

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



SESSION 12

Means of Grace and Sacraments

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**NOTES**

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She has published articles in the Wesleyan Theological Journal and has contributed to two books, including *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*. Her full-length book, *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Perspective*, won the Wesleyan Theological Society Book of the Year Award in 2002. Leclerc is an active member of the Wesleyan Theological Society and the Wesleyan-Holiness Women Clergy Association. She resides in Nampa, Idaho, with her husband and son.

Means of Grace and Sacraments

SESSION OVERVIEW

Wesley's Means of Grace

Baptism

Eucharist

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- discuss and identify the means of grace.
- articulate the Wesleyan understanding of infant and adult baptism.
- explore the meaning of the Eucharist in contrast to other positions.

INTRODUCTION

Wesley:

“By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained by God, to be ordinary channels whereby he might convey to persons prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying grace . . . All who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means that he has given” (*Works*, Jackson Edition, Vol. 5:187).

WESLEY'S MEANS OF GRACE



NOTES

At the very heart of Wesley's understanding of spiritual formation, of how a Christian grows, is his concept of the means of grace. He writes: "By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained by God, to be ordinary channels whereby he might convey to persons prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying grace." Further, "All who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the means that he has given."

The means of grace are the ways in which we open ourselves to experience God's love and grace in our lives. Too often we do activities such as reading our Bibles or praying because by doing them we prove to God our willingness to obey, or worse yet, as a work by which we earn God's favor. Wesley's understanding takes us beyond sheer obedience or any type of works righteousness by emphasizing the ways in which we act as Christians are actually beneficial to our own growth and transformation into the likeness of Christ. To be perfectly clear, Wesley strongly stated, "the use of the means will never atone for one sin; that is the blood of Christ alone" (*Works*, Jackson Edition, vol. 5:189).

How do we receive the benefits of Christ's atonement? Wesley is clear: by attending to the means. Wesley has placed certain activities into three categories.

General Means of Grace

First are the general means of grace. In this list he includes keeping the commandments, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and exercising the presence of God. By denying ourselves, Wesley believed we could draw closer to God when distractions are willingly set aside. By "taking up our cross," Wesley believed we could also draw closer to God and His purposes by doing things that go against our natural inclinations. Exercising the presence of God is the practice of being conscious of God throughout the day. Each of these general means opens us to the grace of God.

Instituted or Particular Means of Grace

By the instituted or particular means of grace, Wesley refers to those means Christ himself admonishes His disciples to participate in, such as prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper, fasting, and Christian conference, by which Wesley meant Christian conversation. As Christians speak about God together, grace is poured out upon the participants in such conversation.

**NOTES***Prudential Means of Grace*

The prudential means of grace have been developed over time, having been recognized as wise actions in the life of growth in grace. These include class meetings (small groups), prayer meetings, covenant and watch night services, love feasts (a type of testimony service), visiting the sick, doing all the good one can, and reading devotional classics.

BAPTISM



NOTES

Infant Baptism

The Church of the Nazarene has always affirmed infant baptism, even though most members do not realize this. It is up to the parents to decide whether to dedicate or baptize their infant child. Infant baptism comes from our Methodist roots and the theology of John Wesley. When we baptize children, we are acknowledging together several important characteristics of God.

First of all, we proclaim together our common belief in the reality of God's prevenient grace. While a dedication focuses on the parent's commitment to the child, a baptism focuses on God's commitment to the child, and thus is one of the few places where the Church celebrates together the doctrine of prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace is the grace that makes the infant a part of the Body of Christ. It is the grace that keeps him or her safe in God's loving arms if anything were to happen to him or her; and it is the grace that will draw him or her to a place of personal commitment to Jesus Christ when he or she gets older, if he or she responds. It is grace given by the Holy Spirit, who we believe will mysteriously work in his or her life.

In presenting a child for baptism, the parents are making a commitment before the people of God to do everything in their power to guide and nurture their child spiritually. Even more, we acknowledge God himself is committed to the child in deep and lasting ways—in ways beyond what we could ask or imagine.

We believe baptism, as a sign of the new covenant, is a sign of God's promises even to the child, as circumcision was a sign of God's covenant in the Old Testament. We believe God owns the child as His own. Baptism is a sacrament, and we recognize as a denomination the very sacredness of this event, as we acknowledge the sacredness of life.

Believer Baptism

The Church of the Nazarene also affirms adult or believer's baptism. This would have been rare in Wesley's context, because nearly every British citizen would have been baptized as an infant into the Church of England.

 **NOTES**

It is thus up to scholars, such as Rob Staples, to develop a Wesleyan understanding of adult baptism. Staples lists five different meanings the symbol of baptism elicits (pp. 119-60).

1. *Bearing the mark of Christ:* The Christian is to wear the mark of Christ's purity.
2. *Dying the death of Christ:* The symbol, particularly when the mode of immersion is used, represents a burial—beneath the water—that signifies death to sin.
3. *Living the life of Christ:* Coming out of the water symbolizes our participation in Christ's resurrection, and that, having our sins buried frees us to live a new life as a new creation in Christ.
4. *Receiving the Spirit of Christ:* Just as the Spirit was present at Christ's own baptism, we affirm the Spirit is present in our baptism. As Paul says in Romans, all who are in Christ have received the Spirit of Christ. Baptism, being a symbol of our life in Christ, is also symbolic, therefore, of the Spirit's presence.
5. *Becoming a part of the Body of Christ:* From the very earliest Christian liturgies, we realize baptism was seen as a transition point of the catechumen into full membership in the Church.

EUCHARIST



NOTES

Wesley had a very high estimation of the Lord's Supper. It will be easier to discuss his position by outlining the classical Eucharistic interpretations.

Transubstantiation

This theory is most often associated with Roman Catholicism. It is the belief the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ. When the priest says the prayer of consecration, there is a change in the essence of the elements, even though they may still appear as bread and wine.

Consubstantiation

This theory is most often associated with Martin Luther. It is similar to transubstantiation in that Christ's body and blood are literally present in the bread and wine. The difference is the essence of the elements also remains bread and wine while being body and blood.

Spiritual Presence

This theory is most often associated with John Calvin. Calvin did not believe there was a change in the elements but that Christ truly comes into the bread and wine in a spiritual sense.

Memorialist

This theory is most often associated with Ulrich Zwingli, a Reformer, contemporary with Calvin and Luther. This theory affirms the Lord's Supper is to be taken as a memorial of the death of Christ, as a remembrance of His self-sacrifice for us. There is no sense that Christ participates in the actual elements.

Most scholars agree Wesley's position falls between the concept of spiritual presence and the memorialist position—with some interpreters of Wesley's position placing it extremely close to Calvin's.

The difference between Wesley and Calvin on this issue is that it is not only Christ's presence that is experienced, as Calvin stressed, but also the presence of the whole Trinity in the whole act of the Eucharistic meal. Wesley's position focuses on the Eucharist as a means of grace. Here are some of Wesley's words:

 NOTES

The Lord's Supper was ordained by God to be a means of conveying either prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying/preserving grace, according to the necessity of the people. The persons for whom it was ordained are all those who know and feel that they want the grace of God, either to restrain them from sin, or to show their sins forgiven, or to renew their souls in the image of God, or to enter into the presence of God in communion with him. No preparation is necessary other than a desire to receive whatsoever grace God pleases to give. No fitness is required other than a sense of our state, or our utter sinfulness and helplessness apart from Christ. Therefore if you want such grace as God pleases to give to you, draw near in faith and find comfort and strength.

Rob Staples stresses the Eucharist is a means particularly of sanctifying grace, and in doing so reminds us there is an integral connection between the means of grace and growth in our sanctification in Wesley's thought. It is impossible to grow in our Christian walk without attending to the means of grace in general. For Wesley, though, the Eucharist was the most important means, and to neglect it was unthinkable.

Duty of Constant Communion

Again, Rob Staples helps interpret the significance of the Eucharist by examining the meaning of the symbol. The Eucharist is a symbol of:

- Thanksgiving to the Father
- Commemoration of Christ
- Self-sacrifice or consecration
- Fellowship and unity of the faithful
- The promise of the coming Kingdom (Staples, pp. 228-49).

According to Wesley, "If, therefore, we have any regard for the plain command of Christ, if we desire the pardon of our sins, if we wish for strength to believe, to love and obey God, then we should neglect no opportunity of receiving the Lord's Supper" (Sermon, "The Duty of Constant Communion," Outler, p. 336).

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Discuss your understanding of the different means of grace and the part they play in your life.
2. Write a reflection paper on the Wesleyan understanding of infant and adult baptism.
3. Write your understanding of Eucharist. Include personal insights and feelings about the importance of this sacrament.

EXAM



NOTES

1. At the heart of Wesley's understanding of spiritual formation is his concept of the means of grace.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. Wesley wrote, "By means of grace I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained by God, to be ordinary channels whereby he might convey to persons prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying grace."
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. According to Wesley, we receive the benefits of Christ's atonement by _____.
 - A. Having the mind of Christ
 - B. Attending to the means of grace
 - C. Working hard
 - D. All of the above
4. Wesley's category general means of grace includes _____.
 - A. Keeping the commandments
 - B. Denying ourselves
 - C. Taking up our cross
 - D. Exercising the presence of God
 - E. All of the above
5. By the instituted or particular means of grace, Wesley refers to those means Christ himself admonishes His disciples to participate in, such as _____.
 - A. Prayer
 - B. Searching scripture
 - C. The Lord's supper
 - D. Christian conversation
 - E. All of the above
6. Prudential means of grace include _____.
 - A. Small groups and prayer meetings
 - B. Covenant and watch night services
 - C. Love feasts (a type of testimony service)
 - D. Visiting the sick and doing all the good one can
 - E. All of the above

 **NOTES**

7. The Church of the Nazarene has always affirmed infant baptism.
 - A. True
 - B. False

8. When we baptize children, we are acknowledging together several important characteristics of God, including: _____.
 - A. We proclaim together our common belief in the reality of God's prevenient grace
 - B. Parents making a commitment before people and God to guide and nurture their child spiritually
 - C. Baptism is a sign of the new covenant, a sign of ownership
 - D. All of the above

9. Adult, or believer's baptism, would have been rare in Wesley's context, because nearly every British citizen would have been baptized as an infant into the Church of England.
 - A. True
 - B. False

10. _____ is NOT part of Staples' list of the five different meanings the symbol of baptism elicits.
 - A. Working in the church
 - B. Bearing the mark of Christ
 - C. Dying the death of Christ and living the life of Christ
 - D. Receiving the Spirit of Christ
 - E. Becoming a part of the body of Christ

11. Transubstantiation theory is the belief the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ when the priest says the prayer of consecration.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. Consubstantiation is a theory of the Eucharist similar to transubstantiation in that Christ's body and blood are literally present in the bread and wine. The difference is the essence of the elements also remain bread and wine while being body and blood.
 - A. True
 - B. False

**NOTES**

13. Spiritual presence is a theory of the Eucharist most often associated with John Calvin. Calvin did not believe there was a change in the elements but that Christ truly comes into the bread and wine in a spiritual sense.
- A. True
 - B. False
14. Memorialist is a theory of the Eucharist that affirms the Lord's Supper is to be taken as a memorial of the death of Christ, as a remembrance of His self-sacrifice for us. There is no sense that Christ participates in the actual elements.
- A. True
 - B. False
15. Most scholars agree Wesley's position on the Eucharist falls between the concept of spiritual presence and the memorialist position.
- A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. Your understanding of the different means of grace and the part they play in your life.
2. Your reflection paper on the Wesleyan understanding of infant and adult baptism.
3. Your understanding of Eucharist and your personal insights and feelings about the importance of this sacrament.