with the answer to be found by the purchase and consumption of their product or service. This quest for perfection, though rarely stated in this way, is readily evident. There is a restlessness within each of us as we seek that which will make us whole – as persons and as a community. It is this same restlessness

that Augustine identified in his Confession (Book 1): “For Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

This restlessness was identified and analyzed again by Isaac of Syria, a 7th century bishop of Nineveh, who wrote, “No one has understanding if he is not humble, and he who lacks humility is devoid of understanding. No one is humble if he is not at peace, and he who is not at peace is not humble, and no one is at peace without rejoicing. In all the paths on which people journey in this world, they will find no peace until they draw near to the hope which is God. The heart finds no peace from toil and from stumbling blocks until it is brought close to hope – which makes it peaceful and pours joy into it. That is what the venerable and holy lips of our Savior said: ‘Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’”

In the Book of Revelation there is a promise of a return to the garden that is home to the Tree of Life, a promise of a return to Paradise through Jesus Christ (2:7). Disciples of different eras have attempted to establish communities to help persons on their journey home by modeling a life of perfection in this world. Examples of this would include the early Christians who held everything in common (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35), the Desert Fathers, monastic communities, Anabaptist communities, and the base community movement of the Roman Catholic Church.

The most familiar prayer in Christianity has as one of its petitions an expectation of a perfect world, and a beginning description of that perfect world: *thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. (Matthew 6:10) The question, of course, is how do we get from the reality of where we are to the perfection of heaven? The faithful answer is, “through the grace of Jesus Christ” – even as we discern and discuss how that grace is to be applied in practice.

The discussion concerning the Kingdom of God on earth generally falls into two emphases, which are variously phrased as love of God and love of neighbor, or as vital piety and social holiness. Yet, when this vision meets reality, all too often we emphasize one part over the other. We either struggle with God in our attempts to be pious, and leave our neighbor to be a secondary condition of faith at best, or at worst, the primary source of our temptations to sin. Or, we struggle with creating a world of justice, tolerance and acceptance, with prayer and piety sometimes seen as the last acts of a desperate people unwilling to grapple with the hard issues of life. Many of the arguments within the Church can be clarified as being between “the prayer warriors” and “the kingdom builders,” with their different emphases.

In the 18th century two brothers, who had accepted this invitation to struggle with what it means to be a Christian, combined vital piety and social holiness together in a way that kept its focus on the perfect love of neighbors as *our response* to the perfect love of God *received*. John and Charles Wesley shared their new “method” of doing theology with those people who had grown cold in their piety, detached as it was from the love of their neighbor; as well as with those who had grown weary in their seeking social justice, detached as it was from the love of their God revealed in Jesus Christ. Their method was

not gladly received by those in authority, but was gladly received among the common people who were either not pious or “good” enough for the Church.

Yet, even among the Methodists, John Wesley noted that there were predictable manifestations of the struggles for those who were earnest in their faith. He listed them in a pamphlet titled, “Cautions and Directions Given to the Greatest Professors in the Methodist Societies.” I call these manifestations the “Unholy Responses” that arise when we struggle trying to follow Christ. It should be understood that these cautions are not primarily concerns for the new Christian, or even for the average Christian, but for the Christian seeking to “go on to perfection in love.”

The “unholy responses” are *pride, enthusiasm, antinomianism, sins of omission, desiring any thing but God, and schism*. Even these terms will need some “unpacking” for us to understand why these are such concerns for those seeking to go on to perfection! But before we explore these concerns, we will first look at how the Church has historically and traditionally dealt with the command of Jesus to be perfect (Matthew 5:48). We will then look at some of the historical methods that have been proposed and practiced within the Christian tradition to help persons experience or achieve perfection. I will then propose an integrated method for going on to perfection. This is then followed by what Wesley showed to be the holy and unholy responses to grace.

What you won’t find in this little book is a specific, step-by-step plan that depends on anything less than living a vital relationship with God and our neighbors. That is a necessary choice, but still a risk in a world that desires methods that it can control and master. This “method” insists upon *dependence on God, conformity to Christ, and confidence in the Holy Spirit*. Yet, this was the “method” that was derided by the early critics of the Wesley brothers’ movement to renew the people of Great Britain.

The Wesleys’ reliance on, and familiarity with, scripture as a starting and checking point for a life of faithfulness and perfect love is evident throughout their prayers, sermons, and hymns. John’s reasonable application of scripture towards understanding this high calling is also evident. What is not as evident at first, but which is just as important for understanding “going on to perfection,” is just how much they depended on God, how much they desired to be conformed to Christ, and how strong their confidence was in the Holy Spirit. Apart from that dependence, conformity, and confidence, these prayers, sermons, and hymns would be little more than intriguing exercises of the mind and spirit. Yet in that light, their expectation of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven is known as a promised reality that comes as we are enabled by grace to respond. If you spend time with the prayers (updated and reset in “Casting Out the Evil Spirit in the Church”) and the sermons (summarized for today in “Condensed Sermon Soup”) you may find your self getting caught up in their dependence upon God, their excitement in being conformed to Christ, and their peace in having confidence in the Holy Spirit.

A note about the language in this book: unless otherwise noted, when I have quoted others it is what they actually said or wrote, or as it is commonly translated, without changing their words for inclusiveness or other purposes. This was done, in part, to

illustrate that there are limits in our understanding, even among the saints. But it is also to illustrate that even within these human limits, we may still find perfect love that is always beyond our ability to express it. The language of John Wesley confronted, upset, invited, prepared, and challenged people in how they thought, spoke, and acted in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. I have no doubt that the language you find here will do the same. The temptation is that we let the words distract us from the message, which then distracts us from following Christ, even as we make claims that the gospel calls us to raise our complaint. This is one of Satan's Devices (see Sermon 37), used to dampen our joy by having us focus on our sin and unworthiness, instead of our dependence on God. We are called to struggle with the language, to make our thoughts, words, and actions as holy and as perfectly loving as we can, for that is part of our journey of faith. We are also called to listen to each other, even in our imperfection and sinfulness, so that we may learn how God can use even "the weakest preacher" to teach us (see Wesley's cautions concerning "Pride.") As you read this book, you will not just be exposed to this concept, but have the opportunity to practice it!

Part 1: A History of Interpretation

“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Matthew 5:48

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”

from “Alice in Wonderland,” by Lewis Carroll

After the Beatitudes and some of the more familiar words of the Sermon on the Mount, and before the Lord’s Prayer and the words we share every Ash Wednesday in worship, there is this little and often overlooked verse – *be perfect*. And since then, there has been an “Alice in Wonderland” approach to understanding what Jesus meant by perfection. We have a history of interpreting this verse that begins with the early Church, and which has been influenced by the prevailing culture’s appropriation of the word “perfect.” John Wesley believed that this verse was the key that unlocked the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. In this part of the book, we will look at that history in an attempt to discern what it is that Jesus is still saying to us.

Patristic interpretation

In his “Handbook of Christian Spirituality,” (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1985), Michael Cox looked at the patristic age through the lens of mysticism. For our purposes, this is essentially the equivalent of looking at the Church’s history of interpreting perfection. I offer a few examples from his book on that era.

Athanasius (296-373 AD), bishop of Alexandria who has been referred to as the Father of Orthodoxy, considered chastity to be the foundation of the mystical life, as part of the denial of earthly pleasures so that the mind could be “pure in heart and see God.”

For Cassian (360-435 AD), the first person to introduce the Eastern church’s practices of monasticism to the Western church, being perfected is the work of the disciple towards the goal of a unitive experience of God through prayer. He wrote, “The end of all our perfection is thus so to act that the soul, stripping itself daily of all earthly and carnal inclinations, lifts itself up without ceasing more and more towards spiritual things; so that all its works and thoughts, and all the movements of the heart, may become nothing else but a continuous act of prayer.”

Augustine (354-430 AD), bishop of Hippo and author of his “Confessions,” described a mystical understanding of God as being “most highest, most good, most potent, most

omnipotent; most merciful, yet most just; most hidden, yet most present; most beautiful, yet most strong; stable, yet incomprehensible; unchangeable, yet, all-changing; never new, never old; all renewing . . . ever working, ever at rest; still gathering, yet nothing lacking; supporting, filling, and overspreading; creating, nourishing, and maturing; seeking, yet having all things . . .” This is a good illustration of the noetic experience of God, which we will look at in the next part.

Modern interpretation

While much in society changes, often at a rapid pace, Christian thinking about perfection has moved at a much slower pace. Other issues have captured the attention of Christian writers, so I offer the thinking of two writers who wrote what in modernity may seem like a long time ago; yet in the two thousand years of the Church, is still just a few moments past. Their analysis is still reflective of current critical thinking about perfection, and yet their reflections are based on the writings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD).

In 1956, two Dominican priests wrote a book titled “The Meaning of Christian Perfection” (Jordan Aumann and David L. Greenstock, Blackfriars Publications, London). They alternated chapters to develop the concept of perfection step-by-step as a *Christian philosophy*. Greenstock wrote that a thing is perfect if “it may attain the end or purpose for which it was made.” A thing is perfect if it is complete in its essence, if it possesses every quality required for its specific operation, and if it actually attains its end or at least it must be fully capable of doing so. If those standards of perfection are applied to the soul, then we are made complete through the grace of Jesus Christ, we have the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and we are perfected in love in this life or at least are going on to perfection.

This perfection is divided into two kinds – essential and accidental. The first, essential perfection, concerns the spiritual factors that are the essential minimum requirements for the attainment of our final home with God. The second, accidental perfection, concerns those souls who have reached an intimate union with God, to a degree that their one aim in life is “to be dissolved and be with Christ,” which is understood to be a gift, and not a reward for their “going on to perfection.”

Aumann wrote that these two kinds of perfection are the result of the most intimate and continual love of God of which a person is capable of, leading to a mystical transforming union as a first state, and to glory through a beatific vision as the second state.

Greenstock continued that “grace perfects nature, not merely in the abstract, but as it is in the individual, with all its varied circumstances of time, place, nationality, character and environment.” There are two ways to perfection: the ascetical (giving up) and the mystical (letting go.) The means to perfection are found in the spirit of prayer. Prayer should be concerned with quality rather than quantity, leading to a purification of our intention and a deepening of our attention, together with an ever-increasing surrender of our will to the will of God.

Aumann affirmed this when he wrote that “it is love that makes saints and we cannot insist too strongly that it is not what we do that makes us holy, but the love with which we do it.”

Sin and Perfection

John Wesley believed in original sin and total depravity, but this is to be understood only as describing our relationship before God. Sin is total in that all people are affected. Depravity means that no one has any claim (apart from Jesus Christ) that would make him or her worthy of a claim to eternal life.

Charles Wesley illustrated this understanding of total depravity in a scriptural poem based on Deuteronomy 6:6, “These words which I command thee, shall be in thy heart.”

The table of thy heart prepare,
(Such power belongs to Thee alone)
And write, O God, Thy precepts there,
To show Thou still canst write in stone.
So shall my pure obedience prove
All things are possible to love.

Original righteousness, which can be a starting point for understanding perfection, is defined in terms of the original relationship of humanity with God at the Creation. The Fall is then understood as the falling away from that relationship.

Because of this understanding of righteousness and sin, even “good acts” can be considered “sin” if they are done apart from God’s will and purpose. It is the relationship with God, and not the act (or failure to act), that is the determining factor for deciding sin. Albert Outler, in his book “Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit” (Nashville: Tidings Press, 1975), phrased Wesley’s definition of sin as “our unwillingness to be radically *dependent upon God* for life and breath and all things.” (emphasis added)

Wesley also talked of sin as being a voluntary transgression. To keep this clear as it concerns going on to perfection, I would like to offer a distinction: big “S” Sin is our broken relationship with God, which is revealed in little “s” sins as manifestations of the broken relationship. Because of the limited nature of our “created-ness,” there will always be little “s” sins – even for those persons who are perfect in love, revealing our need to continually be growing in grace and love.

This understanding of sin is reflected in Wesley’s understanding of saving faith. In his sermon “Salvation by Faith,” he declared that Christian faith is not intellectual assent that there is a God (a heathen’s faith); it is not an intellectual assent that God is powerful and just, and the Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world (a demon’s faith); it is not leaving all behind to follow Jesus, working miracles, doing good, and having all authority over evil (the disciples’ faith before the crucifixion and resurrection.) True saving faith “acknowledges the necessity and merit of his death, and the power of his

resurrection. It acknowledges his death as the only, sufficient means of redeeming man from death eternal, and his resurrection as the restoration of us all to life and immortality; inasmuch as He was delivered for our sins, and rose again for our justification.”

This understanding is reflected in his notes on the Bible. For Matthew 5:48, he wrote: *“Therefore ye shall be perfect; as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.* So the original runs, referring to all that holiness which is described in the foregoing verses, which our Lord in the beginning of the chapter recommends as happiness, and in the close of it as perfection. And how wise and gracious is this, to sum up, and, as it were, seal all his commandments with a promise! Even the proper promise of the Gospel! That he put those laws in our minds, and writes them in our hearts! He well knew how ready our unbelief would be to cry out, this is impossible! And therefore upon it all the power, truth, and faithfulness of him to whom all things are possible.”

The only other place in Matthew’s gospel we find the word “perfect” is at Matthew 19:21: “Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” In his notes on the Bible, Wesley wrote: “Verse 21 *If thou desirest to be perfect* - That is, to be a real Christian: *Sell what thou hast* - He who reads the heart saw his bosom sin was love of the world; and knew he could not be saved from this, but by literally renouncing it. To him therefore he gave this particular direction, which he never designed for a general rule. For him that was necessary to salvation: to us it is not. *To sell all* was an absolute duty to him; to many of us it would be an absolute sin.” This choice between the things of the world and Jesus is pointed to in Sermon 23 below, when Wesley talks about storing up treasures on earth and contrasts it with selling Jesus for a few coins. He then refers to the question asked in Matthew 19, and argues again that this was a particular rule for that rich man, since God cares not about our wealth or lack of wealth, but about the condition of our heart in loving others. This, however, was not letting persons off the hook concerning their wealth and its use, as we will see referenced in several sermons.

Another passage that affects our understanding of perfection is I John 4:17-19: *Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.* To this, John Wesley wrote: “Hereby, that is, by this communion with God is our love made perfect; that we may, that is, so that we shall have boldness in the days of judgment, when all the stout-hearted shall tremble. Because as he – Christ – is all love, so are we who are fathers in Christ, even in this world. 4:18 *There is no fear in love* – no slavish fear can be where love reigns. But perfect, adult love casteth out slavish fear; because such fear hath torment, and so is inconsistent with the happiness of love. A natural man has neither fear nor love; one that is awakened, fear without love; a babe in Christ, love and fear; a father in Christ, love without fear. 4:19 *We love him, because he first loved us* – This is the sum of all religion, the genuine method of Christianity. None can say more: why should anyone say less, or less intelligibly?” We see evidence in this commentary of his understanding of

salvation. Prevenient, or convicting grace, is for one who is awakened, and now fears God; justifying grace is at work in the babes in Christ who know both love and fear in their faith journey; and sanctifying grace is the gift that allows us a life of love without fear before God and our neighbors – a state of perfect love. As to Wesley’s distinction between a “natural man,” one that is “awakened,” a “babe” in Christ, and a “father” in Christ, you will want to read Sermon 9, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption.”

Let us briefly consider two other scripture passages from Wesley’s notes on the Bible. James 1:2-4 reads “*My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*” Wesley’s comment was “My brethren, count it all joy, which is the highest degree of patience and contains all the rest. When ye fall into diverse temptations, that is, trials. Let patience have its perfect work. Give it full scope, under whatever trials befall you, that ye may be perfect and entire, adorned with every Christian grace. And wanting nothing – which God requires in you.” In these comments, we see his understanding of conformity to Christ, as well as confidence in the Holy Spirit working for good in the disciple.

The other passage is Colossians 3:14 – *Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.* Wesley’s comment was, “The love of God contains the whole of Christian perfection, and connects all the parts of it together.”

Part 2: What Does It Mean To Be Perfect Today?

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Mark 9:30-37

Perfection may be divided into three major components: perfection as an ideal of God, perfection as an experience of God, and perfection as the disciple's performance for God. Each of these components has something important to tell us about what it means to "be perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect." Yet separately, they are not enough for us to "go on to perfection." We will look at each component briefly, in preparation for weaving them together later.

Perfection as Ideal

In Wesley's notes on Matthew 5: 48, he indicated that the "verses preceding" were the standards for determining the perfection of a disciple. Specifically, the verses known as the Beatitudes comprise the ideal understanding of how a Christian disciple responds to the world. For a full understanding of how Wesley interpreted the Beatitudes as Christ's statement on perfection, read Sermons 16-28.

The poor in spirit, Wesley wrote, are those "who are unfeignedly penitent, they who are truly convinced of sin; who see and feel the state they are in by nature, being deeply sensible of their sinfulness, guiltiness, helplessness." The kingdom of heaven that they shall receive is "the present inward kingdom: righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, as well as the eternal kingdom, if they endure to the end."

The mournful are blessed because their mourning is occasioned "for their own sins, or for other men's, and are steadily and habitually serious" in realizing who they are before God; yet they shall know the comforting presence of God "more solidly and deeply even in this world, and eternally in heaven" through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Wesley worked his way through the Beatitudes and how their attributes indicated the perfecting love at work in the disciple's life. The meek "hold all their passions and affections evenly balanced. They shall inherit the earth;" – at least, all the things of the earth that are "really necessary for life and godliness. They shall enjoy whatever portion God hath given them here, and shall hereafter possess the new earth, wherein dwelleth

righteousness.” The disciple will “hunger and thirst after righteousness” for that is the only way to be satisfied in God.

The perfect disciples will “love all men as themselves,” because “whatever mercy therefore we desire from God, the same let us show to our brethren. He will repay us a thousand fold, the love we bear to any for his sake.” The sanctified are the pure in heart, which allows them to see the God they love with all their hearts, here and in the hereafter. The peace makers are those who, “out of love to God and man do all possible good to all men. Peace in the Scripture sense implies all blessings temporal and eternal. They shall be called the children of God.”

Yet holding perfection in love as an ideal does not mean that others will think lovingly of you. Wesley continued his commentary, following the interconnectedness he observed in the Beatitudes by noting that “One would imagine a person of this amiable temper and behavior would be the darling of mankind. But our Lord well knew it would not be so, as long as Satan was the prince of this world. He therefore warns them before of the treatment all were to expect, who were determined thus to tread in his steps, by immediately subjoining, Happy are they who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” The perfect Christian “is truly a righteous man, he that mourns, and he that is pure in heart;” yet the “godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” since the world cannot bear the comparison of the godly to their own sins. The reward is in following and knowing God through Jesus Christ, which is “even over and above the happiness that naturally and directly results from holiness.”

Understanding perfection is not the same thing as going on to perfection. In a poem titled “Dead Orthodoxy,” (1767) Charles Wesley wrote:

Right notions have their slender use,
But cannot a sound faith produce
Or vital piety:
They cannot make the Godhead known,
Or manifest Jehovah One
In coeternal Three.

That virtue doth from Christ proceed;
That power which animates the dead
The Spirit of life exerts;
The Father His own son reveals,
The triune God His image seals
With pardon on our hearts.

A fond imagination vain,
A shadow floating in the brain,
Which we for faith misdeem,
The mere result of nature’s powers, --
‘Tis not a work of God, but ours,
‘Tis all a waking dream.

The orthodox renowned in fight,
Fierce champions for opinions right,
May reason's strength display:
Their Arian and Socinian foes,
And heresy's whole household knows
The Truth as much as they.

The Truth that makes us free indeed,
We cannot learn it from our creed.
The Truth that sanctifies.
To bring us faith returns from heaven,
And, Father, Son, and Spirit given,
Conducts us to the skies.

Jesus the Truth, the Life, the Way,
Thou in me with Thy Father stay,
Thou with Thy Spirit descend.
I then shall know Thee as Thou art,
The God who never will depart,
My soul's eternal Friend.

Perfection as Experience

“Going on to perfection” as experience is most often associated with “mysticism.” Mysticism is found in most religious traditions. Examples of mysticism would include the quietness of a Quaker meeting and the ecstatic experiences of Pentecostalism – both emphasize the experience of God in their religious practices. It was this characteristic that attracted John Wesley to the Moravians. And while there can be fruitful discussion between the different religious traditions concerning mysticism, we must remember that there is no such thing as a general, or generic, spiritual formation – it is always part of a tradition that has particular understandings concerning the nature of God and our relationship (if any) to our neighbors.

According to Michael Cox, mysticism is usually defined as having four characteristics. The first is that the experience of God is considered *ineffable*; that is, what one experiences can't adequately be described in words since it is beyond our rational categories for describing God. In the Book of Revelation, there is an attempt to describe what John sees in heaven, using the most fantastic imagery he can put into words, and yet there is a sense that the experience is greater still.

Next, the experience is considered *noetic*; that is, the knowledge gained in this experience is grasped by intuition and insight, and not by logic. In the transfiguration of Christ on the mountain, Peter was able to identify Moses and Elijah, though there were no logical or verifiable processes available for making such a positive identification. This might be considered the ultimate victory of “right brain” over “left brain” in how we think and perceive God.

The next characteristic is less about quality than it is about duration. A “perfect experience” of God rarely lasts a long time, though the effects of the experience may last for great lengths of time. The resurrection appearances may be considered as examples of this intense, though short-lived, experience.

The final characteristic is one of passivity. Despite the renunciations, the hard work, the hours spent in prayer and spiritual disciplines, the experience is received as something that is given, not appropriated or earned.

The classical pathway for this mystical experience in Christianity is known as the *Scala Perfectionis*, or the Ladder of Perfection. One begins with the purgative life, which attempts to remove the sinful barriers in our lives that keep us from receiving God’s gifts for us. The next step is the illuminative life, where we are focused on the divine life within and around the seeker. The third step of the ladder is the unitive life, when one has achieved perfect union with God.

It should be noted that there have been attempts to produce the same “experience of God” chemically. It may occur through the ingestion of “sacred” mushrooms as part of a ritual experience within a faith tradition, or by other forms of chemical use. Yet, as Huston Smith noted in his studies of Timothy Leary’s experiments with LSD, these chemicals could produce religious feeling, but they did not necessarily lead to religious living – which points out the separation of vital piety and social holiness!

The irony, which has been observed by the mystics, is that those who are closest to perfection are most aware of their own imperfections. This theme is evident throughout John Wesley’s “A Collection of Forms of Prayers for Every Day of the Week” (1738). Charles Wesley captured this sense in a poem based on Job 9:20, “If I say, I am perfect, mine own mouth shall prove me perverse.”

Though all the precious promises
I find fulfilled in Jesu’s love
If perfect I myself profess,
My own profession I disprove.

The purest saint that lives below
Doth his own sanctity disclaim;
The wisest ones, I nothing know,
The holiest cries, I nothing am!

Perfection as Performance

If going on to perfection means an absolute conformity to the absolute standards of God “by all the means, in all the ways, in all the places, at all the times, to all the people,” then perfection is “too high” in Wesley’s estimation, for that would necessarily mean that God created humanity to sin. Yet, part of the good news of the Incarnation is that Jesus was

human precisely because he did not sin; that is, there was no big “S” sin because the relationship with God was unbroken, even if there were little “s” sins as were pointed out by the scribes and Pharisees.

In what is commonly called “John Wesley’s Rule,” which begins “Do all the good you can . . .” it is the addition of “you can” after each phrase that recognizes that we are called to respond continually to the grace of God, but that we are not capable of doing so as a perfect performance.

To insist on “perfection as performance” is to attempt to live a life defined by moral rectitude, with its necessary temptation to live within a “dotted line” theology. In this theology, the emphasis is on how far you can go before you cross the “dotted line” that separates faithfulness and sinfulness, with subsequent theological arguments concerned primarily with where you draw the “dotted line.” The dotted line defines our little “s” sins. It ends up being a big “S” sin because our focus is on how far away we can be from God and still be in “good standing,” rather than focusing on how close we can be to conforming to God’s will as we grow in faith and love. It is this orientation towards a “dotted line” that necessitates Christians to continually be repenting, to continually be turning towards God.

The Apostle Paul touches on this distinction in the question about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols (see Romans 14:16-23; I Corinthians 8:8-12, 10:23-30). Since the idols do not represent real deities, the meat is just meat and therefore suitable for eating. However, if it caused someone weaker in the faith a problem, Paul advised to refrain from eating it. The sin is not in the eating of the meat, but in how it affects our relationships with others. Doing something we know to be right can be very wrong if it hurts the faith of another – which is precisely what Jesus said at Mark 9:42: *“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.”*

The performance of perfection needs to be tested, like any other experience, as Charles Wesley counseled in this poem based on Philippians 3:12, *“Not as though I were already perfect.”*

Then know thy place (a novice cries,
Whose fancy has attained the prize,)
Stand by thyself, nor rank with me,
For I am holier than thee;
Beyond the chief Apostle I!
And you, who dare my gifts deny,
The proof of my perfection know;
It is – because I *think* it so!

Perfection as Vital Piety *and* Social Holiness

Susannah Wesley influenced her sons John and Charles, as she had in turn been influenced by Lorenzo Scupoli's "Spiritual Struggle" (though the author then was thought to be Juan de Castaniza) with the idea of holy living as faithfulness. John would cite other influences along this path, including Bishop Jeremy Taylor's "Rules and Exercises for Holy Living," Thomas a Kempis' "Christian Pattern" (more commonly known as "The Imitation of Christ,") and William Law's "Christian Perfection" and "A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life."

In his studies, John Wesley encountered others who would shape and influence his thinking. From Plotinus' concept of the dynamic of love which seeks out God, to Augustine's further development of this thought which he coined as "prevenient grace," and Gregory of Nyssa's "kindred Deity" which seek relationship with each person as God's own on a journey which never ends, Wesley developed an understanding of the primacy of grace in our relationship with God.

From such "practical mystics" as Johann Tauler, who developed a double concept of the will and its freedom, matched with the Eastern notion of *synthesis* as the dynamic of God's will and our will, and Francis de Sales' insistence that faith is doing what love finds necessary, Wesley was able to find advocates for holy living as righteousness, without also placing a vain emphasis on works.

Macarius the Egyptian (a student of Gregory of Nyssa, if not an invention of Gregory) and Ephraem Syrus particularly interested Wesley, for in them he found a description of perfection as a dynamic goal in life, a process of perfecting our relationship (*teleosis*) with God and neighbor, which Albert Outler described as "further horizons of love and participation in God always opening up *beyond* any level of spiritual progress." This dynamic perfecting of love is contrasted with the static and meritorious perfection (performance) and the static quietism perfection (experience).

It was in 1738 that performance (social holiness) and experience (vital piety) were woven together for Wesley, which is revealed in his order of salvation. The steadfast love of God revealed in Jesus Christ comes to us first as prevenient grace, giving us the ability to see our sin and understand our need for God. Next is justifying grace, so that we are turned towards God and our neighbor for the relationship intended by God at the Creation, with the only necessary response that of faith. Then comes sanctifying grace, which enables us to participate and grow in that relationship. Holy living was not a prerequisite for God's grace, but the God-enabled response to that grace. With this order of salvation, Wesley was able to avoid the antinomianism of those who held to grace without human participation, as well as avoid the works righteousness which relied so heavily on human participation that there was little or no need for atonement through Christ.

Later, John Wesley would describe this perfection in a pamphlet titled, "A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity." Characteristics of this perfect love include a dependence on

God, confidence in God, and conformity to God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Conformity to Christ included generous and disinterested love (seeking no advantage to ourselves, not even the pleasure of loving); sincerity and simplicity; all possible good, of every possible kind, to every possible person; carried out in a cheerful course of sobriety, temperance and chastity (which in Wesley's time was synonymous with being pure in heart). The pamphlet concludes with an echo of "God's action/our response" – full assurances received, with praise and adoration returned.

Charles Wesley expressed this merging of vital piety and social holiness in a poem he based on Romans 12:11, "Not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord."

Their earthly task who fail to do
Neglect their heavenly business too,
Nor know what faith and duty mean,
Who use religion as a screen,
Asunder put what God hath joined,
A diligent and pious mind.

Full well the labor of our hands
With fervency of spirit stands;
For God, who all our days hath given,
From toil excepts but one in seven;
And laboring, while we time redeem,
We please the Lord, and work for Him.

Happy we live, when God doth fill
Our hands with work, our hearts with zeal;
For every toil, if He enjoin,
Becomes a sacrifice divine,
And like the blessed spirits above
The more we serve, the more we love.

Part 3: Spiritual Direction and Formation Methods

Jesus prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

-Matthew 26:39 (NRSV)

The village priest was a holy man, so each time the people were in trouble they had recourse to him. He would then withdraw to a special place in the forest and say a special prayer. God would always hear his prayer and the village would be helped.

When he died and the people were in trouble they had recourse to his successor, who was not a holy man but knew the secret of the special place in the forest and the special prayer. So he said, "Lord, you know I am not a holy man. But surely you are not going to hold that against my people? So listen to my prayer and come to our assistance." And God would hear his prayer and the village would be helped.

When he died and the people were in trouble they had recourse to his successor, who knew the special prayer but not the place in the forest. So he said, "What do you care for places, Lord? Is not every place made holy by your presence? So listen to my prayer and come to our assistance." And once again God would hear his prayer and the village would be helped.

Now he too died, and when the people were in trouble they had recourse to his successor, who did not know the special prayer or the special place in the forest. So he said, "It isn't the formula that you value, Lord, but the cry of the heart in distress. So listen to my prayer and come to our assistance." And once again God would hear his prayer and the village would be helped.

After this man died, when the people were in trouble they had recourse to his successor. Now this priest has more use for money than for prayer. So he would say to God, "What sort of God are you that while you are perfectly capable of solving problems that you yourself have caused, you still refuse to lift a finger until you have us cringe and beg and plead? Well, you can do as you please with the people." Then he would go right back to whatever business he had in hand. And, once again, God would hear his prayer and the village would be helped.

Taking Flight, Anthony de Mello (Doubleday: New York, 1988)

The point of the story is that we do not control or manipulate God into coming to us. The traditional methods for spiritual formation are, at best, methods for helping us to create a space in our lives that only God can fill. They are not methods for *forcing* or *manipulating* God to make us perfect. In our sin, however, too often we have tried to make them into the "special prayer" and the "special place." We act as if we believe that if we do these exercises perfectly enough, then by our own efforts we will become perfected. Yet, the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane reminds us that the way

of perfect love is found not in what we want but in what God wants. And God wants us, intends us, to be the persons God created at the very beginning: persons who walk with God, in harmony with each other and creation.

William Law, one of the writers that John Wesley reprinted in abridged forms, made this same point in his book “A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life.” He asked, “Would you know who is the greatest saint in the world? It is not the man who prays the most, or fasts most; it is not the man who gives most alms, or is the most eminent for temperance, chastity, or justice; but it is he who is always thankful to God, who wills everything that God willeth, who receives everything as an instance of God’s goodness, and has a heart always ready to praise God for it.” In other words, it is not the person who has worked the best or most faithful method, but the person who, in response to the mighty act of God in Jesus Christ, is thankful for even the most insignificant acts of God whose will is ever directed to our good.

This does not mean, however, that we are not also called to a disciplined life within the Christian faith. If “going on to perfection” is a gift of grace to us, we may wonder what (if anything) we should be doing while we wait for this gift. To that wonderment, Wesley wrote: “Not in careless indifference, or indolent activity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God. And if any man dream of attaining it in any other way, (yea, or of keeping it when it is attained, when he has received it even in the largest measure,) he deceiveth his own soul. It is true, we receive it by simple faith: But God does not, will not, give that faith, unless we seek it with all diligence, in the way which He hath ordained.” (Works XI, pp. 402-3)

These words echo what Jesus said to indicate our salvation is both a gift *and* something we work for:

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.”

Mark 10:17-30

The following methods generally have one or more of the following three focuses: who God is, who we are before God, and how that difference affects our relationship with God and the neighbors God gives to us.

Scriptural methods

This is by no means an exhaustive list of scriptural methods that are used, or have been used, by persons and denominations for being formed as disciples of Jesus Christ. The methods I share are likely the most common, as they call for us to imitate Christ, usually by emphasizing a particular characteristic of Jesus. Other scriptures that are used in methods have been, and will be, presented throughout this book.

John 14:1-7 Jesus Is The Way

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Mark 10:17-23 Radical Obedience

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." ' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'

(Matthew’s version [19:16-22] varies “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell . . .”)

Hebrews 12:1-3 Consistent And Persistent Journey Of Faith

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Matthew 25:31-46 Indifferent Loving Service To Others

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Matthew 10: 7-10 Preferential Option for Those in Need, Identifying with Them

As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.”

Romans 12:9-21 Marks Of A True Christian

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I Corinthians 13 Even Faith Is The Handmaid Of Love

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Colossians 3:12-17 Clothed with Christ

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

James 1:22-25 Doers, Not Hearers Only

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they will be blessed in their doing.

James 2:14-18 Faith Revealed By Works

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

Four Spiritual Laws: The Plan for Salvation

The Four Spiritual Laws present scriptural salvation as conformity to a set of immutable laws, as discerned and supported by the selected scripture readings. The emphasis tends to be on making a Christian connection to God, rather than on becoming Christ-like, but it is included here because of its popularity in some parts of the Church.

The first Spiritual Law is, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” (*see John 3:16; 10:10.*) The second Spiritual Law is, “Humanity is tainted by sin and is therefore separated from God.” (*see Romans 3:23; 6:23.*) The third Spiritual Law is, “Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for our sin. Through Jesus Christ, we can have our sins forgiven and restore a right relationship with God.” (*see Romans 5:8; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; John 14:6.*) The fourth Spiritual Law is, “We must place our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior in order to receive the gift of salvation and know God’s wonderful plan for our lives.” (*see John 1:12; Acts 16:31; Ephesians 2:8-9.*) Once the laws are accepted, a prayer that includes the main points of this plan for salvation is offered, so that salvation can be received.

Four Alls (from the Irish Methodist website, <http://www.irishmethodist.org/>)

1. All people need to be saved.
2. All people can be saved.
3. All people can know they are saved.
4. All people can be saved to the uttermost

John Wesley’s Four Spiritual Laws

God loves you: therefore love and obey him.

Christ died for you: therefore die to sin.

Christ is risen: therefore rise in the image of God.

Christ liveth evermore: therefore live to God, till you live with him in glory.

-- an open letter printed in “*The Arminian*” Dec. 20, 1751

Traditional/Experiential Methods

I have organized the next two methods from a particular viewpoint; others have taken the same information and divided them differently. Since methods are a way of organizing information in order to make our experiences intelligible, whichever way works for you is fine. It is not as if these methods were written upon stone tablets by the finger of God! For most of us, particularly within the Wesleyan tradition, our disciplines for spiritual formation are often both “giving up” and “letting go,” ascetic and mystical, apophatic and cataphatic. For my purposes, I have organized “giving up” as focused on the testing of our intention, while “letting go” is focused on trusting God to bless us in whatever ways God chooses. In practice, it is often impossible, as well as unnecessary, to separate what we do into such neat categories.

The “Giving Up” Method

Jesus said to his disciples: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?”

Luke 9:22-25

One of the petitions in John Wesley’s prayer for Wednesday morning is focused on the power of the “giving up” method:

O Thou, whose whole life cried aloud,
 “Father, not mine, but thy will be done!”
 give me grace to walk after your pattern, and
 to accept its hardship.
Let me so practice all the habits of godliness now,
 so I will be ready when the rains descend
 and the floods beat upon me.
Let me fast this day from those things which are pleasing to me
 in my senses and desires,
 that in the times of testing I will not renounce you
 for fear of suffering or denial of pleasure,
 but may stand firmly in faith, and still do your will.

“Giving up” methods are like Lenten devotional practices multiplied exponentially in their calling for ascetical practices. We give up the ways of the world, the comforts of contemporary living, and the things that bring us ease and pleasure in order to have only God left before us. Ancient images of those using this method include the stylite hermits who lived in baskets high above the ground, and desert monks who wore hair shirts and survived on prayer and a simple diet.

Today’s images tend to be focused more on living simply, with differing levels of commitment advocated, and in different areas of life. We might include Luddites and vegans in this category, though their practice is sometimes based in a “generic” spirituality, rather than as a Christian formation practice.

The opposite of “giving up” is “self-indulgence.” This is a celebrated theme in some parts of the culture, which adopt catch-phrases such as “The one with the most toys wins.” Many of the spiritual maladies of today can be traced to a belief that we both need and deserve to have the latest and greatest conveniences, automobiles, cell phones, computers, gaming systems, homes, televisions, leisure time equipment, and more as we indulge our pleasures. This is compounded by the fear that we might lose these things, and therefore lose part of our identity, so we crowd out time for family, community, and church with more hours at work. To counter this sin, we can begin to give up as essential those things that even a generation ago were considered luxuries or did not yet exist for

our outer behaviors, and learn to identify ourselves by the cross of Jesus Christ rather than by the logo on our clothing or nameplate on our car.

“Giving up” can also be practiced in our prayers. In Christianity, contemplative prayer is the practice of giving up even words when we come before God. We “give up” any attempts to justify ourselves before God, as well as our petitions for what we want and need, so that all that remains in our prayer is the presence of God. Contemplative praying can lead to an “unknowing” because what we experience in God's presence, while real, we cannot adequately put into words. We don't know how to describe the One who is beyond words, except as we have been given language in the scriptures. Think about the language used in Revelation, which is both fantastic and beyond our experience, as John of Patmos struggled to describe what he had experienced.

“Giving up” is an important step on the classical spiritual path of mysticism. We referred to this earlier, but a brief refresher is in order. The steps are: 1) purgative -- we remove all that is not God by fasting and penitence; 2) illuminative -- we see the light of Christ illuminating our path; and 3) unitive -- we experience mystical union with God. The message of this path is that we give up what is not God in order to be open to receive what is God.

“Giving up” can also be called mortification, which usually conjures up images of hair shirts, bare feet, sleeping on hard surfaces, and other challenges to deny our flesh comfort and ease. John Wesley had a place for mortification in his understanding of going on to perfection; yet, it was a *practical mortification* that had safeguards against pride. We see this in his questions for his Wednesday evening prayer. These questions are:

Have I done anything merely because it was pleasing?

Have I not just resisted passionate pleasures, but also sought to deny myself that pleasure?

Were any unavoidable inconveniences gladly received as a means of testing?

Have I made any excuses to avoid self-denial?

Have I thought any chance at self-denial as unimportant?

Have I taken pleasure, at the request of others (except where the glory of God is concerned), as a means of denying myself total control over this discipline?

Have I set aside some time for seeking after a lively sense of the suffering of Christ for my sins?

Have I set aside time to consider God's judgments on me, and how I may seek to grow in grace and discipleship?

What is important in these questions is identifying our intention in practicing mortification. If it is to be mindful of the sacrifices that Jesus made on our behalf, or to prepare our self for times of testing by the world, then mortification is an acceptable practice for those seeking to go on to perfection. If it is to prove our worthiness when confronted with severe challenges, or to separate ourselves from others by our mastery of this discipline, then mortification counts for nothing and may indeed lead us away from true Christian faith.

Going to church camp as a child or a counselor, or going on retreat, is another way to experience “giving up.” Many of our camps are either by design or necessity rustic in nature, with few of the world’s conveniences readily available. By giving up the distractions of the world, many persons have encountered God in significant ways. It was a tradition for many years in my annual conference for a show of hands from ministers who received their calling while at church camp – and many hands were always raised.

The “Letting Go” Method

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:1-9

If “giving up” is the apophatic, or negative, method of spirituality, then “letting go” is the cataphatic, or positive, method of spirituality. We “let go” of our limited observations and judgments so that we may receive the fullness and beauty and goodness of the creation around us as a mystical gift from God. We can think about “letting go” as having one’s hands free to receive whatever Gods wants to give us. Empty hands can hold much, while clutched hands can hold nothing else.

The opposite of “letting go” is “hanging on,” and that is a good place to begin to consider our spiritual maladies. When we hang on to past wrongs or to sins we have not forgiven, we are either taking the place of God by trying to make things right by our own power and our own sense of justice, or we are opposing God by ignoring the power of grace and forgiveness. To counter this sin of hanging on to the ways of the world, we are to “let go and let God.”

One way to think about “letting go” is submission. This can be difficult for us, as we recall in the Old Testament that the Chosen People are known as Israel, those who struggle with God. Even as we struggle, there still comes a point when we must let God be God, and submit ourselves to God’s will and direction. To never submit would be to never trust God. Or, we can think of this submission as having our will derived from the will of God, as Wesley put it in his Thursday morning prayer:

O Thou All Sufficient God of angels and all people,
who is above all, and through all, and in all,
from whom, by whom, and in whom are all things,
may my will be entirely and continually derived from yours,
as my very being and happiness are.

Submission sometimes means letting go our expectations. What we expect determines how we judge something as good or bad – which we are not to do (see Matthew 7:1). This was the temptation of Adam and Eve who desired the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Genesis 2 story makes the point that we want to judge for ourselves, rather than accept that all God has created is good. Many a blessing has been missed because we were expecting something else, and we were disappointed that we didn't get what we expected – whether it was a birthday gift or a time spent in worship. We are usually too short-sighted and too limited in our understandings to make those kinds of determinations of good and evil.

Judging also indicates that we do not trust God with ultimate outcomes. When we do not trust God, we have at least two choices: 1) to work to ensure the outcomes we want, that we believe are “good,” even if it means doing un-Christ-like things to get what we want; or 2) to be disappointed in God, and to judge God as unworthy of our love and time. Both options leave us in sin (big S!)

Wesley’s Thursday morning prayer addressed this concern, as well:

And for the things to come,
give me your grace to do all things that will please you,
and then, with an absolute submission to your wisdom,
to leave their final outcome to your hand.

Sabotage is one of the ways we express our failure to submit; i.e., if it can't be our will, then we can make sure it is not anyone else's will either -- as if that failure we help create proves that our will is indeed the correct course to follow. Another way of saying this: if I can't be right, then I can make sure that you are wrong. Many a congregation has been set adrift because this kind of sabotage takes place whenever a pastor or committee tries to do something “new.” Letting go is hard work!

Letting go is something we can do in prayer, as well. Closely related to contemplative prayer is “centering prayer,” and it can often lead to contemplative praying. This can take several forms, but the intent is to let go of the distractions that take us away from

being in the presence of God. One method includes focusing on our breathing as God's breath/Spirit entering our bodies. Another method is repeating a short verse or prayer over and over again so that it finds a rhythm like our breathing. During a trying time in my ministry, when I would go for my morning walk, my prayer was "create in me a clean heart, O God," repeated each time I breathed in and out as I walked. Eventually, I was able to let go of the stresses I was carrying and focus on the work of the ministry again.

The most famous "breath prayer" comes out of the Eastern traditions of the Church, and is known as the "Jesus prayer," which is based on Luke 18:13. When you first begin, the phrase is "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Over time, the "pray-er" needs fewer words: Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me; Jesus, have mercy on me; Jesus, have mercy; Jesus; and finally the awareness of your breathing helps you enter into a silent prayer ready to listen for God. It is not a silence of nothingness, as in some Eastern religions, but instead a silence prepared where only God can speak.

"Letting go" prepares us for faithful living, because throughout life we are letting go. It happens to all of us at some time, in varying degrees. Something or someone we have counted on fails us. It might even be that we fail ourselves, or our body fails us. The spiritual question then becomes either 1) are we alone (with nothingness); or 2) are we in solitude (with God who never fails us). Many spiritual crises have their roots in this failure to "let go and let God."

I visited with a person in jail over several months. He was cut off from his spouse, his livelihood and calling, his home, and his friends. Many of the persons he thought would be there for him were not. When he focused on this, he felt alone. When he prayed (in his cell and with me), when he read his Bible and shared it with others, he knew solitude. I have visited with persons in nursing homes. Some feel betrayed, abandoned, and alone. Others readily acknowledge, in the face of what the world may see as evidence to the contrary, that "God is so good to me." These persons knew solitude, for they were able to "let go."

Another way to think of this distinction between loneliness and solitude is to ask, "How do I define myself?" If we are defined by the things we own, the abilities we have, and the relationships we keep, then we will know loneliness when we lose those things, when age or disability makes us frail, and when relationships end. If we define ourselves as the redeemed children of God through the grace of Jesus Christ, the loss of everything else doesn't make us lonely.

The Wesleyan Covenant Prayer is an example of the commitment present in "letting go."

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

Reasonable Methods

Classical methods that apply reason

What follows here may more correctly be seen as practices of Christian formation. Several of these practices are often combined to form a person's or a community's rule on how to live faithfully in the name of Jesus Christ. In today's reductionist culture, however, some persons attempt to make just one of the practices the whole of their discipline. So we will look at them separately.

Meditation in Christianity historically has been a reflection on what a scripture text means for Christians living together as disciples. It is seeking within the text **a word from God for the faith community today**. Often, one text does not stand alone when we meditate, as other texts are called to mind to reinforce or refine what we believe God is still saying to us. As a gift to the community, it is also tested by the community of faith, using formally or informally the standards of Scripture, Tradition (how our faith community has interpreted this passage before), our Faith Experience (how is my experience as a redeemed child of God through the grace of Jesus Christ reflected in this passage), and Reason within the faith (is what we hear in this reasonably consistent with what we have heard in scripture, tradition, and our experience?)

Lectio divina is a listening to the text, usually as we read it out loud for ourselves, in such a way that it becomes my story, my encounter with God. Here we are seeking to understand **who we are before God in our sin, and in our redemption**, so that we may hear our calling to repentance, and our calling to respond to the Spirit of Christ at work through us. It is usually recommended that we listen deeply to one story at a time, or one part of the story, or even just one verse or word in scripture, knowing that God can and does speak to us in every word of the scripture and not just in the "Cliff notes" version we usually remember. Throughout the day, we return again and again to that one word or verse, to hear it call us to listen to what God is saying to us deeply.

The common "thread" in meditation and *lectio divina*, as well as in contemplative and centering prayer, is that we are not telling God what to do! Instead we are waiting on God, waiting for God, waiting for a word from God, because we acknowledge and accept that we are not God. And that is something we all need to hear consistently and continually if we are to be humble before God, and ready to love God and to love our neighbors.

Francis de Sales (1567-1622) advocated **devotion** as a reasonable method for growing in faith and love. "Devotion is spiritual agility and vivacity, by means of which charity

works in us lovingly and readily. Charity leads us to obey and fulfill all God's commandments; devotion leads us to obey them promptly and diligently. Therefore, no one who fails to observe these commandments can truly be virtuous or devout, since to be good one must have charity, and to be devout a ready eagerness to fulfill the laws of charity. . . . Charity and devotion differ no more than the flame from the fire. Charity is a spiritual fire which breaks out into flame and is then called devotion. Devotion simply adds a flame to the fire of charity which makes it ready, active and diligent not only in keeping God's commandments, but also in carrying out the heavenly counsels and inspirations."

John Wesley talked of the **means of grace** as reasonable methods for waiting faithfully for God to work in and through us. These means include *hearing the Word of God, participating in the sacrament of communion, prayer, fasting, and Christian conferencing*. His understanding of how we are to use the means of grace is shared in Sermon 12, "The Means of Grace."

Developmental methods

The Apostle Paul indicated that there could be stages in the development of faith. He addressed his advice to newborns in the faith, children in the faith, and fathers in the faith. John Wesley made the (usually sequential) distinctions between those who are asleep, almost Christians who have the form but not the power of godliness, and true Christians. These "stages" are found in his confessional Sermon 2, "The Almost Christian." Wesley, in Sermon 9, made the distinction between those who walk in darkness, those who walk in the light of hell's fire, and those who walk in the light of heaven, as a way of talking about different (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) stages in a person's faith journey.

In current thought, scholars have described stages of faith development. Most of these methods build on the work of those who observe the moral and social development of children and adults. These methods tend to insist that one stage must be worked through before moving on to the next stage, and often these stages apply whether we are talking about Christian formation or formation in any other religious tradition – even when there is no "religious" tradition such as atheism. I share just two of the many possible development models here.

James Fowler has developed a method that considers forms of logic, forms of world coherence, role-taking, locus of authority, bounds of social awareness, form of moral judgment, and the role of symbols. Each stage has a particular way of dealing with each of these areas that are consistent and predictable. The six stages of faith are: 1) intuitive-projective; 2) mythic-literal; 3) synthetic-conventional; 4) individuative-reflexive; 5) paradoxical-consolidative; and 6) universalizing. Fowler emphasizes that this theory is not an achievement scale of holiness or worth before God and each other, but a way of understanding interrelated patterns of thinking, valuing and acting.

Sam Keen, in a book he did with James Fowler (*Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith*, World Books 1978) noted that Fowler's method approaches faith in a way that is

primarily cognitive, intellectual, institutional, and symbolic. Keen's preference was to approach it through desire/fantasy, feeling, and carnality as a matter of trust. His stages include construction of character/personality (child and rebel), construction of character armor (adult), destruction of character armor (outlaw), and life beyond character (lover and fool.) Another way of distinguishing these two approaches is that Fowler approaches God from the left side of his brain, while Keen approaches from the right side.

While Tex Sample was writing about the economic and social realities that face working people and their faith journey (Blue Collar Ministry, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984), there are implications for understanding the development of their faith. The realities of winning and losing, more than concepts of sin and salvation, lead to religious distinctions between persons who can be categorized as winners, respectables, survivors, and hard-living.

Psychological methods

There is, of course, some overlapping with the developmental models just mentioned, but I want to mention three methods that seem to be based mainly in personality theories. There are several books available that make connections between personality types as identified by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test and spiritual direction models. Introverts are thought to be more receptive to one kind of spiritual direction, while extroverts would be more receptive to another kind. Some authors make connections between all 16 possible personality types and particular direction methods and disciplines.

Another model is called the enneagram, which lists nine possible personality types, grouped by whether they are instinctive, thinking or feeling personality types. These types include the reformer, the helper, the achiever, the individualist, the investigator, the loyalist, the enthusiast, the challenger, and the peace-maker. Knowing your personality type would allow you to work with your natural tendencies, instead of against them, in becoming a whole person.

Another model, which is gaining attention in some circles, is known as kything, which is sometimes described as a kind of empathic telepathy that allows your spirit to connect with another person's spirit. The roots for this come from the Celtic people, who brought kything with them into their understanding of Christian spiritual direction. It took a much different form than it does popularly today, and we will consider its influence later under "Christian conferencing."

Critique of these methods

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me

apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was please to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

Galatians 1:11-24

For centuries, many people have used these various methods for going on to perfection, and many of these same people have been genuine and loving persons who loved God and their neighbor in ways that brought glory to Christ. If we accept the premise that perfection is received as a gift, then these persons may have been made holy *despite* these methods, rather than *because* of these methods. The importance of a disciplined Christian formation is that it helps create a space within our lives that only grace can fill. And the “intention and attention” to be made perfect certainly would make persons more receptive to receiving the gift of grace than someone who approached these disciples as a means of wrestling away from God a blessing.

In other words, there are people who can witness to the veracity of all the aforementioned methods in that they grew in faith and love. It has been suggested by others that our personality type may also affect which method “works” best for us, with some methods making persons more receptive than others. And, as Paul’s witness in Galatians attests, it is certain that God can choose to enter into our lives in any way that God sees fit so to do, even if we have no method!

So, there are witnesses to the efficaciousness of all of these methods. There are witnesses that no method works for every one. And there are witnesses that testify that God worked in and through them without the benefit of any method. It seems to be clear that any one offering the definitive “how-to” method for going on to perfection is either delusional, or intentionally exclusive, or must by necessity be so vague that everything could be considered a possible approach and part of the method. John and Charles Wesley were accused of each of these extremes!

And yet, we are still called to follow Christ, and commanded to “be perfect.” John Wesley counseled that waiting actively by attending upon the ordinances of Christ is preferable to wasting the time while we wait (Sermon 12). Having a discipline is part of being a disciple. Before I can propose a method for going on to perfection, I think there are three general concerns with these methods that must be addressed.

First, rather than seeking God who is greater than all we can know and do and experience, these methods all seem to be based on making God *less*, confining God to a small part of who we are – a feeling, an experience, a vision, an ethical or moral standard of conduct.

Our lives would then be divided into “where God is God” and “where God is not God.” God might rule our feelings, but not our intellect. God may make us feel good about ourselves, but not change the way we do business in the world. The underlying temptation is to make God into something that can be mastered, to be pulled out as needed, which is a heresy on its face!

Second, there seems to be an underlying assumption that going on to perfection is a solitary pursuit done apart from the Christian community. If I deny myself enough; if I look hard enough; if I study the scriptures closely enough; if I can master the intellectual abstractions well enough – then I, and only I, will receive/achieve perfection and others can follow me. The emphasis on self leaves little room for the love of our neighbors, and sometimes even leads to isolation from the neighbors God gives to us in order to more intensely work on my salvation.

And third, there is the assumption that sanctification is a “reserved grace,” that only a few persons may have a right to expect the gift of being perfected in love – as if it is not God’s will that we should all grow in grace and love! The prevailing evidence of sin as part of our human condition tempts us to believe that perfection must be rare, and therefore must not be intended for most of us. Part of the Good News of the Incarnation is that Jesus was fully human precisely because he was sinless, for it is sin that separates us from God; and it is sin which makes us less than God intended us to be.

By emphasizing *part* of what perfection means, we have received methods that are intended to strengthen *part* of our faith, but not to make us complete and whole in love – what John Wesley would call an “altogether Christian.” Again, the division falls generally along the lines of vital piety (relationship to God) and social holiness (relationship to neighbors), with most of the emphasis historically being on vital piety.

It has been noted that one of the reasons for this overemphasis on vital piety, and under emphasis on social holiness, is its context in history. Many of the traditional methods as we have received them took form during the Middle Ages when plagues and other pandemics made it dangerous to venture out into the community. We have received and built upon those foundations, but in our largely individualistic Western culture we have not always considered the context of those received traditions against the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Too often, in our individualistic pursuit of perfection, we reverse the pattern of formation and transformation – we assume that God is already dwelling in our hearts, and we pray for God to change the world to conform to us; instead of praying that God will change us so that we conform to Christ, and that we may discover the God who is dwelling in the world among the least of these. The reversal reveals that our focus is still on ourselves, rather than on God and our neighbors. Is it any wonder then that “prayer” seems to be so ineffective for so many people!

This reversal calls to mind a story of a king who liked to walk barefoot in his kingdom. It distressed him that the rough ground hurt his feet, so the king ordered that any place the

king would walk must first be covered in carpet. A wise advisor suggested to the king that it would be more effective if instead of carpeting the whole world, the king simply wore shoes to protect his feet.

If your practice of a discipline has been a blessing to you, give thanks for the blessings that have been given, and for the Benefactor who gives the blessing! If you have been practicing a discipline that is strengthening part of your faith, remember it is not the discipline itself, but the grace of God that strengthens you. The “gifts” we acquire through our own strength may have the outward appearance of godliness, yet because they are separated from the inner gift from God of a new life in Christ, these “gifts” may tend to our own glory instead of the glory of God.

Part 4: An Integrated Method of “Going On To Perfection”

Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.

Acts of the Apostles 18:24-26

Some methods emphasize a **Christian connection to God**. These methods assume that there will be future formation and direction, perhaps given as needed or as intended by God. The weakness of these methods is that Christianity becomes an individual’s *experience* of grace and forgiveness, apart from their accountability to their neighbors in society. An illustration of this compartmentalization would be the slave owner who could passionately recall a Damascus Road experience of salvation. The belief is that significant change occurs when an individual has a revelatory experience of God. While these methods may be found in some form in nearly every Christian community of faith, they are particularly the focus of churches that emphasize being saved, in becoming connected to God through a moment at the altar. An important question in these faith communities would be, “*Have you asked Jesus Christ to be your personal Lord and Savior?*”

Some methods emphasize **Christian formation as discipleship**. These methods assume a previous or prevenient connection, and a clearly defined and limited direction based in scripture, tradition, or some combination of both. The weakness of these methods is that Christianity becomes either a set of *principles* that one believes, or a set of *actions* that one performs, neither of which necessarily *requires* a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, or *anticipates* a further growth in grace and love. An illustration of this compartmentalization would be the active church member who gets burned out trying to maintain the right actions as a requirement for being in good standing before Christ. The belief is that significant change occurs by searching more thoroughly the scripture and tradition of the faith community. While these methods may be found in some form in nearly every Christian community of faith, they are particularly the focus of churches that emphasize piety and theological conformity as the standards for Christian living. An important question in these faith communities would be, “*What would Jesus do?*”

Some methods emphasize **Christian direction as Spirit-enabled journey**. These methods assume both a previous connection and an adequate formation process, though that is not always the case. The weakness of these methods is that the emphasis is on the individual’s *progression* in faith, rather than their *growth* in Christ-like love. An illustration of this compartmentalization would be those persons who have faith enough to handle snakes, but who do not love their neighbors who look differently from themselves. There is also the temptation to expect “new graces,” or “new gifts” beyond what “ordinary” Christians may receive. The belief is that significant change occurs

when a new path can be discerned as being revealed for the individual or the community. While these methods may be found in nearly every Christian community of faith, they are particularly the focus of churches that emphasize either the mystical nature of God, or the disciple's confidence in God to be with them in every moment "equipping the called." An important question in these faith communities would be, "*Do you trust the Holy Spirit to protect you and equip you?*"

What I hope to do is to integrate **connection, formation, and direction** in such a way that it takes place within the Christian community, and that it leads to a faithful relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ, as well as a loving relationship with our neighbors, which is revealed as God works in and through us by the Holy Spirit.

Actually, John and Charles Wesley have already done most of that work for me in their "method" of salvation. In John's pamphlet, "The Character of a Methodist," he described this method as including **dependence on God (connection), conformity to Christ (formation), and confidence in the Holy Spirit (direction)**.

The Tools of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Jesus said to the crowds, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

Matthew 7:7-11

Albert Outler coined the phrase "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," based on John Wesley's distinctive emphases, or tools, for considering the will of God. Sermon 32, "The Nature of Enthusiasm," gives a further explanation of how these tools work together, which are used when there is not a plain scriptural answer for a particular question. These four emphases are **Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason**. Together, they formed the method for discovering the will of God for persons and communities in particular settings and situations. This "method" was initially derided, since "a once and forever" answer was unlikely to be found consistently. Today, it is more likely that this method is misunderstood or only partially utilized, with emphasis being given to less than all four parts of the quadrilateral. The "advantage" of using only part of the Quadrilateral is that there can be **dependence** on an answer, or it can provide a group with a static standard for **conformity**, or it can establish a solid foundation in which their **confidence** can be entrusted. In doing this, however, we slip easily into the sin of desiring any thing less than God (see Part 5, "Desiring Any Thing But God," for Wesley's explanation of this sin).

That we may come up with different answers as we apply the quadrilateral is to be expected (as Wesley indicated in "The Character of A Methodist," "Cautions and

Directions,” and Sermons 4, 7, 17, 28, 32, 33, and 34), but is also evidenced in the writing of the Apostle Paul. In his first letter that we have to the Corinthians, Paul gives his opinion (Christian reasoning) “as one who is trustworthy” (has Christian experience) after considering the scriptures and the traditions of the primitive Church, where there is not a clear answer given “from the Lord” (see I Corinthians 7).

To help us re-appropriate the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, I ask that we think of the parts according to their “witness.” Scripture is the witness of God’s word; Tradition is the witness of the Gospel Community; Experience is the witness of God’s love for us through the assurance of our forgiveness and our acceptance in the Church; and Reason is the witness of our integrated response to God’s love.

Christian Scripture – The Witness of God’s Word

The rhythm of our salvation is first God’s mighty actions and then our response. We see it repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments. This rhythm is woven into the themes of our relationships with God and each other. *We love, because God first loved us* (I John 4:19). We forgive, because God forgives us. We show mercy to others, because God has shown mercy to us. We provide for those in need, because God has provided everything we need. Another way of thinking about sin is that it is a breaking of this rhythm: God acts, but our response does not acknowledge the actions of God.

Our understanding of what it means to love God comes from all the many and different ways the people in the Bible showed their love for God – prayer, worship, songs, offerings, sacrifice, commitment, loyalty, meaning-filled ritual, and more. Likewise, our understanding of what it means to love our neighbor is also illuminated by the actions of the people of the Bible – community, caring, forgiveness, mercy, hospitality, generosity, mission, service, respectful boundaries, justice, and more.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the liturgy for the sacrament of communion is one of the ways that the Christian community recalls this witness of the scriptures. The structure of the prayer invites us to a faithful immersion in the entire Biblical witness that culminates in Jesus Christ. There is the first *anamnesis*, a “soul remembering” of the mighty acts of God in the Old Testament. There is the second *anamnesis*, focused on the mighty acts of God in and through Jesus Christ. There is the *epiclesis*, or the seeking of the Holy Spirit to work through this sacrament and among the people. And there is the humble petition to have God at work in, among, and through the people as the Body of Christ. This remembering would be reason enough for participating in the sacrament of communion as frequently as possible, though John Wesley will give us more reasons in Sermon 12, “The Means of Grace.”

The temptation comes when we try limiting this witness by giving emphasis to part of the scripture out of context with the rest of the scripture. This is sometimes used when we “proof-text” a passage for the purpose of supporting an argument or position as “the” position of God. A sign that we have given in to this temptation is when we substitute the word “or” where we used to say “and.”

Christian Tradition – The Witness of the Gospel Community

The rhythm of our Christian tradition echoes the rhythm of Christian scripture. God has acted among us, and we have our Spirit-enabled responses. Some of these responses are catholic/universal, such as gathering together for worship and prayer; while other responses may vary from location to location, such as how community meals are served and what style of music is sung during worship.

More important than the particulars of the traditions are the themes of the tradition. For just one example, in Matthew 25 Jesus tells us the importance of feeding the hungry. We have several traditional ways for fulfilling this ordinance of Christ. We feed the hungry by serving in soup kitchens to feed large numbers of people, and by taking casseroles to particular families during times of crisis. We feed the hungry by gleaned the fields to recover nutritious food left behind, and by raising funds to purchase surplus foodstuffs from manufactures to stock food pantries. We feed the hungry by organizing food cooperatives and community gardens, and by teaching communities better ways to grow crops and animals. We feed the hungry by helping persons have access to adequate employment opportunities so they can purchase their own food, and by working with governments to provide safety nets for the working poor and the unemployed. The tradition is that the Church feeds the hungry. The tradition is fulfilled in many different ways. The witness of the tradition is reflected by the word “and,” as we “do all the good we can, by all the means we can, in all the ways we can, in all the places we can, at all the times we can, to all the people we can, as long as ever we can.” (John Wesley’s Rule)

Sometimes, “new things” are resisted in a congregation because the “new thing” is not seen as being part of the tradition. The difficulty is often because we have confused the *particulars* of a tradition with the *tradition itself*. The difficulty in gaining acceptance for a new thing can often be resolved, if it can be shown to be solidly within the tradition, even as the particulars are different. This applies to how we worship, who may lead us in worship, how we serve others, and how we disciple each other.

Another important tradition in the Church is how we keep time. The Christian Year does not follow the calendar year, and is set up with the rhythms of God’s actions and our response. Each season of the Church Year carries a particular message concerning God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Advent is the season that expresses hope and expectation for both the first and second comings of Christ, with the message that as Christ is in our beginning so is Christ in our end. During Advent we give thanks for the gift of Jesus and look with anticipation for the completion that comes through Christ. With Christmas, we are to give thanks for God’s self-giving in history in the person of Jesus. Epiphany is to remind us that it is in Christ that God is manifested in a redemptive revelation. During Lent, we recall the self-giving nature of Christ’s love for us, which leads to reconciliation and restoration as a communal reality. With Easter, we celebrate Christ’s victory over sin and death, which brings with it the gift of a new creation after the order of the original Creation. In Pentecost, we remember Christ’s promise and actual gift of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to go on from strength to strength, to mature in our faith, and to go on to perfection in love. Ordinary Time follows the cycles of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany

and Lent-Easter-Pentecost, when we reflect on our response to God's mighty acts revealed in Jesus Christ.

Christian Experience – The Witness of God's Love in Assurance and Community

Again, there is a rhythm to how we tell others about our experience as Christians. Some of us come to know the saving grace of Jesus Christ in dramatic experiences, similar to Paul on the road to Damascus. These are sometimes referred to as "mountaintop experiences." Some of us come to know the saving grace of Jesus Christ through an immersion in the continuing incarnation of Christ, the Church, where we may not be able to point to one specific moment, but rather we can point to many moments where our experience of Christ's love is affirmed. These are sometimes referred to as "foundation experiences."

It is from within the Christian faith that Christian experience gains meaning. Our experience is not simply "how did that feel" or "what trials have I gone through" that typify the experiences of the world. Instead, Christian experience involves the life-changing experiences of being forgiven, showing mercy, practicing repentance, and participating in the means of grace. Christian experience includes true poverty of spirit, meekness before God, mortification of the flesh through fasting and denial of pleasures, and hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

These Christian experiences are both personal and communal. It includes receiving the assurance that our sins have been forgiven through the witness of the Holy Spirit, as well as the acceptance we find within a community of disciples who welcome us as one who is forgiven. It is the experience of loving others "indifferently" simply because God through Jesus loves us when we are fully aware that we do not deserve such mercy as this, but simply need it for abundant living. It is the experience of showing mercy when we have the advantage over another, and being shown mercy when another has the advantage over us. It is the humbling experience of repenting of our sins by working to make whole those we have harmed personally, and it is the confessional experience of the Church to work together to atone for our corporate sins that have separated us from each other and from God.

The temptation comes when we try to substitute our experiences apart from God as being normative for Christian experience. We might feel empowered by our anger and sense of justice, but it is not the power of the Holy Spirit if we are angry because we have dethroned God and placed ourselves there to rule. We might feel accepted within a community of like-minded believers, but it is not the Church if our agreement is based on anything less than our common experience as forgiven sinners through the grace of Jesus Christ. We might be considered good stewards if we are careful with money, but we are not God's stewards if we think of it first as our money. We may be thankful for the blessings we have received, but it is not Christian gratitude if the benefits are separated from the Great Benefactor.

Christian experience is both the inner witness that we are redeemed by the grace of Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and the outer witness of experiencing the

presence of Christ through the means of grace and in the persons who are in need that we receive as the neighbors we are given to love.

Christian Reasoning – The Witness of our Integrated Response to God’s Love

The rhythm of Christian reasoning is different from the reasoning of the world, though it has similarly consistent rules. The world begins with the premises it can test and see, and the promises of favorable or foreseeable conclusions. Christians begin with the premises of God’s action and our response, and the promises of God through Jesus Christ to be with us always, as we work to fulfill God’s will for us to love God and our neighbors in ways that bring glory to God. Within the Wesleyan method, there is a “weaving together,” or integration, of our understanding of Scripture, our appropriation of Tradition, and our Experience as Christians so that we may discern what God is calling us to do that shows that we *depend on God*, are *conformed to Christ*, and *have confidence in the Holy Spirit*. It is not Christian reasoning if there is no reflection of God’s word in our answer. It is not Christian reasoning if our answer has no connection to our tradition as Christians. It is not Christian reasoning if the experience is disconnected from our “radical dependence upon the grace of Jesus Christ for life and breath and all things.”

While there are consistent rules for Christian reasoning, it is inevitable that we will at times come to the wrong conclusions about what we think God is calling us to do in our faith. Even a cursory examination of our history reveals that, in the name of Christ, we have all too often chosen slavery over freedom, hostility over hospitality, exclusion over evangelism, maintenance over mission, polemic over prayer, and conviction over conversation. None of us has absolute knowledge about any particular situation or context, despite our assertions to the contrary. I suspect that many of these latter errors occur when we depart from reasoning from *within* the witness of the Christian faith. By that, I mean that we put an overemphasis on some part of the Quadrilateral for the purpose of finding only one answer that can be applied universally, thereby elevating our answer to “ultimate truth” or “the mind of God,” when it may only be the best answer we can come up with at this time, given our human limitations. John Wesley talked of these errors as reaching the **wrong conclusions** from the **right premises**. As long as we remain on this side of the eternal veil, there will be wrong conclusions, even among those who agree on the right premises of Christian faith.

The answer to dealing with this faithfully was proposed by John Wesley in his pamphlet, “The Character of a Methodist”: “But from real Christians, of whatsoever denomination they be, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all, not from any who sincerely follow after what they know they have not yet attained. No: ‘Whosoever doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.’ And I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that we be in no wise divided among ourselves. Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine? I ask no farther question. If it be, give me thy hand. For opinions, or terms, let us not destroy the work of God. Dost thou love and serve God? It is enough. I give thee the right hand of fellowship. If there be any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies; let us strive together for the faith of the Gospel; walking worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called; with all lowliness and meekness, with long-

suffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; remembering, there is one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called with one hope of our calling; 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.'”

A bigger problem facing the Church is the problem of the “*madman*.” This is what John Wesley, and all “right thinking” British of his era called persons who came to the **right conclusions** but began from the **wrong premises**. Persons may not start just anywhere and then faithfully call themselves Christians. Ted Campbell (related to the author by the blood of Christ) has done an excellent treatment on the right premises in his online work “Christian Mysteries,” and since the focus of this book is not to give you the “right conclusions,” I would recommend this writing to your edification and formation, and will not deal with it here.

Part of the process of reasoning within the Christian Faith is how we balance the left and right brain processes. Scripture and Tradition are received as outside of whom we are, while Experience and Reason are vitally part of how the faith takes root within us. Our faith is incomplete if it relies too much on reason or experience, and too little on scripture and tradition. Our faith is deficient if it relies too little on reason or experience, and too much on scripture and tradition.

Prevenient Grace and Spiritual Connection

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favorably on his people!' This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Luke 7:11-17

The woman in this story doesn't ask Jesus to raise her son, which would then reveal a faith in the power of Jesus over life and death. When her son is brought back to life, Jesus likewise does not commend her for her faith. Jesus simply stops the procession, tells the woman not to weep, touches the son, and raises him to life. This story isn't about faith. It's not about gratitude. This story is about grace – pure, unearned, un-asked-for grace. This raising doesn't happen because of a mother's faith or her son's worthiness. It happens because Jesus has compassion for her. It is a story of prevenient grace, and the connection God through Jesus has with us. It is the initiative of Jesus to intercede. And because Jesus interceded in a situation that seemed hopeless, the people glorified God. The rhythm is present: God acts, we respond –even before we know that God could act on our behalf!

The parables of Luke 15 also speak to this prevenient grace. The lost sheep doesn't seek the shepherd; the shepherd finds the lost sheep. The lost coin, obviously, can't find its way back, but the diligent woman can find the coin. The prodigal son and the older brother both think they have done something that is in their best interest, yet it is the father who truly helps them find their way home. Prevenient grace is God seeking us so that we know to seek God. It is God who initiates the connection. It is God who stirs in us the hunger to be connected to God. It is God who leads us home.

Prevenient grace is also convicting grace. To hunger for God is to know that we are not God. To thirst for God is to know the deadly dryness of our sin. To be awakened to our need for God is to discover all the ways we fall short of the glory and perfect love of God, as well as our inability to save or redeem ourselves. The fruit of this conviction is a poverty of spirit that enables us to receive the kingdom of God as an unmerited and underserved gift – as grace.

We can think of faith as being prevenient, as well. We do not invent the Christian faith new for ourselves, even as we receive it as a new gift that has come to us – the scriptures and traditions of our Christian faith are part of the grace that we receive, as is the Christian community that tells their story of what Christ has done for them.

Justifying Grace and Spiritual Formation

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2

When our son was in high school, my wife and I attended a “pre-contest” concert of the three high schools within the school district. It was an informal setting, designed to let the three bands perform under sometimes chaotic conditions of quickly getting on and off stage with judges evaluating the performances. My wife, who was employed then as a special education teacher, decided to take advantage of the breaks between the performances, and brought with her the reports that the elementary teachers had written for the students she would be working with the next year in middle school. Each student with special needs has an individualized set of goals to be achieved while in the classroom. Over and over again, as she read over these reports, I heard her say, “dead man rule,” which was then followed by some furious scribbling. I asked her what she meant by “dead man rule.” Her answer, I think, has tremendous application for spiritual formation: “If a dead man can do it, it isn't a goal.”

Spiritual formation is not primarily concerned with the “thou shalt nots,” which any “dead man” can keep inviolate, and which can lead to a religion of avoidance. Wesley considered this the least part of religion. The “thou shalt nots” are based in a fear of the wrath of God, from which we are released through the justifying grace of Jesus Christ. Instead, authentic Christian spiritual formation is concerned with the active “love your

neighbor as your self” that conforms our living (at least outwardly at this point) to the life of Christ.

Justifying grace is the gift of God through Jesus Christ that *imputes* to us the righteousness of Christ, so that we may enter into an authentic relationship with God. Justifying grace is about what Jesus has done for us through his death and resurrection. A justifying faith is about our new saving relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

While justifying grace is an unmerited gift of God through Jesus Christ, we have been given “means of grace” to help us become conformed to Christ, so that we may continue a justified relationship with God. John Wesley taught that Christ ordained the means of grace; that is, Jesus himself said that we should do these things that help us to “*work out our own salvation*” (Philippians 2:12). These things include prayer, searching the scripture, and receiving the Lord's Supper -- all elements of our worship. The purpose of these means of grace is not the outward works but the renewed heart through which flows the love and grace of God.

Wesley counseled that there are two temptations we face in justification and our use of the means of grace. The first comes when we make the means of grace the *end* of our faith. The second comes when we go to the other extreme and consider the *means* as nothing at all. In the first, we come to worship in order to fulfill our duty. In the second, we see no duty to worship at all. The first temptation has the form of godliness but not its power. The second temptation lives with the contradiction that in order to worship Jesus you must first ignore what Jesus tells us to do!

Wesley taught that in our “going on to perfection” the means of grace are not the end of our faith. The fulfillment of our salvation is our love for God and love for our neighbors. The means are outward and visible signs that God has chosen for conveying God's grace to us. God is free to offer grace in many other ways, and is not limited to these particular means, but it is clear that God has given us these means.

That is why it is important to come *expectantly* to worship. To come expecting anything less than the powerful and gracious presence of God is an attempt to save ourselves, which we cannot do. Ever the analyst, Wesley concluded that if we do not experience in worship the presence and power of God, it is because we either think we are Christians when we are not, and therefore have not repented of our sin; or because we are attempting to make our worship something that earns us favor with God, which is not possible since the means of grace cannot atone for even one sin, for that is the work of the blood of Christ alone.

We receive the gift of God by believing, and we live out our belief when we wait on God. Our waiting is active rather than passive, as it is reasonable that God will come to us through the means of grace that Jesus has ordained. The means of grace put us in a place where God can work in us by prevenient grace, alerting us to our sin; justifying grace, leading us to repent and then depend on God; and sanctifying grace, so that God can

transfigure us into the people who bear the glorious image of God.

Sanctifying Grace and Spiritual Direction

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:3-11

If conforming our outward behaviors to those of Christ is the work of Christian spiritual formation, then conforming our inward intentions to that of Christ is the work of Christian spiritual direction. In Sermon 15, Wesley makes this distinction between justifying and sanctifying grace and their roles in our faith. While they can occur at the same time, they are easily distinguishable. For our purposes here, I lift up just one of the distinguishing factors between the two: Justification changes our outward relationship with God; sanctification changes us from sinner to saint. It is justifying grace by which Christ's righteousness is imputed to us; it is sanctifying grace by which Christ's righteousness is imparted to us, so that we may go on to perfection in love. This conformity of the inner spirit takes place as we have confidence in the Holy Spirit.

“Confidence” includes more than a strong expectation of a successful outcome. When John Wesley used the word, it was in connection to its root word “confide.” Confidence in God means sharing with God our hopes, our fears, our dreams, and our doubts, just as we would confide in a trusted friend. We do this, not because we need to inform God of these things, but so that we may inform ourselves, exposing these ideas and feelings and concerns to the light of God's presence and power. We do this in confidence so that we are not afraid to hide anything from God; and we do this with confidence that God will guide and direct us by the Holy Spirit. We can have assurance that this is the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the witness of our spirit confirms the witness of the Holy Spirit (see Sermons 10 and 11 below.)

As important as faith is, it is our confidence in God through the Holy Spirit that identifies someone as going on to perfection in love. John Wesley wrote in Sermon 31, “We continually declare that faith itself – even Christian faith, the faith of God's elect, the faith of the operation of God – still is only the handmaid of love. As glorious and honorable as it is, it is not the end of the commandment. God hath given this honor to love alone. Love is the end of all the commandments of God. Love is the end, the sole

end, of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things.”

The Complete Faith of an Altogether Christian

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 13:20-21

It is now time to consider a working definition of Christian perfection that is “fleshed out.” John Wesley offered one definition in his pamphlet, “The Character of a Methodist;” another in his pamphlet, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.” The first pamphlet described Methodists as persons who shared in common with all Christians the core of the Christian faith, undistinguished by peculiar beliefs or practices. The second pamphlet undertook the definition of perfection in Wesley’s usual style, by beginning with what perfection is not. The first emphasizes the outward behaviors (even as it reveals the inner spirit), while the second emphasizes the inner spirit (even as it is revealed in the outward behaviors.) Summarizing these two pamphlets together, we can come up with a fairly good working definition of the outward and inward dimensions of Christian perfection.

The Methodist, the epitome of an outward Christian,

- + has the love of God shed abroad in their heart by the Holy Spirit given to them;
- + is happy in God, giving thanks in everything;
- + prays without ceasing;
- + loves their neighbor unconditionally;
- + is pure in heart, seeking only God’s will;
- + avoids what God forbids, in obedience to God;
- + does what God commands, for the glory of God;
- + and does good unto all people, of every possible kind.

Christian perfection is love of God and love of neighbor,

- + working out of humility and meekness without regard for pleasures or ultimate outcomes after the example of Jesus Christ,
- + with a thankfulness which knows God’s presence and which moves at the Spirit’s direction
- + is disinterested in the use God makes of us,
- + trusting God for the final outcome
- + perception that our time with God on earth as the seed time of an eternal harvest and not as the harvest itself.

This definition binds together our dependence on God, our conformity to Christ, and our confidence in the Holy Spirit. Our faith is not the complete faith of both inner and outer holiness if it is missing any of these three.

If we do not depend on God, we are living as practical atheists, “with no knowledge or acquaintance with God. It is true that we could use our ability to reason to come up with concepts of God, and even that there is a God, but we did not know God any more than we know the Emperor of China, whom we could also reasonably be sure existed” (see Sermon 38: Original Sin).

If we do not conform to Christ, we “are self-willed, inordinate lovers of ourselves, thinking highly of our own attainments, desirous of the praise of others, yet easily provoked and swift to return evil for evil” (see Sermon 24: Discourse on the Sermon on the Mount.) We may think of ourselves as spiritual, but it is a spirituality that is practically indistinguishable from that of the Druids.

If we do not have confidence in the Holy Spirit, we are living as Heathens, who have the form of godliness but not its power (see Sermon 2: The Almost Christian.) We may not be doing anything that the gospel forbids; we may act in genuine sincerity about what we believe, doing what the gospel commands; but if we are without the assurance of the Holy Spirit that our sins are forgiven, we are Heathens still.

To be an “altogether Christian,” we will love God and our neighbors, as lived out by Christ and witnessed to by Paul. We will be “born of God,” with a right living faith that brings forth repentance, love, and all good works. We will know that Scripture and faith are true, having a sure trust and confidence to be saved from damnation by Christ. By the merits of Christ our sins are forgiven, and we are reconciled to the favor of God. Being reconciled, we glory to spend and be spent for all persons as we work by love that reveals Christ.

Part 5: The Holy and Unholy Responses to Grace

The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself. Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

II Timothy 2:11-15

Wesley quickly observed that those persons who depended on God, who were being conformed to Christ, and who had confidence in the Holy Spirit, often succumbed to particular sins. These sins both led persons away from true perfection of love, as well as caused disruption in the community of faith, which could then lose its focus and mission.

“Cautions and Directions to the Greatest Professors of Methodism” was John Wesley’s first in a series of evolving pamphlets that addressed his understanding of the specific challenges that faced those who were earnestly striving after perfection. The final pamphlet in the series was titled “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.” The attitude in the series shifted from a strong defense of Christian perfection, to a hospitable invitation to strive after perfection. Over the course of these pamphlets, he moved from the problems and sins we would face *on the journey*, to the reasons and support *for the journey*.

His intent was consistent from the first pamphlet to the last: to provide direction to those who were earnestly seeking to go on to perfection in love as the Spirit-empowered disciples of Jesus Christ. His direction then is just as timely today, and perhaps even more necessary.

What Wesley termed “cautions,” I have called the “unholy responses.” Partly, this is to draw attention to them. But mainly, it emphasizes the seriousness and threat of these sins to the communities of faith who are intent on living together as disciples of Jesus Christ, as the body of Christ. The Christian “holy responses” offer the promise of God’s “and” against the politics of wedge power’s “or.” While Wesley described the “holy responses,” he didn’t name them as such, so I have used a mnemonic device to help us remember his counsel and direction.

The importance of identifying these six “unholy responses” is precisely because they attack what it means to be the ongoing incarnation of Christ as a revelation of perfect love. They are a negative witness to the world about what it means to be a Christian, and to be part of a Christian community. The “holy responses,” then, should not be seen so much as *remedies* for what ails the church, but as *normative standards* for holy communities defined and enabled by gracious love.

Both the holy and unholy responses will be paired here with the three forms of grace and their inner and outer religion considerations, and come from Wesley's pamphlets.

The Responses to Prevenient Grace

The Holy Response (Inner Religion): Calmness (based in dependence on God)

I would consider, first, who is a Christian indeed? What does that term properly imply? It has been so long abused, I fear, not only to mean nothing at all, but what was far worse than nothing, to be a cloak for the vilest hypocrisy, for the grossest abominations and immoralities of every kind, that it is high time to rescue it out of the hands of wretches that are a reproach to human nature, to show determinately what manner of man he is to whom this name of right belongs.

A "Christian" cannot think of the Author of his being without abasing himself before him, without a deep sense of the distance between a worm of earth and him that "sitteth on the circle of the heavens." In his presence he sinks into the dust, knowing himself to be less than nothing in his eye and being conscious, in a manner of words cannot express, of his own littleness, ignorance, foolishness. So that he can only cry out, from the fullness of his heart, "O God, what is man? What am I?"

He has a continual sense of his dependence on the parent of good, for his being and all the blessings that attend it. To him he refers every natural and every moral endowment, with all that is commonly ascribed either to fortune or the wisdom, courage, or merit of the possessor. And hence he acquiesces in whatsoever appears to be his will, not only with patience but with thankfulness. He willingly resigns all he is, all he has, to his wise and gracious disposal. The ruling temper of his heart is the most absolute submission and the tenderest gratitude to his sovereign benefactor. And this grateful love creates filial fear, an awful reverence toward him and an earnest care not to give any place to any disposition, not to admit an action, word, or thought which might in any degree displease that indulgent power to whom he owes his life, breath, and all things.

The Unholy Response (Inner Religion): Pride

Watch and pray continually against **pride**, against every kind and degree of it. If God has cast it out, see that it enter no more. It is full as dangerous as desire. And you may slide back into it unawares, especially if you think you are in no danger of it. "Nay, but I ascribe all I have to God." So you may, and be proud nevertheless. For it is pride not only to ascribe what we have to ourselves, but to think we have what we really have not. Mr. Law, for instance, ascribed all the light he had to God and, so far, he was humble. But then he thought he had more light than any man living – and this was palpable pride. So you ascribe all the knowledge you have to God, and in this respect you are humble. But if you think you have more knowledge than you really have, if you think you are so "taught of God" as no longer need man's teaching, pride lieth at the door. Yes, you have need to be taught, not only by Mr. Maxfield, by one another, by Mr. Morgan or me, but by the weakest preacher in London – yea, by all men – for God sendeth by whom he will send.

Don't therefore say to any who would advise or reprove you, "You are blind; you cannot teach me; this is your 'wisdom'; this is your 'carnal reasoning'; but calmly weigh the thing before God. O let there be in you that lowly mind which was in Christ Jesus. And 'be ye clothed,' likewise, "with humility." Let it not only fill but cover you all over. Let modesty and self-diffidence appear in all your words and actions. Let all you speak and do show that you are little and bare and mean and vile in your own eyes.

The Holy Response (Outer Religion): Confidence in the Holy Spirit

And he has the strongest affection for the fountain of all good, so he has the firmest confidence in him; a confidence which neither pleasure nor pain, neither life nor death can shake. But yet this, far from creating sloth or indolence, pushes him on to the most vigorous industry. It cause him to put forth all his strength in obeying him in whom he confides; so that he is never faint in his mind, never weary of doing whatever he believes to be his will. And as he knows the most acceptable worship of God is to imitate him he worships, so he is continually laboring to transcribe into himself all his imitable perfections: in particular, his justice, mercy and truth, so eminently displayed in all his creatures.

The Unholy Response (Outer Religion): Enthusiasm

Beware of that daughter of pride, **enthusiasm**. Sometimes likewise it is the parent of pride. O, keep at the utmost distance from it! Give no place to an heated imagination. Do not ascribe to God what is not of God. Do not easily suppose dreams, voices, impressions, visions or revelations to be from God, without evidence. They may be purely natural: they may be diabolical. Therefore remember the caution of the apostle: "Beloved, believe not every spirit but try the spirits whether they be from God" (I John 4:1). Try all things by the written Word and let all bow down before it. You are in danger of enthusiasm every hour if you depart ever so little from Scripture – yea, or from the plain literal meaning of any text taken in connection with the context. And so you are if you despise, or lightly esteem, reason, knowledge or human learning – every one of which is an excellent gift of God and may serve to the noblest purpose.

One general inlet to enthusiasm is the expecting the end without the means – the expecting knowledge, for instance, without searching the Scripture and consulting with the children of God; the expecting spiritual strength without constant prayer; the expecting growth in grace without steady watchfulness and deep self-examination; the expecting any blessing without hearing the Word of God at every opportunity.

The very desire of "growing in grace" is sometimes an inlet to enthusiasm. As it continually leads us to seek new grace, it may possibly lead unawares to seek something else new, beside new degrees of love to God and man. So it has in fact led some to seek and imagine they had received gifts of a new kind, after a clean heart: as (1) the loving God with all our mind, (2) with all our soul, (3) with all our strength, (4) oneness with God, (5) oneness with Christ, (6) having our life hid with Christ in God, (7) being dead with Christ, (8) the rising with him, (9) the sitting with him in heavenly places, (10) the being taken up into his throne, (11) the being in new Jerusalem, (12) the seeing the

tabernacle of God come down among men, (13) the being dead to all works, (14) the not being liable to bodily death or pain, (15) or grief, (16) or temptation.

One ground of many of these mistakes is the taking every fresh and strong application of any of these Scriptures to the heart, to be a gift of a new kind. Another is not knowing that some of these Scriptures are not fulfilled yet. Most of the others are fulfilled when we are justified; filled in higher degrees: that is all we have to expect. Another ground of these and a thousand mistakes is the not considering deeply that love is the highest gift of God – humble, gentle, patient love – that all visions, revelations, manifestations whatever, are little things compared to love; and that all gifts above mentioned are either the same with or infinitely inferior to it.

The Responses to Justifying Grace

The Holy Response (Inner Religion): Conformity to Christ

Above all, remembering that God is love, he is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbor: of universal love, not confined to one sect or party, not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions, or in outward modes of worship, or to those who are allied to him by blood or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love only those that love him, or that are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance. But his love resembles that of him whose mercy is over all his works. It soars above all these scanty bounds, embracing neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies; yea, not only the good and gentle but also the forward, the evil and unthankful. For he loves every soul that God has made, every child of man, whatever place or nation. And yet this universal benevolence does in nowise interfere with a peculiar regard for his relations, friends and benefactors, a fervent love for his country and the most endeared affection to all men of integrity, of clear and generous virtue.

The Unholy Response (Inner Religion): Antinomianism

Beware of **antinomianism**, making void the law or any part of it through faith. Enthusiasm naturally leads to this. Indeed, they can hardly be separated. This may steal upon you in a thousand forms, so that you can never be too watchful against it. Take heed of everything, whether in principle or practice, which has the tendency thereto. Even that great truth that “Christ is the end of the law” may betray us into it, if we do not consider that he has adopted every point of the moral law and grafted it into the law of love.

Beware of thinking, “Because I have faith and love, I need not have so much holiness; because I pray always, therefore I need no set time for private prayer; because I watch always, therefore I need no particular self-examination.” Let us “magnify the law,” the whole written Word, and “make it honorable.” Let this be our voice, “I prize thy commandments above gold or precious stones. O what love I have unto thy law! All the day long is my study in it.” Beware of “Moravianism” – the most refined antinomianism that was ever under the sun, and such as I think could only have sprung from the abuse of true Christian experience. I cannot doubt but many of them were once exactly as you are now: feeling the living power of faith divine and experiencing Christ to be all in all. But

they were not aware of Satan's devices. They gave way to pride and strong imagination and then to antinomianism into which they have fallen deeper and deeper ever since. You have unawares adopted some of their words already, if not of their sentiments. But why should we even talk in an exceptional manner? Let us not call ourselves "the church" or affectedly style this or that doctrine "the thing," "the point," "the matter." Why should we pray to Christ more than to the Father? No Scripture will justify this. But these are comparatively small things. Beware of their bigotry. I mean bigotry to their own party. Let not your love be confined to Methodists only, much less to that very small part of them who seem to be renewed in love. Count not those your enemies who do not believe your report. Make not this your "shibboleth." Above all, beware of Moravian stillness, their "ceasing," in a wrong sense, "from their own works." To mention one instance out of many: "You have received," says one of them, "a great blessing, but you began to talk of it and to do this and that. So you lost it. You should have been still."

The Holy Response (Outer Religion): Compassion of Christ

His love to these, so to all mankind, is in itself generous and disinterested, springing from no view of advantage to himself, from no regard to profit or praise; no, nor even the pleasure of loving. This is the daughter, not the parent, of his affection. By experience he knows that social love (if it means the love of our neighbor) is absolutely, essentially different from self-love, even of the most allowable kind, just as different as the objects at which they point. And yet it is sure that, if they are under due regulations, each will give additional force to the other, 'till they mix together never to be divided.

The Unholy Response (Outer Religion): Sins of Omission

Beware of **sins of omission**: lose no opportunity of doing good in any kind. Be zealous of good works. Willingly omit no work of either piety or mercy. Do all the good you possibly can, to the bodies and souls of all men. Particularly, "thou shalt in any wise reprove thy neighbor and not suffer sin upon him." Be active. Give no place to indolence or sloth. Give no occasion to say, "Ye are idle, ye are idle," though they will say so still. Be always employed. Lose no shred of time. And what you do, do with your might. Do not talk too much, neither too long at a time. Few can converse profitably above an hour. Keep to the utmost distance from pious chit-chat and from religious gossiping.

The Responses to Sanctifying Grace

The Holy Response (Inner Religion): Commitment to Christ

This same love is productive of all right actions. It leads him into an earnest and steady discharge of all social offices, of whatever is due to relations of every kind: to his friends, to his country and to any particular community whereof he is a member. It prevents his unwilling hurting or grieving any man. It guides him into an uniform practice of justice and mercy, equally extensive with the principle whence it flows. It constrains him to do all possible good, of every possible kind, to all men; and makes him invariably resolved in every circumstance of life to do that, and only that, to others, which supposing he were himself in the same situation, he would desire they should do to him.

...
And he who seeks no praise cannot fear dispraise. Censure gives him no uneasiness, being conscious to himself that he would not willingly offend and that he has the approbation of the Lord of all. He cannot fear want, knowing in whose hand is the earth and the fullness thereof and that it is impossible for him to withhold from one that fears him any manner or thing that is good. He cannot fear pain, knowing it will never be sent unless it be for his real advantage, and that his strength will be proportioned to it, as it has always been in times past. He cannot fear death, being able to trust him he loves with his soul as well as his body, yea, glad to leave the corruptible body in the dust, 'till it is raised, incorruptible and immortal. So that, in honor or shame, in abundance or want, in ease or pain, in life or in death, always and in all things, he has learned to be content, to be easy, thankful, joyful, happy.

...
He is peculiarly and inexpressibly happy in the clearest and fullest conviction: "This all-powerful, all-wise, all-gracious Being, this Governor of all, loves me. This lover of my soul is always with me, is never absent; no, not for a moment. And I love him: there is none in heaven but thee, none on earth that I desire beside thee! And he has given me to resemble himself; he has stamped his image on my heart. And I live unto him; I do not only his will; I glorify him with my body and my spirit. And it will not be long before I shall die unto him, I shall die into the arms of God. And then farewell sin and pain, then it only remains that I should live with him forever.

The Unholy Response (Inner Religion): Desiring Any Thing But God

Beware of **desiring any thing but God**. Now you desire nothing else. Every other desire is driven out. See that none enter again. "Keep thyself pure"; let your eye remain single and your whole body shall be full of light. Admit no desire of pleasing food or of any other pleasure of sense; no desire of pleasing the eye or imagination by any thing grand, or new, or beautiful; no desire of money, of praise, or esteem or happiness in any creature. You may bring these desires back, but you need not. You need feel them no more. O stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free.

The Holy Response (Outer Religion): Community of Christ

And this universal, disinterested love is productive of all right affections. It is fruitful of gentleness, tenderness, sweetness; of humanity, courtesy, and affability. It makes a Christian rejoice in the virtues of all, and bear a part in their happiness at the same time that he sympathizes with their pain and compassionates their infirmities. It creates modesty, condescension, prudence – together with calmness and evenness of temper. It is the parent of generosity, openness, and frankness, void of jealousy and suspicion. It begets candor and willingness to believe and hope whatever is kind and friendly of every man; and invincible patience, never overcome of evil, but overcoming evil with good.

The same love constrains him to converse, not only with a strict regard to truth but with artless sincerity and genuine simplicity, as one in whom there is no guile. And not content with abstaining from all such expressions as are contrary to justice or truth, he endeavors to refrain from every unloving word, either to a present or of an absent person; in all his conversations, aiming at this, either to improve himself in knowledge or virtue,

or to make those with whom he converses some way wiser, or better, or happier than they were before.

...

And as he is easy to others, so he is easy in himself. He is free from the painful swellings of pride, from the flames of anger, from the impetuous gusts of irregular self-will. He is no longer tortured with envy or malice, or with unreasonable and hurtful desire. He is no more enslaved to the pleasures of sense, but has the full power both over his mind and body, in a continued cheerful course of sobriety, or temperance and chastity. He knows how to use all things in their place and yet in superior to them all. He stands above those low pleasures of imagination which captivate vulgar minds, whether arising from what mortals term greatness, or novelty, or beauty. All these too he can taste and still look upward, still aspire to nobler enjoyments. Neither is he a slave to fame: popular breath affects not him; he stands ready and collected in himself.

The Unholy Response (Outer Religion): Schism

Above all else beware of **schism**, of making a rent in the Church of Christ. Beware of everything tending thereto. Beware of a divisive spirit. Shun whatever has the least aspect that way. Therefore say not, "I am of Paul or Apollos" – the very thing which occasioned the schism at Corinth which St. Paul so sharply reproveth. Say not, "this is my preacher, the best preacher in England! Give me him and take the rest." All this tends to breed or foment division, to disunite those whom God has joined. Do not extol or run down any preacher, Mr. Maxfield in particular. Do not say, "What do I care for Mr. Wesley's 'Rules'?" Mr. Maxfield is sufficient to teach me." Do not exalt him above all other preachers, lest you hurt both him and the cause of God. On the other hand, do not bear hard upon him for some incoherency or inaccuracy of expression; no, nor even for some mistakes in judgment, were they really such.

Suffer not one thought of separating from your brethren whether their opinions agree with yours or not. Do not dream that any man sins in not believing you, in not taking your word, or that this or that opinion is essential to the work, and both must stand or fall together. Beware of impatience of contradiction. Do not condemn or think hardly of those who cannot see just as you see or who judge it their duty to contradict you, whether in a great thing or a small. So I fear some of us may have condemned Silas Todd, Benjamin Smith, John Read, Mary Anson, Sarah Clay, John Jones – perhaps Sarah Crosby and John Hampson, too. And why? Because they contradicted what we affirmed. All this tends to division; and by every thing of this kind we are teaching them an evil lesson against ourselves.

O beware of touchiness, or testiness, not bearing to be spoken to, starting at the least word and flying from those who do not implicitly receive mine or Mr. Maxfield's sayings.

Expect contradiction and opposition, together with sufferings of various kinds. Consider, "To you it is given not only to believe but also to suffer for Christ." It is given? God gives you this opposition or reproach. And will you disown the giver or spurn his gift and count it misfortune? Will you not rather say, "Father, the hour is come that thou

shouldst be glorified. Now givest thy child to suffer something for thee. And the cup thou givest me, shall I not drink it?" Know that these things (far from being hindrances to the work of God or to your soul, unless through your own fault) are not only unavoidable in the course of providence but profitable, yea, necessary for you. Therefore receive them from God as a peculiar mark of his favor, with willingness, with thankfulness. Receive them from men with humility, meekness, yieldingness, gentleness, sweetness. And be free and open in acknowledging what has been amiss, either in your judgment or practice; not listening to "carnal reason," which will tell you: "This would hurt the cause of God." No. It will forward the cause of God and remove a great hindrance out of the way.

And beware of tempting others to separate from you. Give no offence which can possibly be avoided. See that your practice be in all things suitable to your profession, adorning the doctrine of God your Savior. Be particularly careful in speaking of yourself. You may not indeed deny the work of God; but speak of it, when you are called thereto, in the most inoffensive manner possible. Avoid all magnificent, pompous words. Indeed, you need give it no general name, neither "perfection," "sanctification," "the second blessing" nor "the having attained." Rather speak of the particulars which God has wrought. You may say, "I then felt an unspeakable change. And since that time, I have not felt pride or anger or unbelief, nor any thing but a fullness of love to God and to all mankind." And answer any other plain question that is asked with modesty and simplicity.

I would add but one word more. If any of you should at any time fall from where you are now, do not deny, do not hide, do not disguise it at all, at the peril of your soul. At all events come as soon as possible to your leader, or to Mr. Maxfield, Morgan or me, and speak just what you feel. God will then enable us to speak a word in season. It shall be health to your soul. And he will soon lift up your head and cause the bones that have been broken to rejoice.

Part 6: The Praxis of Perfection

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk just as he walked.

I John 2:1-6

The Guru meditating in his Himalayan cave opened his eyes to discover an unexpected visitor sitting there before him – the abbot of a well-known monastery.

“What is it you seek?” asked the Guru.

The abbot recounted a tale of woe. At one time his monastery had been famous throughout the western world. Its cells were filled with young aspirants and its church resounded to the chant of its monks. People no longer flocked there to nourish their spirits, the stream of young aspirants had dried up, the church was silent. There were only a handful of monks left and these went about their duties with heavy hearts.

Now this is what the abbot wanted to know: “Is it because of some sin of ours that the monastery has been reduced to this state?”

“Yes,” said the Guru, “a sin of ignorance.” “And what sin might that be?”

“One of your members is the Messiah in disguise and you are ignorant of this.” Having said that the Guru closed his eyes and returned to his meditation.

Throughout the arduous journey back to his monastery the abbot’s heart beat fast at the thought that the Messiah – the Messiah himself – had returned to earth and was right there in the monastery. How had he failed to recognize him? And who could it be? Brother Cook? Brother Sacristan? Brother Treasurer? Brother Prior? No, not he; he had too many defects, alas. But then, the Guru had said he was in disguise. Could those defects be one of his disguises? Come to think of it, everyone at the monastery had defects. And one of them had to be the Messiah!

Back in the monastery he assembled the monks and told them what he had discovered. They looked at one another in disbelief. The Messiah? Here? Incredible! But he was supposed to be here in disguise. So, maybe. What if it were so-and-so? Or the other one over there? Or . . .

One thing was certain. If the Messiah was there in disguise, it was not likely that they would recognize him. So they took to treating everyone with respect and consideration. “You never know,” they said to themselves when they dealt with one another, “maybe this is the one.”

The result of this was that the atmosphere in the monastery became vibrant with joy. Soon dozens of aspirants were seeking admission to the Order – and once again the church echoed with the holy and joyful chant of monks who were aglow with the spirit of love.

Taking Flight, Anthony de Mello (Doubleday: New York, 1988)

If we go through Wesley’s sermons, we will notice that he said many things were “necessary:” Among these we could include our response of faith, the attitude of the Beatitudes, the contradiction of opinions among the faithful, spiritual company to hold us accountable, and a heart disengaged from the world so that we might have purity of intention when we engage the world in order to fulfill God’s design of love. In this part, we will explore these necessities from another angle, so that we might more fully understand what is truly necessary for preparing us so that the Holy Spirit can work through us and enable us to go on to perfection in love.

Our inner spirit is revealed in our outer actions. The outer actions can help shape and form our inner spirit. This is not a process of vital piety being the prescription to fix our inadequate social holiness, or social holiness being the cure for our less-than-vital piety. Doing two things for the wrong reasons will still not make it a right relationship before God. Instead, we are called to a holy journey of growth in faith and love that shapes us through faithful community practices and accountability to each other before God. These practices include participating in the means of grace, *and* our incarnation of those practices for those in need.

Our accountability includes both discipline *and* grace. We are to both hold each other to the highest standards of Christian living, *and* offer mercy and forgiveness for when we fail. When we have this integrity between our inner spirit and outer actions, grounded in a justified relationship with God through grace by faith, we can make a faithful witness to the saving and redemptive grace of God through Jesus Christ *and* how this calls us to respond with holiness of heart and life. While affirming that God can choose to act in whatever ways that God chooses, in the ordinary course of our faith there are some things that we will consider as “necessary” for a faith that has both the form *and* the power of godliness.

The Necessary Mind and Spirit

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of

you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:1-9

We are called to walk, first, “with all holiness”; to have the mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus; not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think; to be little and poor and mean and vile in our own eyes; to know ourselves as also we are known by him to whom all hearts are open; to be deeply sensible of our own unworthiness, of the universal depravity of our nature (in which dwelleth no good thing), prone to all evil, averse to all good, insomuch that we are not only sick but dead in trespasses and sins till God breathes upon the dry bones and creates life by the fruit of this lips . . . When our inmost soul is thoroughly tintured therewith, it remains that we be “clothed with humility.” The word used by St. Peter seems to imply that we be covered with it as with a surtout [a long, close fitting overcoat]; that we be all humility, both within and without, tinturing all we think, speak and do. Let all our actions spring from this fountain, let all our words breathe with this spirit; that all men may know we have been with Jesus and have learned of him to be lowly in heart.

“Of the Church”, 1786, sermon by John Wesley printed in “The Arminian.”

Over and over again, John and Charles Wesley lifted up the importance of a life that depended on God and was conformed to Christ, not just in our outward actions but also in our inner spirit. The witness of our own spirit confirms the assurance of the Holy Spirit that works in and through us. We can know our confidence in the Holy Spirit is real if we have a humble joy. In this joy, we are meek, patient, gentle and long-suffering because we have confidence in the Holy Spirit. This is the necessary mind and spirit for those who are going on to perfection in love.

If we have deceived ourselves by claiming the witness of the Spirit when we do not have it, then our confidence is misplaced, no matter what we may call it. Instead of going on to perfection, we can become “haughtier and overbearing, incapable of receiving reproof, slow to hear and swift to speak, unready to learn, fiery in temper, and eager in conversation” (see notes on Sermon 10 above.) Instead of building up the kingdom of God on earth, which may be our stated reason for acting, we find ourselves working against the will of God. The sins of “desiring any thing but God” and “schism” are often close at hand when we do not have the necessary mind and spirit.

An example of the practice of this necessary mind and spirit is found in the instructions for praying in John Wesley’s edition of William Law’s “A Practical Treatise on Christian Perfection.” Law wrote that “it is the habitual taste for music that carries people to concerts; and again, it is concerts that increase the habitual love of music: so it is the right disposition of the heart towards God that leads people to outward acts of prayer; and on the other side, outward acts of prayer preserve and strengthen the right disposition of the heart towards God. So therefore we are to judge the significance of our prayers by

looking to the state and temper of our frequency, constancy, and importunity of our prayers. For we are sure that our prayers are insignificant unless they proceed from a right heart; so unless our prayers be frequent, constant, and full of importunity, we may be sure that our heart is not right towards God. . . . Now prayer never so corrects and amends the heart as we extend it to all the particulars of our state, enumerating all our wants, infirmities, and disorders; not because God needs to be informed of them, but because by this means we inform ourselves, and make our hearts in the best manner acquainted with our true condition. When our prayers thus descend to all the circumstances of our condition, they become a faithful glass to us; and so often we see ourselves in a true light.”

The Necessary Tension

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

Matthew 9:14-17

In a church that is often closer to the world than to the heart of God, it can be readily apparent that there are tensions that threaten to rend the fabric of the community. The struggles are defined by the word “or,” when the humble truth can only be discovered when the word “and” can be faithfully applied. This passage from Matthew illustrates this difficulty in the church in applying the word “and.” The usual interpretation of this teaching separates the cloak example from the wine example. Apart, we can read this to mean that 1) old traditions cannot be fixed by the untried new ways (cloak), and that 2) the old traditions are insufficient for the new spirit (wineskin.) Our choice is to either repair the old ways with old solutions, or to accept the new spirit with new forms.

We can reach a different understanding of this text if we believe that in the new spirit of Christ “there is a flowing and,” that the perfect love of Jesus Christ is both deep and wide. If we read “and so both are preserved” as referring to both the cloak and the wineskin (a matter of punctuation), then we find a different understanding. In Jesus’ answer to this question about fasting, he does not say that his disciples are not to fast, but that there is a time for fasting *and* a time for feasting. There is need for the traditional means of grace, even as they may need mending; *and* there is a need for new traditions to provide meaning for the new spirit that is stirring among the people.

There is a necessary Story that we tell and reveal that is apostolic, if who we are is authentically the Body of Jesus Christ. To focus on the outward activities to the neglect of the inner Spirit is to be spent in things that are worth nothing before God, as Wesley so often reminded his Methodists. Yet we often see this in debates and discussions that

believe we must either choose between either maintaining the traditions of the established Christians, or embracing the “new spirit” that is reaching out to persons who are not established in the traditions of the Church.

To illustrate the wideness of the differences in old and new, with both their strengths and weaknesses, I offer the extremes of one means of grace. In the early church, the sacrament of communion was sometimes served in the catacombs, with two candles dimly lighting the sarcophagus that was serving as the altar. The nearness and possibility of death for the outlawed followers of the Way, and the affirmation of Christ’s victory over sin and death were experiences that could not be casually accepted. As a result, the person’s and the community’s discipleship was focused, and their commitment was deepened. Remembering the mighty acts of God through Jesus Christ in that context took on an immediacy and depth that may not necessarily be present in a brightly lit contemporary sanctuary filled with the triumphant sounds of a praise band helping a free people celebrate their abundant life. Yet the ancient practice also suffered in that it was not widely inviting to persons outside of the trusted few, which can be the strength of a contemporary service.

The challenge, both then and now, was for a faith that was both deep *and* wide. These followers of the Way, often at great personal cost, depended on God, conformed themselves to Christ, and had confidence through the Holy Spirit that God’s kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. As the early church began to move out into the world, they had to consider what was essential to their Story. Did Gentile men need to be circumcised? Did new believers have to adopt a kosher lifestyle? As the church today encounters the world for Christ, we have to consider questions of both depth and width. Reflecting on music styles and dress codes are examples of questions of width. Reflecting on the frequency of communion and the learning of the faith language and traditions are examples of questions of depth. Both sets of reflections must be done, and with a confidence that the Holy Spirit will be at work through that community to find the answer that says “and” instead of “or.”

This tension is also reflected in Jesus’ words recorded in Luke 12:49-56 about bringing division and the necessity of being able to read the signs. If we have a “catholic spirit” we will recognize that there will be division among Christians, yet one of the signs of the kingdom is that this division does not lead to schism, since our unity is based in God’s grace (deep) and not in our opinions or practices (wide).

Susanne Johnson reminds us of the importance of the fullness of the gospel being “retold, reinterpreted and rehearsed” so that each person and each community may hear and receive the transformative good news of Jesus Christ. They must appropriate it for themselves in ways that invite others to respond to the movement and grace of the Spirit of Christ at work in us and through us, bringing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Because of our limitedness in this life, there can never be a complete and perfect “cloak” for covering us with the gospel. A tear in an old tradition needs an appropriately tested “patch” so that the tradition can still serve usefully in God’s purposes. New experiences quickly become new traditions, which likewise will need attention as time

and practice test the traditions. New wine matures within its new wineskin, and they age together.

Our choice should never be old cloak or new wineskin. Instead, it is mended old traditions and new traditions that still need some stretching. Our choice should never be new wine or old comfort. Jesus said this same thing to his disciples (Matthew 13:52): “*Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.*” We will know which treasure to “bring out” when we have confidence in the Holy Spirit to lead us in making those choices.

We (individually and as a community) need both the experiences of God that are individual to the reborn disciple and the experiences of God that are embodied as the Church. We need both those who agree with us, and those who hold other opinions, if we are to truly be dependent on God for knowing the will of God. We need both those persons and communities whose practices match ours, and those persons and communities whose practices differ from ours, if we are to find an authentic conformity to Christ. This serves to both acknowledge our dependence on God and to recognize our limits as a necessary consequence of being human.

And so both are preserved.

The Necessary Rehearsal

For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

I Timothy 4:10-16

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love.
I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.

(Refrain)

I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love.

Katherine Hankey, 1866

One of the traditions within the liturgical Church is the Church Year. James White, principal writer of “Seasons of the Gospel” (Abingdon Press, 1979), claimed that “all in all, the church year is a very satisfactory reflection of the life and faith of the early church. . . . its strength lies in its firm grasp of the core of the Christian experience and in its ability to reflect in a vivid way that Christ made God manifest, that Christ has risen from the dead, and that Christ has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in the holy church.” He went on to write that “the Christian year reflects the very nature of Christian prayer and our relationship to God. Much of its power, as with daily prayer, comes through reiteration. Year after year, week after week, day by day, the acts of God are commemorated and our apprehension of them deepened. These cycles save us from a false spirituality, based on ourselves, by showing forth God’s work instead.”

The emphasis of the church year is on the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Our response is enabled by our participation in that grace. A year, however, is too long a time interval to keep the attention of all but the most patient among us in hearing the Story. The main themes of the church year can be part of every time we gather for worship, intentional faith formation, and service to others. Through this faithful reiteration, a community is shaped, and a place for the working of the Holy Spirit is formed. Experience has shown us, for example, that one sermon on forgiveness, no matter how well prepared and delivered, is not enough for a community from then on to practice forgiveness in its fullness. It is the frequent observance of the sacrament of communion that reinforces the rhythm of our salvation story, as we participate in the sacrifice made on our behalf, and the response to live as the redeemed as we are enabled by the Holy Spirit. It is the regular opportunity to make an offering that enables us to recognize that we have been given a stewardship from God.

Susanne Johnson wrote in “Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom” that we are formed in faith by “three interrelated, intentional, and lifelong processes, through which Christian character receives its distinctive shape and orientation over a lifetime and through which the church itself is more fully initiated into the Realm of God. These are *worship*, *praxis*, and *instruction*.” This formation is not a solitary endeavor, for “the prevenient grace of God, the ground of all Christian education, is a mystery that grasps us and thrusts us into community. Christian spiritual formation is based on the assumption that community, interconnectedness, and interdependency *is* the shape of reality and *is* the nature of our very being.” Participation “is not a call to concentrate on getting ourselves changed. We are called to follow Christ and enter his Story, and to participate in the community created by that following. And this does, after all, change us, as we ourselves become as the Story is.”

By applying a “compressed” church year to our practices of worship, intentional faith development, and service to others, we can begin to form a method for going on to perfection in love. Whenever we gather for worship, intentional faith development, or work together in Christian mission and service, we can plan for the full witness of the gospel message to be presented. We may not want to sing Christmas carols every Sunday, but we would certainly want to include in every worship service the hopeful expectation that God is going to give us new life through the gift of Jesus Christ. It may

not be desirable to practice the Lenten disciplines year round, but we would certainly want to proclaim the importance of repentance and the promise of reconciliation within the community with constancy. We might confuse people if we waved both palm branches and red streamers, but we certainly want to proclaim Jesus as our messiah and the giver of the Holy Spirit whenever we gather in his name. By holding together and presenting the full Story, we don't reduce the good news to only part of the Story and thereby avoid the heresies of a partial truth about Christ.

Because the fullness of the gospel must be “retold, reinterpreted, and rehearsed so that modern men and women may hear afresh its transformative good news” (Johnson), within real communities with differing cultural contexts, there can be no absolute way of doing worship, intentional faith development, and Christian outreach and mission. Any method that hopes to be faithful must keep as its focus the content of the saving and redemptive grace of God through Jesus Christ, and how that calls us to respond with holiness of heart and life. The particulars will vary from setting to setting, with the particulars checked for their implicit messages as appropriate for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Necessary Themes

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 4:22 – 5:2

We mentioned earlier the tradition of keeping time in the Christian year as a rehearsal of the fullness of the gospel. Within each season is a theme that is necessary for understanding how deep and wide the love of God is that is revealed through Jesus Christ.

Advent is the season we wait with hope and expectation for the coming of Christ, in both our personal experience and in the completion and fulfillment of God's will. Paulo Freire (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Seabury Press, 1970) wrote that hope is rooted in our incompleteness, and the desire to become complete. For those who are earnestly striving

to go on to perfection in love, this hope is recognized as God's prevenient grace drawing us towards holiness, so that we may become what God intended at the Creation. An awareness of our lacking the kind of relationship that God intends for us individually and as a community is possible because of prevenient grace, and is a necessary condition if our hope is to have authentic content. The content of this hope is the expectation that God will be with us, and work in us, and work through us. Without this hope, our concerns in the practice of the means of grace are for consumption rather than conversion, for maintenance rather than maturation, and for satisfaction rather than sanctification.

Christmas is the season when we celebrate God's intervention in our lives in a particular time in history. Our hopeful expectation is that God will intervene in our history, in particular moments such as when the community gathers for worship, or when we pray in secret to our Father who sees in secret (cf. Matthew 6). Historically, the reading of Scripture is a sign that God is present. When the Jews had no Temple during the Exile, it was the reading of the Sacred Scripture in the synagogue that enabled the people to maintain their identity as the Chosen of God. They believed that when two pious Jews read the Torah together the Holy Presence of God was with them. The early Christian church continued the reading of the Scripture in public worship, as well as reading in private. Origen (185-254 CE) outlined the basic principles for reading the scriptures while expecting God's grace to give to the reader understanding. Jerome would later write that "one who does not know the scripture does not know the power and wisdom of God; ignorance of the Scripture is ignorance of Christ." This ignorance was not *about* Christ, but *of* Christ, indicating the presence of Christ in the reading.

Epiphany is the season when recall that it is in Jesus Christ that God has been manifested in a redemptive revelation. It is not through a generic kind of religious sensibility, or by a universal set of moral standards, that God has chosen to redeem us in our sin (big "S" sin) but through the gracious gift of Jesus Christ. Susanne Johnson has correctly pointed out that the Church is not called into being to promote a general spiritual formation (as if there is such a thing) but for Christian formation that recognizes our reliance upon the Holy Spirit as the gift promised by Jesus Christ. Our sermons, scripture readings, prayers, missions and fellowship must all point to the incarnation and power of Jesus Christ. Our participation in that incarnation is as vessels of God's grace, since "*we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*" (II Corinthians 4:7)

Lent is the season when we recall the self-giving nature of Christ's love for us, which leads to reconciliation and restoration as a communal reality. The ongoing need for reconciliation is due to our big "S" sin, which is often manifested in our little "s" sins. The good news of Jesus Christ begins with the big "S" sin and our total depravity before God. This understanding keeps the order of salvation as God's mighty act in Jesus Christ and our Spirit-enabled response to this grace. We love sinners because Jesus loved us in our sin. We love sinners in order that they may be changed by that love (which comes from God and which flows through us as the vessel), rather than requiring persons to change first before we love deem them worthy of love. As proof of our love and our

desire for reconciliation, we practice repentance that recognizes the great cost of Christ's self-giving for us. That repentance begins, as Albert Outler described it, when we "let the Holy Spirit teach you the real truth about your sin, your need, your potential." Repentance then is our Spirit-enabled response to live out our love of God and neighbor with the perfecting love of Jesus Christ. Reconciliation and restoration to full participation in the faith community is possible for all. Evangelism is grounded in, and finds its power and direction from, repentance!

Easter is the season when we celebrate the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death, which brings with the victory the gift of a new creation after the order of the original Creation. It is a victory that releases us from the fear of God's wrath, and the fear of being separated from God, and that gives us freedom from the power and guilt of sin. With the resurrection there is not just the relative change in our relationship with God through justification, but also the beginning of our real change in our new reborn life as we are sanctified by grace. We proclaim Christ's victory as final in that it is once for all, but it is not final in the sense that we are therefore excused from any further relationship with Christ. John Wesley instructed his preachers as to the best method for presenting the good news. We are: 1) to invite, 2) to convince, 3) to offer Christ, and 4) to build up. The full witness of the gospel does not end with Jesus on the cross, nor does it end with Jesus risen from the grave, but continues with what this new and victorious life means as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The power to live into this new life is celebrated in the season of Pentecost, when we remember Christ's promise and actual gift of the Holy Spirit that enables us to move beyond the gift of the Law to the gift of the Spirit. It is the power of the Spirit that enables us to go on to a perfecting of our relationship with God and our neighbors in love. While the Spirit may bestow extraordinary gifts, both John Wesley and the Apostle Paul agreed that the most extraordinary gift of the Spirit is love that bears fruit for the kingdom of God. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that makes possible the work of sanctification, evidenced by the holiness of heart and life. While we receive the assurance of our salvation by the Holy Spirit, it is also clear that this assurance is the foundation of our sanctification and not its fulfillment. Pentecost is when we remember that the story of Babel is reversed – instead of people being confused and separated by many languages, we are brought together in the one language of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ.

William Law summarized these themes, and their importance for the religion of the heart, when he wrote, "The reason why we know so little of Jesus Christ as our Savior, why we are so destitute of that faith in him which alone can change, rectify and redeem our souls, why we live starving in the coldness and deadness of a formal, historical, hearsay-religion, is this: we are strangers to our own inward misery and wants, we know not that we lie in the jaws of death and hell. We keep all things quiet within us, partly by outward forms and modes of religion and morality, and partly by the comforts, cares and delights of this world. Hence it is that we believe in a Savior not because we feel an absolute want of one, but because we have been told there is one, and that it would be a rebellion against God to reject him. True faith is a coming to Jesus Christ to be saved and

delivered from a sinful nature, as the Canaanite woman came to him and would not be denied. It is a faith that in love and longing and hunger and thirst and full assurance will lay hold on Christ as its loving, assured, certain, and infallible Savior. It is this faith that breaks off all the bars and chains of death and hell in the soul; it is to this faith that Christ always says what he said in the gospel: ‘Your faith has saved you, your sins are forgiven you; go in peace.’”

Seeking completion in Christ, **expecting** God to be present, **recognizing** how Christ has made God manifest, **working** to build a community of reconciliation and restoration reflecting the self-giving nature of Christ’s love, **identifying** how Christ’s death and resurrection can lead to victories in our lives and the lives of our neighbors, and an **increasing** confidence to rely upon the Holy Spirit for holy living as our response to God’s grace is the full witness of the Church Year, and the standard for our life together as Christians when we worship, study, pray and work together. This is the explicit message we share, which necessarily needs to be reinforced by the implicit messages of where and when we meet, who is welcome when we gather, and how we act when we are together. When our explicit and implicit messages agree in the full witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we create a space in our lives together that only God can fill!

Part 7. Common Entries for the Holy Spirit

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.

II Corinthians 2:14-17

If we have an understanding of what it means to go on to perfection, and an understanding of where we as a faith community are in relationship to that perfection in love, then we need some means for helping us get from where we are to where God intends us to be. Or, more accurately, we need means that we have confidence that the Spirit of God can work through to enable us to respond. Wesley makes clear the need for the means of grace, as part of our active waiting upon God to conform and direct us. This active waiting is necessary, as Wesley reminded us in his prayers so that we “will be ready when the rains descend and the floods beat upon me” when we are tempted and tested in the world.

We will look at these means of grace again, and add what I will call “the buckets of grace.” These are devices that, if used faithfully, may carry grace to be poured over the congregation. The emphasis here is on being used faithfully, both with an inward spirit of holiness and with outward forms that reveal and invite persons into Christ’s glory. These are not “secret tools” for manipulating God, but they are offered so that we can prepare ourselves to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and have this religion of the heart, of which Wesley wrote, “This it is, in the judgment of the Spirit of God, to be a son or a child of God; it is, so to *believe* in God, through Christ, as ‘not to commit sin’, and to enjoy at all times, and in all places, that ‘peace of God which passes all understanding.’ It is, so to *hope* in God through the Son of his love, as to have not only the ‘testimony of a good conscience’, but also the Spirit of God ‘bearing witness with your spirits, that you are children of God,’ whence cannot but spring the rejoicing evermore in him through whom you ‘have received the atonement.’ It is, so to *love* God who hath thus loved you, as you never did love any creature: so that you are constrained to love all men as yourselves with a love not only ever burning in your hearts, but flaming out in all your actions and conversations, and making your whole life one ‘labor of love,’ one continued obedience to those commands, ‘Be you merciful, as God is merciful;’ ‘Be you holy, as I the Lord am holy;’ ‘Be you perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.’”

Means of Grace

Hearing the Word of God

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

Romans 10.14

We hear the Word of God in several ways. During worship, we can hear the Word of God in the reading of scripture, the listening to the sermon, the singing of “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), the participation in the liturgy, and the silence of waiting on God in a holy place. The goal of Sunday school classes and Bible studies is to be the hearing of the Word of God, as well. Even when we are immersed in the world, we need to be listening to hear the word of God that may be in the cries of the poor and oppressed. We will look at each of these briefly, not with an eye to technique and practice, but as they “form and inform” us about going on to perfection in love.

Reading of Scripture

Historically, the reading of the Scripture was considered a sign that God was present among the hearers. When the Israelites had no access to worship at the Temple during the Exile, it was the reading of the Sacred Scripture in the synagogue that enabled them to maintain their identity as the Chosen People. The rabbis taught that when two pious Jews read the Torah together, the Holy Presence of God was with them. The early Christian church continued the reading of the Scripture in public worship, as well as its reading in private for devotional use. In my own experience, it is a humbling to know that as the scripture is read, these same words have been shared with untold numbers of people, in places all around the world, for generations upon generations of people who copied these words by hand, or translated them into new languages for other people, so that they could hear these same words and know that God was at work, and with them, in that reading.

Origen (185-254 CE) outlined the basic principles for reading the scriptures while expecting God’s grace to give the reader and listeners understanding. He wrote, “By what principle ought one to read and interpret the Scriptures? It is a fact that a number of errors have had their origin in an inability to understand a sacred text in the right way. For example, many Jews have not believed in our Savior, because they have been attached to the literal meaning of the prophecies made about him and have not seen them physically fulfilled. They have not seen the prisoners set free, (Isaiah 61:1) nor the city of God built in the way they imagined it, (Ezekiel 48) nor the chariot cut off from Ephraim, nor the warhorse from Jerusalem, (Zechariah 9:10) nor butter and honey being eaten and the good chosen without prior knowledge of evil or preference for it (Isaiah 7:15). So then the reason for so many mistaken ideas about God consists solely in the inability to interpret Scripture in a spiritual sense. It has been taken in its literal sense only. Those who receive the Word, even the most literal-minded, know that some truths revealed in the sacred Books are full of mysteries. Wise and humble people recognize

that they cannot explain them. What do we say, for instance, about the prophecies? They are packed full of obscure words. And who has not been struck by the unspeakable mysteries contained in the revelation made to John? The literal-minded person finds edification in the sacred Books. He finds the bare bones, so to say of the Scriptures. But the person who has made some progress attains to the soul of the Scriptures. The one who is perfect, then, discovers the spiritual law.” (Translation by Thomas Spidlik)

Jerome (342-420 CE), responsible for the Latin Vulgate translation, would write that “one who does not know the scripture does not know the power and wisdom of God; ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” This ignorance is not *about* Christ (outer, external facts), but *of* Christ (inner, personal relationship). Wesley said as much in Sermon 29: “But hearing the law is not the same as knowing God, who can only be revealed by God’s Spirit.” We hear this distinction between the external knowledge and the internal relationship on the lips of Jesus (John 14:9): “*Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?*” Certainly, Philip could have recited external facts about Jesus, and identified Jesus (under friendlier circumstances than his arrest), but he does not yet know Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Marianne Dorman indicates that Jerome had two purposes in his translation. “Apart from trying to provide a more accurate account of Scripture, there was another purpose in Jerome’s mind for his work. This was to enhance the preaching of priests. To him it was imperative that they could quote from the Bible. ‘Let a priest’s speech be seasoned with the Bible,’ for ‘the Scriptures are a trumpet that stirs us with a mighty voice and penetrates to the soul of them that believe,’ and ‘nothing so strikes home as an example taken from the Bible.’”

How we listen to the reading of the scripture is important, as indicated in this petition from Wesley’s Sunday evening prayer:

Deliver me, O God, from a lazy mind,
from all lukewarmness concerning your will and grace,
from all dejection of Spirit.
I know that all these can serve to deaden my love for you.

The reading and hearing of scripture can take many forms. Scripture can be included in responsive readings, choral responses, lections, illustrations in the sermon, the language of the prayers, hymns and spiritual songs, and banners. In one church I served, in a stained glass window high around the dome of the sanctuary, opposite the pulpit where only the preacher could see it, was this verse and reminder for the preacher: “*Perfect love casts out fear*” – and that witness from John spoke to me every time I stood in that pulpit.

The reading of the scripture must always take place within the context of a community of believers who are seeking to be dependent on God, conformed to Christ, and confident in the Holy Spirit. The various schools of Biblical criticism can be useful, and helpful, for understanding a text, but this should not replace the Scripture’s value for the congregation as the living Presence and Word of God. To approach the scriptures

without preparation, holy expectation, or critical thought is to be guilty of enthusiasm (Sermon 30), and it is to be guilty of treating the texts as superstitions, which makes the Bible an unholy thing. If we doubt this claim, consider how the unbelieving world describes the Bible, based on how they see “Christians” using it!

Study of Scripture

When I was a child, the only Bible translation than most people I knew saw as authoritative was the King James Version. The Revised Standard Version was still relatively new, and it was the version of the gift Bible I received at confirmation. A Bible expert was then thought of as someone who knew facts about the Bible, and more specifically, facts about the King James Version of the Bible. Important questions you were expected to know the answer to included: What is the shortest verse? (*John 11:35*) What is the longest verse? (*Esther 8:9*) What is the longest chapter? (*Psalms 119*) What is the shortest chapter? (*Psalms 117*) What verse is exactly in the middle of the Bible? (*Psalms 118:8*) Which verses contain all but one of the letters in the English alphabet? (*Ezra 7:21* contains all but the letter *j*; *Joshua 7:24*, *1 Kings 1:9*, *1 Chronicles 12:40*, *2 Chronicles 36:10*, *Ezekiel 28:13*, *Daniel 4:37*, and *Haggai 1:1* contain all but *q*; *2 Kings 16:15* and *1 Chronicles 4:10* contain all but *z*; and *Galatians 1:14* contains all but *k*). I didn't know the answers to those questions, because I knew I could look them up and the answer would always be the same. With the advent of more translations of the Bible, some including the Apocrypha, almost all of those answers above would be changed -- pointing out their limited value for faithful Bible knowledge. I also believed, even at the age of 10, that there were more important questions to ask when reading and studying the Bible.

A temptation for preachers is to study the Bible asking only the questions that will help them with the business of preaching, seeking either to reinforce what we already believe or to explain away troublesome (to us) passages. The temptation for all of us is to study the Bible seeking answers that reinforce our will, rather than seeking God's will. For those going on to perfection in love, we are to study the Bible with an expectation that we will encounter God in the reading, and that our relationship with God and our neighbors will be revealed. It is in that encounter and revelation that we open ourselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit, as we seek to be conformed to Christ. The Spirit can help an individual open and understand the scriptures, but our understandings are to be tested within the faith community, so that we do not fall into the sins of pride and enthusiasm.

Meditation and *lectio divina* can help us keep our focus on listening to God and being formed so that we look like God, rather than trying to reform the Bible and the Word of God to look like us. One of the tests that we can use when we are tempted in this way is to consider if our reading of the scripture leads us to “exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees” (Matthew 5:17-20, Sermon 20, and Saturday morning prayer.)

We find this petition in Wesley's prayer for Monday evening:

Give me grace that I may study your Word daily,
so that as my knowledge increases so does my love for you.

It is the expectation that by growing in knowledge of the scriptures that we will also grow in love for God that keeps our study of scripture from being merely the form of godliness separated from the power of godliness (see Sermon 20). And the study of scripture helps keep us from making void the law of God (see Sermon 30).

Sermon

Many groups have meetings when one or more persons address those assembled for the purposes of encouraging, teaching, exhorting, advising, and rallying the membership. It is only the Church, however, that expects this address to be good news above all else. Without the good news of Jesus Christ, the sermon becomes indistinguishable in function from any other public address or speech.

The use of scripture in the sermon must always point to the redemptive work of God in and through Jesus Christ. In many sanctuaries, the pulpit is a silent reminder of the importance of proclaiming the good news, as opposed to offering good advice. A traditional pulpit has five faces, which were to remind the preacher that unless the message was grounded in the gospels of 1) Matthew, 2) Mark, 3) Luke, and 4) John, and 5) the letters of the apostles, it was not good news that was being proclaimed. It is this remembrance that will help keep the sermon the proclamation of God's words, and not merely the pronouncement of the preacher's words.

Wesley talked of the sermon as being the Word proclaimed rightly, according to the needs of those hearing, and then gave direction on how to rightly proclaim the Word. In the minutes of the first conference held in 1744, he instructed his preachers to include four purposes in each sermon. The sermon was: 1) to invite, 2) to convince, 3) to offer Christ, and 4) to build up. Using the themes of the Church Year, we can add that the content of the sermon should offer hope for our incompleteness and sin; that God through Jesus has intervened to redeem us; that it is in Christ alone that we find our hope confirmed; that as we are conformed to Christ we can be reconciled to God and our neighbors; that Christ has defeated sin and death by his death, resurrection, and ascension; and that Christ promised and actually gives to us the Holy Spirit to enable our response to this outpouring of grace.

This attention to the necessary themes helps keep preachers from "making void the law" (Sermon 30), as we recall that the perfect love of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law. Sermon 32's cautions against enthusiasm remind us of the necessity of preparation. We need to be mindful always that it is Christ who is at work in us and through us, since "*we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*" (2 Corinthians 4:7) When people have heard the Word rightly proclaimed, they should leave worship praising God, and not the preacher.

When I was in seminary, it was the custom and privilege of the senior students to lead the community worship services. Rick Justice, a senior student when I was in my first year, preached a sermon titled "In Praise of Bad Theology," in which he described the simple country church where he was raised and where he came to know Jesus as his savior.

From his vantage point as a seminary student, he knew that much of what he heard from that pulpit was heresy, and sometimes what was claimed as scripture existed only in the imaginations of that congregation and their preacher. Yet the genuine love and concern the preacher had for Rick and the members of that congregation revealed the grace of Jesus Christ in such a way that Rick was convicted of his sins and his need for the blood of Christ. That sermon echoed John Wesley's advice about listening to "even the weakest preacher." How we listen for God to speak through the sermon may be even more important than how well the sermon is prepared, crafted, and delivered. There is a meta-message that can speak louder and with more authority than the explicit message of our sermon.

We often see the importance of the meta-message in children's sermons during worship. The children may not be able to repeat the verses and lessons offered, but they will know that they are important to God because intentional time has been set aside for them during worship to be with the minister.

When we listen for God, particularly after we "shake off" all the words of the sermon, we have the antidote for the pride that waits to judge if the preacher is worthy, because it is then we will hear the "silence that is on fire." It is in our judging someone to be a "weak preacher" that we are tempted away from God and into sin.

Music

He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

Psalm 148:14

In the Septuagint, this verse instead reads "*He shall exalt the horn of His people. This is the **hymn** for all His saints, for the sons of Israel, and for the people that draw nigh unto Him. Praise the Lord!*" In his "Exposition of the Psalms," Augustine wrote in his comments (translated by Louis Benson) on Psalm 148: 14, "Do you know what a hymn is? It is singing to the praise of God. If you praise God and do not sing, you utter no hymn. If you praise anything which does not pertain to the praise of God -- though in singing you praise, you utter no hymn. A hymn then contains these three things: song, and praise, and that of God. Praise then of God in song is called a hymn." In his Confessions (Book 9), Augustine noted that the singing of hymns was the practice of the Eastern Church, while the Western Church preferred the solemn chanting of the psalms. In a letter concerning the practices of the Donatists (see article in the New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia online), Augustine suggested that all should take up this practice of singing hymns since it encouraged the people to a better life, so long as it did not oppose true doctrine and sound morality. Charles Wesley took up this advice with a vengeance, writing hymns for the people so that they could praise God!

In the front of perhaps every publication of a Methodist hymnal, there are directions for singing hymns. These are not primarily musical performance directions, but instead directions consistent with the performance of those who are going on to perfection. They are, in keeping with Augustine's concern, safeguards against "opposing true doctrine and

sound morality.” They emphasize the importance of our attention and intention in seeking God first, and our singing as our response to what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. The rules, included in Methodist hymnals since 1761, are:

I. Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.

II. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.

III. Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a single degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.

IV. Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.

V. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.

VI. Sing in time. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

VII. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

If we sing like this, we will understand what Augustine wrote in his commentary on Psalm 73:1 -- “For he that sings praise, not only praises, but only praises with gladness: he that sings praise, not only sings, but also loves him of whom he sings. In praise, there is the speaking forth of one confessing; in singing, the affection of one loving.” This commentary often gets abridged to the more memorable, “He who sings prays twice.”

Liturgy

Sermon 34, “Catholic Spirit,” gives us direction concerning liturgy and going on to perfection. Whatever form we use, formal or informal, printed or practiced, we are to be convinced that it is scriptural and reasonable. The word liturgy means “the work of the people,” and as such, it is an opportunity for modeling Christian response to the mighty acts of God, both explicitly and implicitly.

The explicit model of the liturgy can reflect our journey of faith. The scriptural and reasonable model found in the United Methodist Hymnal and Book of Worship follows a pattern of a faith journey. We gather as a community to be formed into the Body of Christ. Greetings, prayer, music, passing the peace, and other acts of welcome and formation can occur at this time, and can reveal and announce our dependence on God. Our formation seeks conformity to Christ. Prayers, hymns, anthems, scripture readings, sermons, skits, and other means for hearing the Word of God can be the work of the congregation here. After hearing the Word, we are called to respond as we are enabled by, and have confidence in, the Holy Spirit. Baptism, professions of faith, affirmations of faith, hymns, prayers, acts of reconciliation, and offerings help us model our response for practice in the world. We then give thanks for all that God has done for us, which is appropriately modeled in the sacrament of communion with its rhythm of God mighty acts of salvation, and our response. The worship ends as we renew our understanding of the Great Commission, through hymns, prayers, and other blessings, to go out as disciples of Jesus Christ to bring the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

It was shortly after I had started a new appointment when God helped the congregation understand the implicit messages of the liturgy. The liturgy I was using was a blend of what I had done before and what this congregation had been doing previously, so while it was familiar to all present, it was also new in some ways to both the congregation and myself. I inadvertently skipped over one hymn that was in a place that I was not used to having a hymn. I was about to read a scripture passage when I heard the choir director ask, somewhat loudly, “Preacher, wouldn’t you like to sing a hymn right about now?” I looked down at my bulletin, and noticed that I had indeed skipped this hymn. I could have been embarrassed, felt threatened, or asserted the authority of my position to skip the hymn as something I had intended to do. Instead, I looked up and replied, “I did forget we had a hymn selected for just this moment. You know, I would like to sing a hymn right about now.” The spirit in the sanctuary changed. Without needing it explained, the congregation saw accountability, confession, forgiveness, and grace in practice. And the people talked about that much longer than they talked about my sermon or prayers that day.

Liturgy that is grounded and infused with scripture reinforces our appropriation of the faith, gives us language for understanding and sharing the faith, and shapes us for the life of faith. Wesley wrote in “That Character of A Methodist” that Methodists were not to be distinguished from other Christians by adopting a language and expressions peculiar to themselves, but should use words and phrases that were in common use among Christians, particularly “scripture words for scripture truths.”

Holy Space

Any place where there is an expectation that God will be heard can be a holy place. Whether it is under the branches of a spreading tree, around a camp fire at a church retreat, in a sanctuary filled with the soft light streaming through stained glass windows, or in the rented space filled with portable equipment, the common factor is the experiential expectation that the people will meet with God and be changed by that meeting together.

In our preparations for hearing the Word of God, we need to consider the questions of how we create an expectation of meeting with God in a particular place and time. Our expectation can be announced in the liturgy, and reinforced through the use of our symbols of faith, which can remind us of the necessary themes of the whole Story.

The creation of an expectation can also be associated with previous experiences of meeting together in the name of Christ. When I visited my home church, after being in the itinerant ministry for many years, the physical structure had changed. There was a new sanctuary, and the old sanctuary had been transformed into a day care center. It was the old sanctuary where I went to pray, for it was there I was baptized, confirmed, sang in the choir, listened to sermons, prayed with the community, read the scripture as liturgist, preached my first sermon, and knelt to receive the sacrament. Part of the reason it is so hard for some congregations to relocate, or build new sanctuaries, or “retire” country churches that no longer have a community to gather together, is because we have experienced those places as holy ground – and it doesn’t cease to be holy for us simply because of money or accessibility issues.

There is a distinction we need to make between a sign and a symbol. A sign points to something; a symbol participates in the reality of that something. For those worshipping in more permanent structures, questions to consider include the location of the common symbols of our Christian faith, such as the communion table, the cross, the pulpit, the baptismal font, and the *prie dieus* (kneeling rails for prayer.) In some congregations, the presence of banners, candles, ambient music, incense, ringing of bells, and other symbols can help create an expectation that those assembled have entered into the presence of God for an intentional encounter so that the Word of God can be heard.

Participating in the Sacrament of Communion

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers.

Acts 2:42

Matthew and Mark record Jesus breaking the bread and sharing the cup with his disciples in the upper room, but only Luke records Jesus telling the disciple to “*do this in remembrance of me*” (22:17-20.) After the disciples received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached and about 3000 people repented of their sins. These new believers asked what they were to do; and at Peter’s direction, they immediately “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to *the breaking of bread*, and the prayers” (emphasis added). Later in the Acts of the Apostles, Sunday is referred to as the day “when we met to break bread” (20:7), as a description for worship. And in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, we have the admonition that when we partake of the elements they become part of us, the words of institution that command us to participate in the sacrament as a tradition that Paul has received, and the need to value and protect the sacrament as a central sign of the community of faith.

If we only had Matthew and Mark's accounts, we might be able to make a case for the infrequent observance of the sacrament of communion. But with the witness of Luke and Paul, and the history of the early church recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, it should be clear to those who value Scripture and Tradition that we should participate in the sacrament as often as we are able, "if we really desire to be made conformable to the death of Christ" (Sermon 12).

We have several traditions as to how we celebrate the sacrament. Some of the more common variations in our practices include kneeling, standing, at the altar, in the pews, little cups prepared in advance, little cups filled from a common cup after it has been blessed, one shared common cup, little pieces of unleavened bread, cubed pieces of leavened bread, and loaves of bread that may be home made or store bought. Remembering the parable of the cloak that needed patching (Matthew 9:16), sometimes we need to make adjustments in our traditions, in order to have persons more fully participate in the sacrament.

It had been the practice at a rural church I served to observe the sacrament on a quarterly basis, and we had worked together to move to a monthly observance. That was the first change, or "patch." It was after only a few months, however, that I noticed a disturbing trend. Nearly all the men in the congregation would be absent on communion Sundays. My initial fear was that this was a sign of resistance to the change that had been made. While visiting with one of these men, I asked why he didn't come on communion Sundays. His answer began when he held up his hand. His fingers showed the thickening and stiffness that often happens to people who physically work hard with their hands. The tradition for this congregation had been to use the little cups for the grape juice, and the tiny pieces of commercially prepared bread. "I've got farmer fingers," he said. "I can't pick up the little cup without hitting the other cups in the tray, and it is hard to pick up the little pieces of bread. I won't be embarrassed in my own church, so that's why I don't come on those Sundays." I promised him he would not be embarrassed if he came the next Sunday. When he arrived, he saw the common cup and the full loaf of bread. After the prayer of Great Thanksgiving, I gave directions on tearing off a piece of the bread and dipping it in the cup, and he came excitedly to the altar to receive the sacrament. And the next month, all the men were back in church on communion Sunday.

When it had been observed on a quarterly basis, the little cups and pieces of bread were tolerated because very few of them were proficient at handling these items. But with the increased frequency came more proficiency for some, and more frustration for others. A weekly observance may reveal other issues that may need to be addressed so that the focus during the sacrament may be on being conformed to Christ.

Wesley gave several answers for those who would oppose a more frequent observance for communion (Sermon 12). I would like to add one more – the strength of faithful reiteration that is revealed in times of testing.

It was the first Sunday in Advent, at another church, after we had moved from a monthly observance to a weekly observance of the sacrament. The scripture reading came from

Luke 21, which tells us to watch for the coming of the Son of Man, and that this will be a time of confusion because of the roaring of the sea. During the sermon, I said to my congregation:

Sometimes, the roaring of the past confuses us. Ancient rivalries and hatreds still roar in our cultures, trying to drown out the voice of God whispering in our hearts. In times of stress, we turn to that which is closest to our hearts. Too often in these times of testing, we turn to the voices of the past, which tell us to strike out, to strike back, to save face, to hate the enemy, to win at all costs. These are the voices that we have heard over and over and over again, until they have made us into children of the world.

Yet, there is another voice that we can listen to that will help us live more closely as disciples of Jesus Christ. We hear this voice when we practice faithful reiteration – when we are formed by faithful discipline, which calls us to continual remembrance. The music teacher adage applies here: practice makes permanent.

One of the lessons revealed through this practice is that when the roaring of the past confuses us, what we remain sure of is what we have faithfully practiced. When you can't pray anything else, you can pray the Lord's Prayer. When you can't find any glory in this world, you can sing the Gloria Patri. When you can't think of any way to praise God, you can sing the Doxology. When you can't see any hope for the future, you can recall the mystery of faith that we declare in every observance of the sacrament. *Christ has died. Christ has risen.* Say it with me – *Christ will come again.* In this season of Advent, we have to remember that there is something bigger than our memories of the past.

In that moment, as the congregation joined me in repeating, "Christ will come again," they understood in a new way the importance of Advent in telling the Story, and this depth of understanding was unlikely to come without the faithful and frequent observance of the sacrament.

How important did John Wesley consider participating in the sacrament? In addition to his frequent admonitions to participate in the means of grace, we find support in an unlikely place: in Sermon 27, as he talks about false prophets. Even if the minister is a false prophet, we are to continue to be in worship so that we may participate in the sacrament of communion! And in his Thursday morning prayer, one of the things he gave thanks for was "the frequent observance of Holy Communion."

Prayer

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written,

*'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'?
But you have made it a den of robbers."*

And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.

Mark 11:15-18

Wesley wrote in "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," "God's command to 'pray without ceasing' is founded on the necessity we have of his grace to preserve the life of God in the soul, which can no more subsist one moment without it, than the body can without air. Whether we think of, or speak to, God; whether we act or suffer for him, all is prayer, when we have no other object than his love, and the desire of pleasing him. All that a Christian does, even in eating and sleeping, is prayer, when it is done in simplicity, according to the order of God, without either adding to or diminishing from it by his own choice. Prayer continues in the desire of the heart, though the understanding be employed on outward things. In souls filled with love, the desire to please God is a continual prayer. As the furious hate which the devil bears us is termed the roaring of a lion, so our vehement love may be termed crying after God. God only requires of his adult children, that their hearts be truly purified, and that they offer him continually the wishes and vows that naturally spring from perfect love. For these desires, being the genuine fruits of love, are the most perfect prayers that can spring from it."

In Wesley's abridged edition of William Law's "A Practical Treatise on Christian Perfection," we read "It is the habitual taste for music that carries people to concerts; and again, it is concerts that increase the habitual love of music: so it is the right disposition of the heart towards God that leads people to outward acts of prayer; and on the other side, outward acts of prayer preserve and strengthen the right disposition of the heart towards God. So therefore we are to judge the significance of our prayers by looking to the state and temper of our heart; so we are also to judge the state of our heart by the frequency, constancy, and importunity of our prayers. For we are sure that our prayers are insignificant unless they proceed from a right heart; so unless our prayers be frequent, constant and full of importunity, we may be sure our heart is not right towards God. . . . Now prayer never so corrects and amends the heart as we extend it to all the particulars of our state, enumerating all our wants, infirmities, and disorders; not because God needs to be informed of them, but because by this means we inform ourselves, and make our hearts in the best manner acquainted with our true condition. When our prayers thus descend to all the circumstances of our condition, they become a faithful glass to us; and so often we see ourselves in a true light." (Paragraphs 63, 64)

Prayer is also our opportunity to rehearse and examine our vision of the Kingdom of God, as we are gathered before God who holds that vision before us. If we expect peace on earth, then we (individually and corporately) are to pray for the leaders of the world and our enemies. If we expect justice for all people, then we are to pray for the legislators who write the laws and the judges who decide cases brought before them. If we expect

the true religion of the heart for all people, then we are to pray for our seminaries and Sunday schools to share this good news. If we expect the day to come when the kingdom is “on earth as it is in heaven,” then we need to pray for the Spirit to call persons to ministry and to prepare persons for whom God is a stranger to awaken. If we expect the perfect love revealed in Jesus Christ to rule over every heart, then when we pray we must humble ourselves and confess our own half-heartedness and half-truths. If we expect to be dependent on God, then we need to confess our dependencies on all those things that are less than, and apart from, God. If we expect to be conformed to Christ, we need to hold our selves accountable to that standard of love revealed in sacrifice and grace. If we expect to have confidence in the Holy Spirit, we need to claim our hope in praying. The scope of our praying together models the scope of our vision of God’s kingdom revealed in Jesus Christ.

All of these concerns and emphases are found within Wesley’s collection of forms of prayers, which have a rhythm that is similar to the prayers of the Celtic Christians. This example from “Celtic Fire” (pages 173-174) could easily be attributed to Wesley on the basis of style and content, but instead comes from a collected oral tradition.

Lord of my heart, give me vision to inspire me,
that, working or resting,
I may always think of you.

Lord of my heart, give me the light to guide me,
that, at home or abroad,
I may always walk in your way.

Lord of my heart, give me wisdom to direct me,
that, thinking or acting,
I may always discern right from wrong.

Lord of my heart, give me courage to strengthen me,
that, amongst friends or enemies
I may always proclaim your justice.

Lord of my heart, give me to trust to console me,
that, hungry or well-fed,
I may always rely on your mercy.

Lord of my heart, save me from empty praise,
that I may always boast of you.

Lord of my heart, save me from worldly wealth,
that I may always look to the riches of heaven.

Lord of my heart, save me from military prowess,
that I may always seek your protection.

Lord of my heart, save me from vain knowledge,
that I may always study your Word.

Lord of my heart, save me from unnatural pleasures,
that I may always find joy in your wonderful creation.

Heart of my own heart, whatever may befall me,
rule over my thoughts and feelings,
my words and actions.

It has been suggested that the influence of Celtic Christian prayer forms was the leaven in England's appropriation of the faith. Rather than looking for God outside of themselves in the institutional Church, Celtic Christians tended to see God all around them and in them and through them (see, for example, the prayer known as the Breastplate of St. Patrick) present with them before they even knew to ask – which Wesley would identify as the prevenient grace of God. What keeps this from being the ancient faith of the Druids who shared this belief is conformity to Christ.

Wesley's understanding of salvation is revealed even in his prayers, as this petition from Friday morning shows prayer being based in dependence on God, conformity to Christ, and confidence in the Holy Spirit:

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty,
I, a miserable sinner, humbly acknowledge
that I am unworthy to pray for myself.
But it is your command that I make prayers for all people;
it is in obedience, not worthiness,
and in confidence of your unlimited goodness,
that I commend to your mercy the wants and necessities of all persons.

Sermon 21 reminds us that prayer is about our relationship with the revealed God. In some respects, it is like any other communication that we have with someone we love. Each person is invited to a time of private prayer so that may we affirm the relationship, strengthen our commitment, and learn about ourselves through the eyes of the One who loves us unconditionally. This applies for the faith community, as well, and for the same reasons! And as the language of each relationship is distinctive from others, so it can be with prayer. Some may find it helpful (personally or within the community) to include signs and rituals that help focus the time for prayer. These can include such things as lighting a candle to announce the beginning of prayer time; assuming a different posture for praying, such as kneeling or lying prone or raising hands; and burning incense or listening to instrumental music to engage our senses. In some communities, in the days before pews were common in worship and the priest worked behind the altar railing that separated the common from the holy, a bell would be rung to notify the people when it was time for them to pray.

The Prayer of Great Thanksgiving has a traditional form that engages the congregation in the whole Story of God at work among us. There the two anamneses, or remembering of the mighty acts of God in the Old Testament and in Jesus Christ; the words of institution that recall us to the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper; the hymn sung by the angels gathered before the throne of God; and the epiclesis, or invocation of the Holy Spirit, to be at work through this sacrament and in the people gathered around the table. The prayer does not make Christ present in the sacrament, but helps us to be aware that Christ has always been present with us.

Sermon 21 opens up the power of the Lord's Prayer within the life of the disciple and the community of faith in forming them into vessels of grace through which God can pour grace. One of the temptations we have when we use the Lord's Prayer in every worship service is that it becomes nothing more than "so many words" that pass through our mouths without ever touching our hearts. I was at one meeting where, in the interest of being "contemporary," a worship leader wanted to eliminate this prayer because it was meaningless to him. This was a complaint that Wesley dealt with in several sermons, for the complaint ends up being evidence of our sin of antinomianism, believing that we are already as we should be, and therefore have no need for doing what Jesus did or commanded.

At another church in a small rural community that had experienced a schism in the membership, on a Sunday a few months after I was appointed as their pastor, we were praying together the Lord's Prayer when these words touched my heart in a new way – which was revealed somewhat dramatically. The split had taken place more than four years before, with those who left having purchased another building and started a new church. As we asked for the forgiveness of our trespasses, "as we forgive those who trespass against us," I stopped praying. The congregation stopped, as well. After a few moments of silence, I heard myself saying, "How dare you! How dare you ask for forgiveness when there are people who used to be part of this congregation that you go out of your way to avoid? How dare you come before God and ask for forgiveness, when you have no intention of ever forgiving those who left?" We sat together, consumed by "the silence on fire" for several moments, before we could take an offering and sing a closing hymn. Over the course of the next few weeks, the members of that congregation started to talk again with those who had left, as forgiveness was both offered and received in the community, and reconciliation took place.

Prayers that are common to a faith community can help form a connection and identity with others. When I was a youth, we closed each meeting with what we called the Wesleyan Benediction, the blessing found in Numbers 6:24-26. When we went to a district youth rally and closed with this benediction, I knew we were connected by more than just the events of that afternoon. And when we closed a conference youth rally with this same benediction, I knew I belonged to something, and Someone, that was much bigger than my thoughts, feelings, and local connections.

We are mindful of Wesley's admonition: Formulas for prayer can help direct us, but the formulas will not save us apart from the religion of the heart. The practice of prayer, both personally and corporately, is to help form us as we wait for God to work change in us.

Christian Conferencing

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you

were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:12-17

When I lived in another community, it was the practice of the local Baptist university to invite the area ministers in to be interviewed by their students who were considering a career in ministry. There would be questions about our calling to ministry, the challenges of ministry, our compensation for being in ministry, and the terms of our employment. One area of questioning I could count on each year was over the United Methodist connectional system's practice of being appointed for a year at a time. The Baptist students understood what they felt was the necessity of being able to quit if the congregation didn't agree with them, and for the congregation to be able to fire the pastor if the pastor didn't agree with them. It fell to me to try and explain the importance of the sometimes difficult work of Christian conferencing, of a community of faith holding each other accountable in love, and how knowing the congregation and the pastor had the whole year together can be necessary to doing that work.

Sermon 34 reminds us that truly "catholic spirit" is entirely distinct from the latitudinarianism that is indifferent to where we worship and are disciplined. We are not free as disciples to move from congregation to congregation whenever we are displeased about something. I have a friend who said that when he was young and single, he thought the best approach for picking someone to date was to choose the person with the least number of flaws. What he quickly discovered is that everyone is flawed, and it soon became all he could see about each person. His life became much better when he decided to instead look for each person's strengths and gifts, and was delighted to discover gifts in so many people. The principle applies when we are considering the congregation where we are disciplined. If we only look for the flaws and short-comings, we will certainly find them and become disappointed with the people in the church. If, however, we make the disciplined decision to look for the presence of God in each person, our faith grows, forgiveness is practiced, mercy is offered, and the love of God is revealed.

In other words, it is needful for our faith that we are united to one congregation, in spirit and in practice, where we may be held accountable in love for our discipleship. Sermon 34 reminds us that our unity in God through Jesus Christ is not to be based in thinking alike, or walking in faith alike, but in loving alike. To insist on any other basis for unity in the Spirit is to be liable to the sin of schism, which necessarily harms our witness before the community.

We are often tempted to seek a congregation that thinks like us as our place for being disciplined. It should not surprise us that local congregations often take on particular points of view as part of their identity. It becomes both an identity of what they think, and what they do not think, that is important for membership in that congregation – and we find a drifting into postures of "or" as opposed to "and." We end up thinking of congregations as "conservative" or "liberal," "traditional" or "contemporary," "seeker-

friendly” or “family friendly,” “reconciling” or “transformative,” “mission oriented” or “piety oriented.” In the interest of unity based in a conformity that is much less than Christ, we divide ourselves by “or,” and our witness before the world is severely compromised. If the people who claim to be formed by the love of Jesus Christ can’t talk to each other, then why would the world in its sin want to listen to what we call “good news”? The world already understands and practices divisiveness! It is important, then for congregations to talk together and to work together, so that we may witness together that, whatever our opinions (see again Sermon 34, and the holy and unholy response to grace), we are united by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit can work through many avenues to make us aware of what God’s will is for us. Meeting regularly with a spiritual friend, or as part of a covenant group gathered for holding each other accountable in love, helps us to sort out and discern what is God’s will for us from what is our will, testing the spirits so that we do not fall into the sins of pride and enthusiasm. The rhythm of salvation still applies here: God acts, and we respond. In other words, once we are aware of what God is calling us to do, we (individually and as a community of faith working together) are responsible for doing “whatever love finds necessary.”

Kything (not the fashionably contemporary practice of “making visible another’s spirit” but the practice of the early Celtic Christians) is the practice of being fully present to an *anamchara*, or spiritual friend, for the purpose of examining the inner spirit and holding each other accountable. Again, while I am not aware of any direct connection between Celtic Christianity and John Wesley’s training, others have suggested that this Celtic Christian emphasis permeated English society in that day. This may help explain the phenomenon of persons identifying themselves as deeply religious even as they are sporadic in attending worship and practicing the means of grace.

This practice of holding each other accountable took form for John Wesley in his bringing small groups of disciples together in societies, bands, select societies, and penitents. This organization of oversight for persons desiring to go on to perfection in love was established officially at the 1744 conference. The societies were the largest groups, consisting of persons who were awakened (see Sermons 2 and 3). When a person knew the remission of their sins, they could become a member of a band. Members of a band who seemed to walk in the light of God could become a member of a select society; while those who had made a “shipwreck of their faith” were to meet separately as penitents for the purposes of restoration and reconciliation.

To become a member of a band, one had to answer a series of questions that indicated the person’s willingness to be fully present and fully accountable to the others in the group. The questions could include these examples from “The Rules of the United Societies” (1744), listed here from Outler’s “John Wesley”:

1. Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
2. Have you peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?

3. Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit that you are a child of God?
4. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
5. Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
6. Do you desire to be told your faults?
7. Do you desire to be told all your faults, and that plain and home?
8. Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?
9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear concerning you?
10. Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible; that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
11. Is it your desire and design to be, on this and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak every thing that is on your heart without exception, without disguise and without reserve?

Based on a willingness and desire to be part of such an accountability group, the following questions were to be asked of each person every week they gathered.

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?

This form of conferencing, often part of a covenant group's purpose, is a means for checking our dependence on God, our conformity to Christ, and our confidence in the Holy Spirit.

Repentance is another important aspect of Christian conferencing as a participation in the grace of God. Repentance, as Outler has described it, means to "let the Holy Spirit teach you the real truth about your sin, your need, your potential." It is never enough to simply identify our sin – we must also repent and work out our salvation. Through conferencing, we have a group that can hold us accountable in love, so that we can work towards reconciliation and restoration within the community, rather than towards punishment or reciprocity that seeks to "even things up." Because of Christ's victory over sin and death, we are freed from the fear of God's wrath, and the fear of being separated from God. This frees us from the power and guilt of sin. As we live out this freedom, we do not have to settle for respectability and a sense of religion, made possible by hiding our sins from others. We can open ourselves to the power of the Spirit to cleanse us and make us new creatures through Jesus Christ.

Outler reminds us that with the resurrection, there is not just a relative change in our relationship with God (justification), but also the beginning of real change in our relationship (sanctification). This new birth gives us the power not to sin as we

participate in God's grace (see Sermon 15), creating new relationships with others, as well, which then is revealed in our responses of faith, hope, and love.

Fasting

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money -- not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.' They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.

Luke 9:1-6

Jesus asked those first disciples to take nothing with them, for we are not to place our confidence in these temporal things. If we cannot work for Jesus without the assurances of full bellies and comfortable living, then we are placing our trust in the benefits and not the Great Benefactor. Wesley made this observation that was included earlier in our discussion of the holy and unholy responses.

He has a continual sense of his dependence on the parent of good, for his being and all the blessings that attend it. To him he refers every natural and every moral endowment, with all that is commonly ascribed either to fortune or the wisdom, courage, or merit of the possessor. And hence he acquiesces in whatsoever appears to be his will, not only with patience but with thankfulness. He willingly resigns all he is, all he has, to his wise and gracious disposal. The ruling temper of his heart is the most absolute submission and the tenderest gratitude to his sovereign benefactor. And this grateful love creates filial fear, an awful reverence toward him and an earnest care not to give any place to any disposition, not to admit an action, word, or thought which might in any degree displease that indulgent power to whom he owes his life, breath, and all things.

This distinction was evident in Wesley's Thursday morning prayer:

I also thank you for all temporal blessings:
for the preservation of me this past night,
for my health, strength, food, clothing,
and all other comforts and necessities of life.
May I always delight to praise your Holy Name,
and above all your benefits, love you, my Great Benefactor.

Fasting is a discipline that allows us to learn this distinction, so that we will be found faithful in times of trial. Those times may be when we have to do without regular meals for an extended time because of unemployment, famine, or other disaster. It may more often be for a shorter period of time, such as missing a meal in order to be with a family during a time of crisis. It may even be a sacrifice you make in order to provide something needful for your family or someone else in need.

John Wesley makes this point in Sermon 25, where we can see fasting as an application of the Golden Rule to “do unto others:” “We desire that others may do for us all the good that they can without injuring themselves, giving up trifles for our conveniences, giving up conveniences for our necessities, and giving up necessities when our need is extreme. Apply this to yourself, and act in the same way towards your neighbors!”

Fasting is an intentional time to conform ourselves to Christ, and to separate our pleasures in the flesh from our confidence in the Holy Spirit, as reflected in this petition from Wesley’s Wednesday morning prayer:

Let me fast this day from those things which are pleasing to me
in my senses and desires,
that in the times of testing I will not renounce you
for fear of suffering or denial of pleasure,
but may stand firmly in faith, and still do your will.

Sermon 22 reflects the flowing *and* as it concerns fasting. The discipline is valuable to us if we are reminded to pray for those for whom hunger is not a choice, if it reveals our sinful tendencies to indulge the pleasures of the flesh, and if it awakens in us an awareness of all the other ways that we are “dependent on God for life and breath and all things.” Fasting is of no value to us if it becomes an exercise by which we prove we can depend on the strength of our will.

I have often found that some of the questions for Wednesday evening’s prayer can be helpful in making decisions concerning fasting. They can help us decide if it is time to take up a fast, to set aside a fast, or to continue a fast. These questions are:

Have I done anything merely because it was pleasing?

Have I not just resisted passionate pleasures, but also sought to deny myself that pleasure?

Have I made any excuses to avoid self-denial?

Have I thought any chance at self-denial as unimportant?

Have I taken pleasure, at the request of others (except where the glory of God is concerned), as a means of denying myself total control over this discipline?

Sermon 42 reinforces this understanding that fasting is not about strengthening our will, but instead about submitting our will to the will of God in all things. This submission to the will of God is most evident in Wesley’s Friday morning prayer:

O Jesus, poor and lowly, unknown and despised,
have mercy on me,

and let me not be ashamed to follow you.
 O Jesus, hated, falsely accused, and wrongly persecuted,
 have mercy on me,
 and let me not be afraid to come after you.
 O Jesus, betrayed and sold for a vile price,
 have mercy on me,
 and make me content to have you as my master.
 O Jesus, blasphemed, accused, and wrongfully condemned,
 have mercy on me,
 and teach me to endure the opposition of sinners.
 O Jesus, clothed with reproach and shame,
 have mercy on me,
 and let me not seek my own glory.
 O Jesus, insulted, mocked and spat upon,
 have mercy on me,
 and let me run with patience the race set before me.
 O Jesus, dragged to the pillar, scourged and bathed in blood,
 have mercy on me,
 and let me not faint in the fiery trial.
 O Jesus, crowned with thorns, hailed in derision,
 O Jesus, burdened with our sins and the cures of the people,
 O Jesus, affronted, outraged, buffeted, overwhelmed
 with injuries, griefs and humiliations,
 O Jesus, hanging on the accursed cross, bowing your head,
 and giving up your spirit,
 have mercy on me,
 and conform my entire soul to your holy, humble, suffering spirit.
 O Thou, who for the love of me,
 underwent such an infinity of sufferings and humiliations,
 let me also be wholly emptied of myself,
 that I may rejoice to take up my cross daily and follow you.
 Enable me, also, to endure the pain and despise the shame,
 and if it is your will,
 to be faithful when it requires my blood

The fasting and self denial that may begin with “giving up chocolate” during Lent is only the first step towards going on to perfection in love!

We have this witness from the Desert Fathers concerning the place of fasting. “It was said about a disciple that he endured seventy weeks of fasting, eating only once a week. He asked God about certain words in the Holy Scripture, but God did not answer. Finally, he said to himself: ‘Look, I have put in this much effort, but I haven’t made any progress. So I will go to see my brother and ask him.’ When he had gone out, closed the door, and started off, an angel of God was sent to him and said: ‘Seventy weeks of fasting have not brought you near to God. But now that you are humble enough to go to your brother, I have been sent to you to reveal the meaning of the words.’” When it was used

to try to prove himself worthy of a gift from God, the monk was denied. But when he humbled himself, he was in a condition to receive the gift.

Buckets of Grace

Preparation

But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; for they said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts." It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. And have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies. Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. Jude 1:17-25

Almighty God, graciously accept the prayers and offerings
of your Church this day.

Clothe your ministers with righteousness.

Forgive all your people who come unprepared.

--from the Sunday morning prayer

When I was 6 years old, I wanted to be a comedian (a desire I gave up at age 7 when I learned that most comedians got their starts by performing in clubs that had smoking and drinking; and even at that age I did not want to encourage, or be part of a system that encouraged, these activities.) During this time, in order to become a true comedian and not just someone who told jokes, I listened to comedy albums, read joke books, and studied the writings of comedians. One of the first rules of comedy that I learned is that you have to prepare someone to laugh. While the laugh often comes in the surprise turns of humor, there is still an expectation that a laugh is coming.

I have often thought that this should be the first rule of those coming to worship: that we are to come prepared, expecting to meet with God. We remember this petition from Wesley's Sunday morning prayer: "Forgive all your people who come unprepared." He goes on to identify that it is his desire to "come before you with all humility," and defines his expectation for the necessity of preparation:

May this day be a day of privilege and happiness
set apart for the concerns of my soul,
free from worldly distractions and engagements,
with nothing to do but to praise and love you.

May this day be ever sacred to divine love, rest, and your creative renewal.

He continues in the prayer with what he is preparing himself to receive in worship:

Let the Holy Spirit descend on me,
that I may be in the Spirit on the Lord's Day,
as were your apostles.

Let the Spirit's inspiration guide and assist me
in all that you would have me do this day,
that my wandering thoughts may be fixed only on you,
that my tumultuous affections may know your peace,
that my apathy may become fervent desire for you.

Let me join in the prayers and praises of your Church
with ardent and heavenly affections,
hearing your Word with earnest attention
and a fixed resolution to obey it.

Let me approach your altar expecting to be filled
with humility, faith, hope, love, and all holiness,
receiving these gifts in remembrance of my crucified Savior.

Let me be about the works of necessity and mercy,
in prayer, praise, and meditation.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
always be acceptable in your sight.

This preparation can make a difference in how we experience worship. One Christmas Eve at my home church, the candlelight service began at 11 PM. It was scheduled to end shortly after midnight, but there were so many who came that, by the time all had been served communion by kneeling at the *prie dieu*, it was closer to 1 AM. When we discussed this experience in Sunday school, some complained about the length of the service. But I shared that I felt we were humbly in the presence of God, and the service ended too soon.

Earlier I made the claim that "to come expecting anything less than the powerful and gracious presence of God is an attempt to save ourselves, which we cannot do." The failure to prepare our selves for worship often falls into one of two possibilities. We may think we are already perfected as Christians, and therefore we are already as we need to be before God, with nothing else to gain by coming prepared to meet with God. Or, we approach worship as something that earns us favor with God, and we think that attendance counts for more than attention.

A failure to prepare gives the implicit message that worship and coming into the presence of God is not important to us personally or to the community of faith. A failure to be clear about why we are gathering can also keep people from engaging in worship. I was at a church where I overheard one of the greeters tell a first-time visitor, "We are so glad you are here today. You can help us pay off our building debt." We did not see that visitor at worship again. They had come to meet with God, and they were offered debt.

Preparation is both personal and communal. There are several things we can do to prepare our self personally. We can prepare by taking care of necessary business before

our day of worship, whether that is setting clothing out, finishing work that needs to be done, preparing food ahead of time, or whatever else needs to be done so that our thoughts do not wander from God. We can prepare by scheduling enough rest (adjusting our schedules, if necessary), giving priority to that which is important to us. If the congregation receives information about scripture readings and hymns before the worship service (bulletins, newsletters, emails, web sites, phone trees, etc.), then we can prepare by studying the readings and practicing the hymns. We can spend time in prayer for the pastor(s), the church leadership, the worshipping community, those who may be visiting for the first time, and those who have come with a struggle that only God can address.

To prepare the community, we can share information about scripture readings and hymns before the service, either by the media mentioned in the previous paragraph, or by bulletin inserts or announcements before worship. We can prepare the worship space so that there is evidence that this is a time and place to be in the presence of God. If we use bulletins, we can have them ready in sufficient quantities; or if we use other media, we can work to make them easily readable and inviting. We can prepare persons before they get to the worship space through ministries of hospitality that invite people into our shared expectation. And I am sure you can think of many others ways you can help a community prepare for worship – or Sunday school, Bible studies, and mission trips – that will enable persons to be open to being dependent on God, conformed to Christ, and confident in the Holy Spirit.

Of course, using the means of graces is always to be about preparing ourselves to receive whatever gift it is that God is pleased to pour into us and through us.

Hospitality

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers.

3 John 1:5-7

Jesus said welcoming a little child was like welcoming him, and welcoming God (Mark 9). He said welcoming a stranger was like welcoming him, and welcoming God (Matthew 25). It would seem that welcoming others is important to the religion of the heart. But how important is it?

In the Sermon on the Mount, we read, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” (Matthew 5:43-48) There is a building contrast between those we normally welcome, and those we shun and avoid. Even

Gentiles and tax collectors meet the standard of reciprocity. Our hospitality, if it is to reflect the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ, welcomes the enemy, the persecutor, and the unrighteous, greeting them as brothers and sisters as part of what it means to be perfect. This is how “deep and wide” the compassion of God through Jesus Christ, who came into the world to save sinners (see I Timothy 1:15) through his “full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world” (Sunday morning prayer). Hospitality is about God’s willingness to welcome all into the kingdom!

Karen Mains writing on the distinction between entertaining and hospitality writes, “Entertaining says, ‘I want to impress you with my home, my clever decorating, my cooking.’ Hospitality, seeking to minister, says, ‘This home is a gift from my Master. I use it as he desires.’ Hospitality aims to serve. Entertaining puts things before people. ‘As soon as I get the house finished, the living room decorated, my house cleaning done--then I will start inviting people.’ Hospitality puts people first. ‘No furniture--we’ll eat on the floor! The decorating may never get done--you come anyway. The house is a mess--but you are friends--come home with us.’ Entertaining subtly declares, ‘This home is mine, an expression of my personality. Look, please, and admire.’ Hospitality whispers, ‘What is mine is yours.’”

We remember the verse in Hebrews: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (13:2)*. John’s letter indicates that hospitality is not just how we receive persons, but that it is also how we send them on their way. If we welcome people in, but then ignore their needs, both physical and spiritual, we have not shown them hospitality.

Henri Nouwen wrote that “in our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found. Although many, we might even say most, strangers in this world become easily the victim of a fearful hostility, it is possible for men and women and obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.”

Nouwen continued that there are three parts to genuine Christian hospitality. First, in order to offer hospitality to the stranger, we must create a free and friendly space where friendship is offered without “binding ties up front,” and where the freedom to explore the faith is offered without leaving them alone. “Binding ties up front” means those exclusionary practices that say a person is welcome here only if they look like us, think like us, dress like us, believe like us.

Next, in order to offer hospitality to the stranger, we must create relationships so that people do not remain strangers to us or to God. We are to live out that we belong together in the Body of Christ, and that we need each person in order to be complete. And the stranger is not always someone new who walks in our doors – they may be the person who has been sitting next to you, or in front of you, or across the sanctuary from you, in worship for years. The two great commandments are to love God and to love our

neighbors – we are to have relationships with God and other people, so our faith can never be a solitary endeavor. Remembering the witness of the Bible, we need to be in relationships with other people because that is how Jesus promised to come to us.

The last part of hospitality, according to Nouwen, is creating the freedom for persons to explore who they are before God, as they are both affirmed and confronted. We can affirm that God is already at work in the life of the stranger through prevenient grace, so it is not so much our job to introduce them to Christ as it is to give them the freedom to recognize how Christ already loves them. And we are confronted by the Biblical, traditional, experiential witness of the Church concerning what it means to be a child of God redeemed by Jesus Christ. Nouwen wrote that we are not to be “individuals who can tell you exactly who God is, where good and evil are and how to travel from this world to the next, but people whose articulate not-knowing makes them free to listen to the voice of God in the words of the people, in the events of the day and in the books containing the life experiences of men and women from other places and other times.” If our faith is nothing more than having all the right answers, then people cannot be welcome here until they agree that their answers are the same as ours. If, however, we believe in a God who comes to us in the Bible, who comes to us in the mystery of the sacraments, who comes to us in the still small moments of silence, who comes to us in the stranger, then our faith has to be about our relationship with God and our neighbors, because we can’t have all the answers about a God like that.

There is a prayer posted on the General Board of Discipleship website, in the worship section, that offers some insight on the type of people who might come walking through our doors, tired of the hostility of the world and needing a little hospitality and hope. In between the naming of God and the ending praise for God, we hear these words:

We've been suffering for a long time, God, and we need to hear a word from you.
We've been a long time in our family dysfunction.
We've been a long time in our relationship folly.
We've been a long time in poverty and economic pain.
We have been too long in sin and shame.

Addressing these needs extends true hospitality for those who come to the church seeking to meet with God.

Hospitality considers the physical needs of others. As we examine our worship, study, and fellowship spaces, we need to consider if these spaces are child-friendly, elder friendly, visitor friendly, family friendly, single friendly, ethnically friendly, class friendly? Areas to explore include the physical challenges of mobility, sight, hearing, and comfort. In some communities where there are persons whose immune systems have been damaged or compromised, we will also want to consider air-borne pollutants, food allergies, and other factors to make persons welcome.

This can require some extra work, but it also carries with it extra rewards. At a closing campfire at church camp, one of the campers revealed to the other campers that this was

the first time his parents had ever let him be apart from them overnight since he had been diagnosed with epilepsy. His parents had trusted us to care for him as they did, and by doing so we extended hospitality to both the camper and his parents. And not just that camper's life was touched by this hospitality, as every camper and counselor realized that they had been involved in a ministry that was larger than simply making crafts and singing songs.

Hospitality must include care for the spiritual needs of those we welcome. We are to present the good news so that they may hear it gladly. Opportunities to share prayer concerns, to be stewards, to make a difference by accepting the gifts God has chosen to give through them are other ways that we can address the spiritual needs of those we asked to be there so that we could share with them the gracious gift of new life in Jesus Christ. Printed materials, access to online resources, and information about small groups and activities that might provide for the spiritual needs of our guests are other ways that we can provide what is needed before we send persons on their way.

We can create a place for hospitality in our visiting in the homes and hospitals, the cells of prisons and nursing homes, the work places and any other place where people may gather and need the assurance of the presence of Christ with them as "two or three are gathered together in his name."

Hospitality doesn't end when someone joins the membership of a local congregation. A common lament in some congregations is, "I've been a member here for 20 years, and I am still treated like an outsider." We are not to treat hospitality as some do dating, where we present our "best self" only until we are married, and then we put that "best self" away and live as flawed human beings. Our welcoming of others is not merely an invitation, but also a modeling of what life is like in the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ. If it is only an outer performance, separated from the inner intention, this form of godliness will be exposed as not having the power of godliness! Integration and assimilation of persons into the full life of the faith community is the legitimating response of true hospitality.

Hospitality doesn't end as persons leave the church building. Hospitality must extend far beyond the doors of the church, out into the communities where we live and work. People who have never heard the good news, or who have been "inoculated" against hearing the good news, will need more than an "open door" to know that they will be welcomed in worship and by the faith community. The extent of this hospitality is seen in the Monday evening prayer:

Let your unwearied and tender love for me
be the model of my love for my neighbor.
Let me pray for my neighbor to procure and promote health and safety,
ease and happiness.
Let me be active in providing comfort, succor, and relief
to all in whom your love and their need meet
in calling me to respond in love and charity.

In all my dealings with those neighbors you give to me
make me peaceful and reconcilable,
easy to forgive, and glad to return good for evil.
Make me like yourself,
kindly and incapable of harming your children,
good-hearted, gentle, meek, and long-suffering.
O Thou lover of my soul, raise in me a compassionate zeal
to never lose this eternal life given to us,
and by caring advice, exhortations, and reproofs,
to reclaim the wicked and the lost by your grace.

If we are to “*do well to send them on*” then we must work to offer them Christ in such ways that this offer can be received as Good News for their life.

Service and mission

He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’ He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’ Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.’

Matthew 13:31-35

Seeking Christ in the least of these through service and mission is an extension of the hospitality that welcomes everyone as someone that Christ died to redeem. John Wesley included this in his prayer for Monday morning:

Do not let me exclude even one, O Lord, from your love
for all are to receive your works of mercy.
Let me treat all my neighbors with that tender love
that is due to your servants and your children.
This is the love you have commanded me to do!
For if I fail to love even one of my neighbors,
it exposes to your sight my ingratitude,
and I forfeit your loving kindness in my life,
which I need more than life itself!

One Advent season, my daughter and son (middle school and elementary school ages then) accompanied me as we delivered food boxes and presents that had been collected by the church, for families that had signed up for the community program. We loaded up our van, and made several stops. At each place, the families expressed their appreciation for these gifts – until we got to the last stop. The half-dressed young man with a marijuana leaf tattooed on his stomach seemed irritated that we had interrupted his

television watching. When we indicated that we had brought food and presents from the church, he pointed towards a table and said that we could put the boxes there, as he went back to watching television. Before we left, I asked him if there was anything else we could do for him, and if we could pray with him. When he didn't acknowledge us, we let ourselves out. As we got back into the van, the questions and comments began: he didn't seem very thankful; maybe we should have given the stuff to someone else who would appreciate it; maybe we should have given the stuff to someone who deserves it. But I reminded them that Jesus said we are to love our neighbors – not that all of them would be lovable. Jesus healed 10 lepers, but only one said thank you. Our part was to be faithful in doing good, not to make our selves feel good by what we had done. It was also our part to trust God with what we had done – and we all grew a little bit more in love that day, by having that love tested.

Earlier, I summarized John Wesley's definition of the incarnation of perfect love. For the purposes of service and mission, we remember the following parts of the definition:

- + has the love of God shed abroad in their heart by the Holy Spirit given to them;
- + loves their neighbor unconditionally;
- + is pure in heart, seeking only God's will;
- + does what God commands, for the glory of God;
- + and does good unto all people, of every possible kind.
- + working out of humility and meekness without regard for pleasures or ultimate outcomes after the example of Jesus Christ,
- + trusting God for the final outcome

This is a high standard for doing service and mission, yet this is the way we grow in perfect love, as the Holy Spirit enables us. Wesley was consistent in this understanding for Spirit-enabled service, as he showed in this Friday morning prayer petition:

Bless all my brothers and sisters,
 who have received the gospel of Christ in their lives.
Give them further growth in grace,
 that they may serve you with a perfect heart and a willing mind.

We can think of the results of what we do in service and mission by the dollars and hours spent, and quickly become discouraged. The world makes it clear that we do not have enough money or resources on our own to fix all the problems that dehumanize and divide all the children of God. The world may see our efforts as tiny and insignificant; yet, Jesus calls us to see our Spirit-enabled work as mustard seeds and yeast. There are countless stories in our faith tradition of simple ideas of compassion and service becoming something much greater than any one else could have imagined. Blankets for babies may have been the seed that became a major hospital. An after-school program for children may have been the yeast for a comprehensive program of therapy, education, and life skills for troubled teenagers. A kind word and a helping hand may not seem like much in the moment, and it may not even be thankfully received, yet it may be the seed that will later grow and make that person or community receptive to the working of the Holy Spirit in changing their lives.

Our service and mission to others is the incarnation of Christ, for without this discipline we only have evidence of the *forms* of godliness in our lives, but we do not have evidence of the *power* of godliness. Sermon 19 reminds us that there is an appropriate time to let our light shine before others, remembering that we are not to take any credit for the good that is being done. We can do no good at all, except that God does the good through us.

Remembering this is important for doing service and mission, for it keeps our service from becoming divisive, as it separates people into “us” and “them.” William Law wrote, “And let it always be remembered, that if any distinction of life makes men forget that sin is their only baseness, and holiness their only honor; if any condition makes them less disposed to imitate the low, humble estate of their suffering Master, instead of being any real advantage, it is their curse, their snare and destruction. . . . All other hatred of sin, which does not fill the heart with the softest, tenderest affection towards persons miserable in it, it is the servant of sin at the same time that it seems to be hating it.” It is just another way of saying “*we love, because God first loved us.*”

This incarnate ministry can take forms that are not “in flesh,” with the possibilities of web-based ministries that allow person to learn about the faith, share prayer requests online, chat with others who may be in different time zones, watch sermoncasts, and otherwise interact with others without regard for time and place.

Jesus, as the unjust steward (Luke 16:5-9), has changed the terms concerning what we owe God. The Good News of Jesus Christ has changed our debt, and we have entered into a new obligation – to love God and our neighbor with the perfect love of Jesus Christ, as the Holy Spirit enables us. And like the people of the parable who had their debts changed, we can praise the goodness of the Master. It is then that we will embrace what is known as John Wesley’s Rule:

Do all the good you can,
by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can,
at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.

Table fellowship

And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples — for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?’ When Jesus heard this, he said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

Mark 2:15-17

It used to be almost an inside joke in the rural congregations that I have served: when you joined the church with your promises to support the ministry of that congregation through “your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service,” your gifts had to include a covered dish for the potluck dinners and the recipe for that dish for the church cookbook.

Eating together is not about efficiency in nourishing the body, but about the abundant grace that nourishes our soul. I was serving as pastor in one rural community where the farmland did not produce abundantly, but with careful planning the crops could be produced efficiently and still allow for a small profit. This concern for efficiency carried over into their church dinners. Tables were lined up in long parallel rows that discouraged visiting with others. After several church dinners like this, I asked for the privilege of setting up the room for the next dinner. When they entered, they saw individual tables set at different angles, without a straight path anywhere. They assumed that I hadn't finished the set up, and again arranged the tables in long parallel rows. At the next dinner, I again set up the tables at odd angles that seemed terribly inefficient to them, and convinced them to leave the tables in that set up. They were surprised to find out that they stayed long after the dinner to talk with each other around the tables – and at the next dinner, they set up the tables without a long row in sight!

Eating together makes you family. It was, and still remains, the understanding in the Middle East that sharing a meal together obligates you to deal with each other as family. We see a remnant of this belief in the rehearsal dinner before a wedding that unites the families of the bride and groom into a new family. We experience it when we eat together with the same people each day at school, at work, at a diner, or at other settings.

Eating together at the church affirms our mortality and our faith. We need to eat in order to live; we need Christ in order to live holy lives in this world and eternal life in the next. Gathering together to share a meal on the occasion of celebrating the life of someone who has entered the Church Triumphant is a remembering of the presence of the Risen Christ at the table of the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35.)

Table fellowship should not be thought only in terms of dinners for the membership of the church. Small groups, such as Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, youth groups, after-school programs for children, and other gatherings, can be strengthened through the sharing of a meal.

Our faith is incomplete if we only eat with those we already consider our family, even if it is the extended church family. We should also consider eating together with those in whom Christ said he would come to us: the persons served at the food kitchens; the persons restricted by infirmity in the nursing homes and hospitals, or restricted by jail walls; and the persons who are new to a community.

Every meal eaten together is not a blessing. Matthew 14 contrasts the power of eating together as a “bucket of grace,” with eating together for the purposes of gaining an advantage. The story of Jesus feeding the hungry crowd immediately follows the story of King Herod's feeding the “hungry for power” crowd. One group sought God; the other group sought to be god-like. Herod's banquet would have had the finest foods, as well as an exclusive and powerful guest list. Jesus' banquet had barley bread and salted fish, the food of the working poor, for guests who just showed up, and in numbers they could not have prepared for, or paid for, to feed. Among their number were the sick, the possessed,

the desperate, the anxious, the lost, and the needy. These were people who could never have returned the favor by throwing another party for all these people the next week.

Prior to the banquet for the power hungry, Herod felt the need to gain access to the strengths, and to exploit the weaknesses, of his guests to his advantage. Herod knew that his guests would not concern themselves with anything beyond their own immediate pleasures, which have been numbed by their excesses; and which, only partly, helps explain why cutting off John the Baptist's head and presenting it on a platter could be considered as a party favor. Prior to the banquet for the hungry crowd that was following Jesus, Jesus felt compassion for their needs and healed their sick. Jesus knew that these guests couldn't concern themselves with anything beyond their own immediate pain, which had numbed their spirits by its excess; and which, only partly, helps explain why it takes the Son of God to connect the people to God Almighty.

There was once a little boy who decided he wanted to find God. He knew it would probably be a long trip, so he decided to pack a lunch – four packs of Twinkies and two cans of root beer. He set out on his journey and went a few blocks until he came to a park. On one of the park benches sat an old woman looking at the pigeons. The little boy sat down beside her and watched the pigeons too. When he grew hungry, he pulled out some Twinkies. As he ate, he noticed the woman watching him, so he offered her one. She accepted it gratefully and smiled at him. He thought she had the most beautiful smile in the world. Wanting to see it again, he opened a can of root beer and offered her the other one. Once again she smiled that beautiful smile. For a long time the two sat on that park bench eating Twinkies, drinking root beer, smiling at each other, and watching the pigeons. Neither said a word. Finally, the little boy realized that it was getting late and he needed to go home. He started to leave, took a few steps, turned back and gave the woman a big hug. Her smile was brighter than ever before. When he arrived home, his mother noticed that he was happy, but strangely quiet. “What did you do today?” she asked. “Oh, I had lunch in the park with God,” he said. Before his mother could reply, he added, “You know, she has the most beautiful smile in the world.” Meanwhile, the old woman left the park and returned to her home. Her son noticed something different about her. “What did you do today, Mom?” he asked. “Oh, I ate Twinkies and drank root beer in the park with God.” And before her son could say anything at all, she added, “You know, God's a lot younger than I imagined.”

Stewardship

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints – and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a

command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

In today's world, a cautious person is often on the lookout for being scammed. One area is in the realm of charitable contributions. There are many worthy organizations that do excellent work, by maximizing the dollars received through the use of volunteers, and by keeping the administrative expenses reasonable. And then there are some organizations that use most of the money received for marketing and salaries, with very little being used for the actual charitable goals stated. A reasonable assessment would suggest that we should avoid those persons and organizations that keep most of the money for themselves, and give to those who are the best stewards of the gifts.

If God applied those same standards to us as stewards of the gifts we have received, how would we be assessed? By applying the standards for the use of money (Sermon 44), we have a guideline for our "reasonable" expenses for living, making "whatever is left over" available for being used to bring God glory as we do good to all possible people.

The concern for "our" money often keeps us from reading the scriptures with an eye towards grace. Perhaps foremost among the examples of this is the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-8.) In the preceding chapter of Luke, we have the parables of prevenient grace – a shepherd and a woman looking for the lost, and the father who recognizes that both sons are lost until they are found in his love for them. In the 16th chapter, we have a parable that is good news for those who have been found, but who also understand that they cannot repay their debt for sin. Yet, we usually focus on the problem of the steward not making as much money for the master as he could, so we miss that Jesus is the unjust steward! In the minds of the Pharisees, it is clear that this "unjust" steward should be dismissed for taking away any part of the debt of sin we owe to our Master, and they are shocked that the Master then commends the steward! When we recognize that Jesus has paid our debt, then the money for which we are stewards is to be used to reveal the forgiveness of the debts (actual and sin) of others so that they too might praise God! And then we will understand the depth of Wesley's petition in his Thursday morning prayer:

O Lord Jesus, I give you my body, my soul,
my substance, my fame, my friends,
my liberty, my life.

Use me, and all that is mine, as it seems best to you.

Tithing is the standard for the righteousness of the Pharisees. Those who are going on to perfection in love are called to exceed this level of righteousness (Sermon 20). The amount we are to give for the ministries of the church, and for other charitable needs, is not to be determined by a "dotted line" 10% (as if God is indifferent to how we use the other 90%), but by conformity to Christ, "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor."

This method for giving is consistent with the rest of John Wesley's understanding of *going on to perfection*, for in this he "was able to avoid the antinomianism of those who held to grace without human participation, as well as avoid the works righteousness which relied so heavily on human participation that there was little or no need for atonement through Christ." It helped him to avoid the sins of omission that can only be addressed by being conformed to the compassion of Christ. It helped him "take up his cross," which he addressed in Sermon 42. With an eye towards stewardship, read again Wesley's words on antinomianism and conformity to Christ, as well as the sins of omission and the compassion of Christ.

All of the money that Wesley gave did not go to one congregation, of course. In addressing the needs of his world, he paid the debts of those who were in debtors prison so that they could return to their families. He built schools, orphanages, chapels, and clinics. It would not be a stretch to say that there would not be a Methodist Connection today apart from his stewardship of money, for it was his need to transfer the properties that he had built for these ministries, in an orderly fashion after his death, that led to the trust clause that is still part of every Methodist property's deed.

Other Buckets

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30-31

This book has presented just some of the ways that God can work in and through disciples. As you looked through these categories from your experience as a Christian, you likely thought of other ways that remind you, shape you, and strengthen you to grow as a disciple. We don't have to neatly categorize something for it to be a vessel of God's grace.

For just one small personal example: since 1982, I have worn the same cross around my neck nearly every day. There is a descending dove cut out at the center, and the cross shows the effects of being worn each day. It reminds me that, as I go out into the world, people will be looking at me, and to me, as a witness of the grace of Jesus Christ. It reminds me that there is both a price and a promise for discipleship. Putting it on is a sign that I will faithfully try to accept the cross I must bear that day. Does wearing the cross save me, or protect me from the harms that may come my way? No, for I know that it is not a magical or superstitious item, and that it rains on the just and the unjust alike. And I will not enter the kingdom of God on earth, or the kingdom of heaven, because I wear the cross. It is simply a "bucket of grace" for me.

For a congregational example, the Fairview congregation in Columbia, MO does an interactive living nativity scene each year. Costumes are made, parts are rehearsed, life-size sets are built in the church yard, and cookies are baked in preparation of the approximately 900 people who will walk through "Little Bethlehem." The guests are led

by a shepherd who shares the awe they have experienced, as they encounter the people of Bethlehem, the innkeeper's family, the Holy Family in the manger, the arrival of the wise men, and the appearance of an angel. Then the guests spend time caroling and eating cookies in the church narthex. It takes nearly every member of the congregation to make this happen, and every year they look forward with excitement at doing it all over again, because in this congregation, it is a "bucket of grace" that invites them to consider their faith deeply, and to share it gladly with others.

Postlude

Deep and wide, deep and wide,
There's a fountain flowing deep and wide.
Deep and wide, deep and wide,
There's a fountain flowing deep and wide.

Sometimes, we get so caught up in doing what is important that we miss doing what is vital. One of the ways we are tempted to focus on the important to the exclusion of the vital is to look so closely at scripture and tradition that we miss the overarching theme that reveals the Good News. I want to close with just one example, by summarizing the main points of a very familiar passage that often gets reduced to just one verse. Because we focus on the one verse, we often miss that the passage contains the themes for living a life that is going on to perfection in love: the testimony of scripture, tradition, and experience for those who are born again; the Spirit-confirmed witness of the religion of the heart; the proclamation of the Good News; the conformity to Christ; and our total dependence on God who alone can do good. See if you recognize the passage.

Nicodemus asked Jesus, "What must I do to have a holy life?" Jesus said, "Speak of what you know, and testify to what you have seen. Believe in heavenly things. Lift up the Son of Man. Go into the world, not to condemn, but to save. Those who do this will come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

This is a summary of John 3:1-21, and the verse we often focus on as being important is John 3:16 (believe in Jesus for eternal life), followed closely by 3:3 (you must be born again). It is rare that both those verses are held together when talking about our faith, and yet it is Jesus who holds them together in this same story. Throughout our journey of faith, we must be intentional about being open to the fullness of the gospel, or we end up settling for something that is less than what God intends for us.

There is "a flowing *and*" in the life of Christian discipleship, for those who are going on to perfection in love.

If this book has been nothing more than an intellectual exercise for you or for a class, then I pray that this has been a time of planting seeds that may take root and grow in a later season. There are books that I have read in the past that seemed foreign to my faith, only to later speak deeply to my spirit when they were reread. I was not ready to hear, or I was unable to understand, the depth or the breadth of what was being offered

previously, until God had worked in me enough to be receptive. This book may not be what you need to read at this time, but it may be later.

If this book has encouraged you to examine your personal faith, and nudged you towards a grace-dependent life, then I am humbled. I need to be part of a faith community that is going on to perfection in love, and that believes in the coming kingdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Christianity is a social religion, and I cannot make the journey of faith without you.

If this book has been a tool for your community of faith to help create a place for people where dependence on God can grow, conformity to Christ is lifted up, and confidence in the Holy Spirit is evident, then God is glorified – the kingdom of God comes on earth as it is in heaven!

*Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,
looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*

Hebrews 12:1-2

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