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A Wesleyan Understanding of Grace As Responsible and Therapeutic: A Path to Transformational Spirituality

Katherine Simmons Conolly

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**A WESLEYAN UNDERSTANDING OF GRACE
AS RESPONSIBLE AND THERAPEUTIC:
A PATH TO TRANSFORMATIONAL SPIRITUALITY**

Presented To
The Faculty of George Fox Evangelical Seminary
George Fox University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for The Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by
Katherine Simmons Conolly

April 12, 2002

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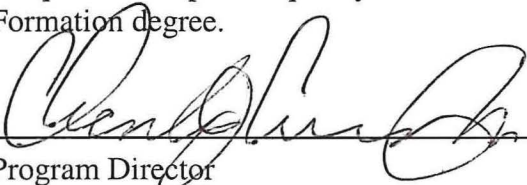
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**Title: A WESLEYAN UNDERSTANDING OF GRACE AS RESPONSIBLE AND
THERAPEUTIC: A PATH TO TRANSFORMATIONAL SPIRITUALITY**

Presented by: Katherine Simmons Conolly
April 15, 2002

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this dissertation and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation degree.



Program Director



Reader

[Faint, illegible circular stamp or watermark]

Dedicated to my parents

Janet L. Simmons

and

Ralph O. Simmons

who are an incredible source of grace in my life

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
----------------------------	-----

ABSTRACT	viii
--------------------	------

Chapter

1. IN SEARCH OF TRANSFORMATIONAL SPIRITUALITY	1
---	---

<i>What's So Amazing about Grace?</i> Class	1
---	---

The Ministry Problem that Needs to be Addressed	3
---	---

Lost Touch with Wesleyan Roots	5
--	---

Transformational Sprituality	7
--	---

The Lack of Transformational Spirituality is Not Just a First United Methodist Church Problem	8
--	---

Wesley's Understanding of Grace as One Way to Affect Transformational Spirituality	10
---	----

"Coming Home to Wesley": Grace as "Responsible"	11
---	----

Coming Home to Wesley: Grace as Therapeutic	14
---	----

Developing a Curriculum of Responsible and Therapeutic Grace to Promote Transformational Spirituality	17
--	----

2. JOHN WESLEY'S JOURNEY	20
------------------------------------	----

England and the Church of England in John Wesley's Day	22
--	----

John Wesley's Parents	23
---------------------------------	----

His Oxford Education and Experience	25
---	----

The Mission to Georgia and the Moravians	28
--	----

Wesley's Calling as an Evangelist	32
---	----

Wesley's Means of Grace Provided Strength for his Journey of Responsible and Therapeutic Grace	34
---	----

	The End of Wesley's Earthly Journey	36
3.	GRACE AS RESPONSIBLE AND THERAPEUTIC	38
	A Simple Definition of Grace from a Wesleyan Perspective	39
	Wesley's View of God	41
	Wesley's View of Humanity	44
	Wesley's Way of Salvation	47
	Prevenient Grace	48
	Awakening	52
	Repentance	53
	Justification	54
	Justification: Instantaneous or Gradual?	56
	Faith and Justification	57
	Sanctification	59
	Christian Perfection	63
	Wesley's Understanding of How We Can Sense God's Grace	67
	The Means of Grace	68
	Instituted Means of Grace	71
	Prudential Means of Grace	78
4.	CONTEMPORARY VOICES OF GRACE	81
	Gerald May on Addiction and Grace	82
	Henri Nouwen on the Inner Voice of Love	91
	Larry Crabb on the Safest Place on Earth	98
	Anne Lamott on Traveling Mercies	105
	Dallas Willard on Hearing God	114

5.	A CURRICULUM: “RESPONSIBLE AND THERAPEUTIC GRACE AS A PATHWAY TO TRANSFORMATIONAL SPIRITUALITY”.	122
	Week One: A Portrait of Responsible and Thereapeutic Grace	124
	Week Two: A General Discussion of Grace	126
	Week Three: Our Need for Grace: Sin and Brokenness	127
	Week Four: Grace is a Journey: Wesley’s Understanding of the Way of Salvation	128
	Week Five: Grace as Responsible: The Partnership between Us and God	129
	Week Six: Grace as Therapeutic: Healing our Brokenness	130
	Week Seven: Pathways to Grace: ”The Means of Grace”	132
	Week Eight: A Love Feast: A Feast of Grace	133
	Closing Thoughts	133
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	135
	VITA	143

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ABSTRACT

The ministry problem addressed in this dissertation is the need for spiritual transformation. Christians are called to transformation into the image of Christ. John Wesley's understanding of grace as both *responsible* and *therapeutic* is one pathway to this transformation. He believed that grace was the interaction of God and humanity, where God reaches out to us and we are to respond. The more we respond, the more we are able to respond. This is *responsible grace*. And as we grow in grace, the result is a growth in holiness, or into the likeness of Christ. This growth is not just something externally applied, but an actual change in our being. This is *therapeutic grace*.

Chapter one is an introduction to the need for transformational spirituality and to the proposed solution of Wesley's understanding of grace as responsible and therapeutic. Chapter two is an overview of John Wesley's life, with the emphasis on the various influences that led him to understand grace as responsible and therapeutic. Chapter three explores Wesley's understanding of the way of salvation and the means of grace. Chapter four follows the threads of responsible, therapeutic grace through one work by each of the following authors: Gerald May, Henri Nouwen, Larry Crabb, Anne Lamott, and Dallas Willard. Chapter five is a curriculum on responsible and therapeutic grace which is built on the foundation of Wesley's *Via Salutis* and utilizes the works of the five contemporary messengers from chapter four.

CHAPTER ONE

IN SEARCH OF TRANSFORMATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

What's So Amazing About Grace? Class

It is Sunday morning at the First United Methodist Church (First UMC) in Lebanon, Oregon, and it is time for Sunday school. Today is our first class on Phillip Yancey's book,¹ *What's So Amazing About Grace?* There is a large group gathered, waiting expectantly. After an opening prayer, we begin by going all around the table, giving our names, and briefly expressing why we are taking a class about grace. The statements go something like this:

- "I've heard about grace my whole life, but I don't get what it is. I'm here to find out."
- "I need to be a more grace-full person. I'm hoping the class will help me."
- "Grace makes me mad sometimes. It means that those who don't play by the rules get treated the same as those who do. How can God think that is fair?"
- "I want to be able to recognize and experience God's grace."
- "Is there anything I can do to stop receiving God's love?"
- "If there is grace, does that mean there isn't a hell?"
- "I believe in grace, but I also try to be a good person so that God will accept me. What is the relationship between God's grace and our actions?"

We open our *What's So Amazing About Grace?* participant guides and are confronted with the question: "How would you define the word *grace*?" We take a few minutes to reflect on and record our answers. When I ask people to share what they have written, I discover that the vast majority have addressed the theme of God's

1. Phillip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000).

unconditional love.² Words such as “gift,” “forgiveness,” “thoughts,” “goodness,” “peace,” “acceptance,” “hope,” “understanding,” “polite,” and “mercy” are also given. One person writes, “Well, Kate, you got me thinking – it turns out I don’t know and that bothers me! When I think of how to define grace I think of all the words with the root of grace–graceful, gracias–to be gracious is the closest I can come to defining ‘grace.’” Another person bluntly writes, “I can’t define it–don’t understand the concept.” And there is even a “What we say before we eat.”

In our student guide, we are given two pages in which to respond to the video portion of the lesson. Above our writing space, Phillip Yancey has given us selected quotes to think about. These three are included:

- “I’m convinced that the future of the church in this new century depends on how well we master this notion of grace.”
- “Never, never, underestimate the power of grace. It is a gift from God, and it holds within it a supernatural power.”
- “Grace is a gift, free of charge, on the house. You only have to do one thing to receive a gift: open your hand.”³

During the following weeks, it becomes increasingly clear that the class is very interested in learning about grace while being challenged by it and that we all have a great deal more to learn about it. Also, I discover that if the class has a hazy understanding, at best, about the meaning of grace, they have little to no understanding of John Wesley’s view of grace. When I ask the class members to record what they think

2. The answers I have included in this paragraph, in the paragraph that asks, “What is John Wesley’s understanding of grace?” and in the paragraph that asks, “Is grace an important concept in your life?” are actually from an all-church survey I conducted. I distributed a short survey in the church bulletin on three consecutive Sundays. Sixty-one were returned. For the sake of clarity and continuity, I inserted them in these three paragraphs.

3. Phillip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace? Participant’s Guide* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 12, 13.

Wesley believed about grace, one person writes, “Clueless.” Another, whom I have good-naturedly been “encouraging” to join the church, answers, “Hmmm. If I was a member, would I know this? (smile)” A telling answer that I suspect expresses the deep-down beliefs of more than a handful of people is, “God loves us unconditionally, but we need to be good also to feel deserving of grace.” One person actually hits very close to the mark with “the power to change—transform self into image of Christ.”

When the class is asked, “Is grace an important concept in my life?” a classic answer comes back. I think it is probably a fair answer for many of us: “Well, I think so, but then again, I can’t define it, can I?” Of course, as Yancey writes, appropriating E. B. White’s definition of humor, the difficulty in trying to define it is that “[grace] can be dissected, as a frog, but the thing dies in the process, and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”⁴

As I spend time praying and reflecting on grace during the course of the class, I begin to see how three elements relating to grace tie together: a ministry problem within my congregation, a Wesleyan understanding of grace, and my passion for the church to be a place of transformation. Let us begin by addressing the ministry problem within my congregation.

The Ministry Problem that Needs Addressing

The First UMC in Lebanon, Oregon, is located 18 miles from Oregon State University and 45 miles from the University of Oregon. In a former mill community that is predominately blue collar, this congregation has, on the whole, more education and a higher standard of living than the majority of the residents of Lebanon. It is not a wealthy

4. Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, 16.

congregation, but it is solidly middle class. It is also overwhelmingly white, reflecting Lebanon's racial makeup.

First UMC has existed since 1850, when Lebanon's first settlers started the church and the community's first school. The current congregation of approximately 300 can look back on a long, proud history of involvement in the community. Today, the congregation's community involvement primarily consists of many individual members donating their time, energy, and resources in a variety of ways, from Habitat to Humanity to the soup kitchen to hospice.

The members of the congregation are loving, caring, and nurturing to one another, as well. They pray for one another, bring food at times of illness and tragedy, worship together, and socialize outside of church.

We have recently received external verification of the quality of the congregants' relationships with one another from a Natural Church Development (NCD) test. The NCD test, which scores congregations on eight areas that are necessary for a healthy church, showed our First UMC's strongest area is in "loving relationships." As the author of *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* writes,

To determine this "love quotient," we asked (among other things) how much time members spend with one another outside of official church-sponsored events. For example, how often do they invite one another over for meals or a cup of coffee? How generous is the church in doling out compliments? To what extent is the pastor aware of the personal problems of the lay workers in the congregation? How much laughter is there in the church?⁵

5. Christian A. Schwartz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, Ill.: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 36.

The quality of “loving relationships” is important for a healthy church. Members of the congregation always mention this quality with great enthusiasm, commenting, “Don’t we have a wonderful church? Everyone is so friendly and caring.”

What concerns me is the congregation’s lowest score. The quality the congregation is the weakest in, scoring well below the NCD’s healthy range is “passionate spirituality.” Dr. Schwartz writes about passionate spirituality: “Are the Christians in this church ‘on fire?’ Do they live committed lives and practice their faith with joy and enthusiasm? ... The concept of spiritual passion and the widespread notion of the walk of faith as ‘performing one’s duty’ seem to be mutually exclusive.”⁶ My congregation is made up of warm, wonderful, kind, generous people who are not, by and large, “on fire” with their faith. Although they possess a noble sense of duty and obligation to the church, most congregants do not practice their faith with “joy and enthusiasm.”

Lost Touch with Wesleyan Roots

I am a pastor in a denomination that, despite some notable exceptions, has lost touch with its roots.⁷ We have retained the “method”-ist when it comes to year-end reports, church committees, hierarchical structure, and an obsession with membership statistics. The chit-chat of potlucks and coffee hours has replaced the soul sharing of class

6. Ibid., 26.

7. A number of people in the denomination are committed to setting Methodists “on fire” again. In the bibliography I have included several books which attempt to recapture the concepts of the class meeting, accountability, and spiritual growth. Among them, *Companions in Christ* (by G.S. Dawson, *et al.*) is an excellent resource for spiritual formation. Also, my denomination continues to have a strong missionary presence around the world and is engaged in countless “works of mercy” through the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the United Methodist Women, the Board of Global Ministries, etc.

meetings. We have lost the heart of John Wesley's mission to spread holiness of heart and life across the land.

When Wesley was asked, "Who is a Methodist, according to your own account?" he answered: "A Methodist is one who has 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him'; one who 'loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.'"⁸

When Wesley identified the "marks of a true Methodist" he said,

He is a Christian, not in *name* only, but in *heart* and in *life*. He is inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God, as revealed in the written Word. *He thinks, speaks and lives according to the 'method' laid down in the revelation of Jesus Christ.* His soul is 'renewed after the image of God,' 'in righteousness and in all true holiness.' And 'having the mind that was in Christ' he 'so walks as' Christ 'also walked.'...God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul...He is therefore happy in God...as having in him 'a well of water springing up into everlasting life,' and 'overflowing his soul with peace and joy.'⁹

These are descriptions of a passionate spirituality.

Wesley wrote directly under the title "The Character of a Methodist:" "*Not as tho' I had already attained.*"¹⁰ He did not really think that every Methodist, or even that the majority, or even that he had attained the kind of love and joy he wrote about. Wesley was setting forth his vision of the Christian life, the goal towards which we should be growing. Wesley believed that, by the grace of God, we could be transformed "in *heart* and *life*" so that we were "inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God." To aim for anything less was unacceptable.

8. John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist [1742]," in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, 35 vols. projected (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1984-), 9:35 (hereafter cited as *Works*).

9. Ibid., 9:41.

10. Ibid., 9:32, 35. These answers reflect Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection or "perfect love." We will explore this controversial and often misunderstood doctrine in more detail in chapter 3.

Transformational Spirituality

Wesley's "marks of a Methodist" certainly convey the Natural Church Development's understanding of "passionate spirituality." However, Wesley's "marks" convey not just passion, but transformation. Not only are we to practice our faith with joy and happiness, we are to be "renewed after the image of God." There are people who can be "on fire" with their faith and yet this does not change them. It does not bring them any closer to the nature of Christ. A term that better communicates Wesley's vision is "transformational spirituality." The early Methodist movement, from Wesley's evangelistic sermons to his small groups, was dedicated to spiritual growth.¹¹ Throughout the rest of this work, I will refer to my congregation's problem as a lack, not of "passionate spirituality," but of "transformational spirituality." I will use this term to refer to a faith that involves the changing of our very natures, until we are "inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God."

The radical nature of transformational spirituality is captured in Mel Lawrenz's description of the caterpillar's transformation into the butterfly. Lawrenz's children have brought numerous chrysalides into their home in order to personally witness "the spectacle of metamorphosis," about which Lawrenz writes:

Only a fortunate person gets to watch a caterpillar attach itself to the underside of a twig, twist and turn to pull a covering up and over itself, and then cease to move at all and enter dormancy. With the passing of weeks it seems that the chrysalis has turned into a sarcophagus as there is no evidence of life whatsoever. Then, one day a crack opens and what emerges is something that would be the most bewildered creature on the face of the earth if it had self-consciousness. The old has gone, the new has come! There is no resemblance to the old, the former way of behaving will no longer work. It takes a while before the creature's wings unfold, but if you try to assist it, the butterfly will die. Finally, with a flap of the

11. We will see the transformational character of Wesley's spirituality in chapters 2 and 3.

wings, it is gone on the wind. It is a transformation so complete and astounding as can be and a symbol that Christians have used for the resurrection life of Christ for centuries. It reminds us that transformation is the work of God.¹²

The Lack of Transformational Spirituality is Not Just a First United Methodist Church Problem

It is not just the United Methodist Church in general or my congregation in particular that is lacking transformational spirituality. I attended a seminar by George Barna, a demographer and statistician whose work focuses on the church.¹³ He said that there is no statistical difference between the lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors of Christians and non-Christians.

One of the problems is that Christians have lost the vision of transformational spirituality. It is a vision that has been expressed by many over the centuries, not just by Wesley. For example, Richard Baxter wrote on the subject in 1656:

The whole of our ministry must be carried on in tender love to our people. We must let them see that nothing pleaseth us but what profiteth them; and that what doeth them good doth us good; and that nothing troubleth us more than their hurt. We must feel toward our people, as a father toward his children; yet, the tenderest love of a mother must not surpass ours. We must even travail in birth, *til Christ be formed in them*. They should see that we care for no outward thing, neither wealth, nor liberty, nor honour, nor life, in comparison to their salvation.¹⁴

John and Nancy Ortberg, in their video study entitled “Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People,”¹⁵ talk about how churches have lost the vision of transformational spirituality. John tells the story of Hank, who was a member of one of his congregations.

12. Mel Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 136.

13. This was a workshop on church growth, taught by George Barna, held in Portland, Ore., in April 1998.

14. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1656), 117.

15. John and Nancy Ortberg, a video series entitled “Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People,” copyrighted by the Tabgha Foundation, 2000.

John said that when he met Hank, he was a “cranky old guy.” Apparently, Hank had been a cranky young guy as well. He could not “effectively express love for people, he was not a very happy person, he did not experience or communicate joy.” What struck Ortberg as he reflected on Hank was that the congregation did not really expect Hank to change. It never really bothered anyone that Hank had come to that church for over 50 years and that he had not “by day, by week, by month, by year become more loving, patient, joyful and winsome.” The elders of the church did not call an emergency meeting to discuss the “strange case of the man who does church but doesn’t change.”

An entrepreneur named Marshall Stevens gave our Doctor of Ministry class on strategic planning his top ten leadership tips.¹⁶ Then, after pausing for a moment, he said, “Now, to why I *really* wanted to come today.” Stevens proceeded to tell us about two British researchers who wanted to see what made the United States a Christian nation. The researchers decided to visit the most “Christian” city in America, selecting the city with the highest rate of church membership. So off they went to study Dallas, Texas. What they soon discovered was that Dallas had a sky-high violent crime rate, teenage pregnancy rate, high school dropout rate, etc. They went back to England scratching their heads, thinking, “If that is what goes on in the most Christian of cities in a Christian nation, what good is Christianity?”

Stevens told us that as the leaders of the church, we were failing. We were not leading people to be any different than they would have been if they had never set foot in a church. It was hard for us to hear. It sounded offensive and arrogant. But he was right.

16. Marshall Stevens, the founder of Oil Can Henry’s, spoke to the Doctor of Ministry students at George Fox Evangelical Seminary in June 2000.

What he said echoed the thoughts of Gil Rendle, a senior consultant with the Alban Institute. During his seminar on “Leading Change in Your Congregation,”¹⁷ he gave us the analogy of a shirt-making factory. The purpose of the factory was, of course, to make shirts. Gil told us that if the cotton was sent through the factory and it came out on the other side as cotton instead of a shirt, there would be some heads rolling in the front office. But somehow the church is able to get away with this year after year; people come in and stay, some for a very long time, and there is no change, let alone a metamorphosis.

Wesley’s Understanding of Grace as One Way to Affect Transformational Spirituality

There are many factors that can keep us from transformation or change. The Ortbergs mention factors such as the threatening nature of change and the way it involves being honest about who we are. Nancy says that in the early church, we were expected to confess our sins to one another and point out where others were falling short in their spiritual walks. We have obviously lost that expectation. I propose that appropriating John Wesley’s understanding of grace is one way we can practice transformational spirituality. In the next two sections, we will look at two aspect of Wesley’s understanding of grace that I feel are critically important for achieving transformational spirituality.

17. “Leading Change in Your Congregation” is an Alban Institute seminar. The seminar I attended was in Boston, Mass. in October 1999.

“Coming Home to Wesley”¹⁸: Grace as “Responsible”¹⁹

The story of the prodigal son is my favorite Biblical story of grace, because it provides me with a most remarkable picture of God. This is a God who runs to greet us after we have, in effect, told God to drop dead, then gone off to do our own thing. This is a God who throws a party for us before we even have a chance to explain. This is a God who embraces us before we have even had a chance to clean the stench off ourselves. This is a God who, when we are being mean-spirited, judgmental, and jealous, loves us anyway. As one member of my congregation answers the question, What is grace?: “God’s unconditional love and acceptance of me *regardless of my actions*.” The many people who define grace as a variation on the theme of unconditional love are recording the message I have been preaching for five years in Lebanon.

While hearing the message of God’s unconditional love is really important, I realize I have dispensed a form of “cheap” grace to my congregation. Why? Because I have only talked about God’s unconditional love and have rarely made mention of our sin and responsibility. I now see this message as being at cross-purposes with what I believe to be the purpose of the church—the transformation of people into the image of Christ.

Recognition of my need to reexamine my message happened last Easter after listening to Cathy Grossman, the religion and ethics writer for *USA Today*, give a commentary on National Public Radio.²⁰ She was reflecting on what a tough sell Jesus is in today’s popular culture. Since we do not see ourselves as sinful people, she said, we

18. R. Larry Shelton, “The Trajectory of Wesleyan Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 21 no. 1, 2 (Spring–Fall 1986): 159-175.

19. This is the term Randy L. Maddox uses. Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingwood Books, 1994).

20. Weekend Edition Sunday, National Public Radio. April 15, 2001.

certainly do not need Jesus to save us from our sins. We may admit to a few goofs, she said, but we forgive ourselves “in a Bill Clinton minute.” We live in a time of “upbeat universalism,” said Grossman. “God helps those who help themselves; good people can overcome their failings, and our beliefs have no eternal consequences.” So, when it comes to Jesus, Grossman said, if we think of him at all, we find ourselves asking, “What is so awful about us that Jesus had to die? Couldn’t he have just gone without supper for a few days? Really, Christ, you shouldn’t have bothered.” She ended by saying that on this Easter Sunday, most of popular culture will be thinking of some nice fellow named Jesus who went to a lot of trouble just so we could all eat some Cadbury Crème Eggs.

I realized I had been contributing to this problem by exclusively emphasizing God’s unconditional grace and shortchanging our sin and responsibility. What Cathy Grossman was saying about Jesus could apply to grace as well. In a time of “upbeat universalism” one can very well ask, “Grace—who needs it?”

Wesley would say about my preaching of unconditional love:

Is it not most pleasing to me as well as to you to be always preaching of the love of God?...But yet it would be utterly wrong and unscriptural to preach of nothing else...The bulk of our hearers must be purged before they are fed; else we only feed the disease. Beware of all honey. It is the best extreme, but it is an extreme.²¹

I needed a more balanced message, a corrective to focusing exclusively on God’s unconditional love. As I began my initial study of grace for this dissertation, I was introduced to the first critical aspect of John Wesley’s understanding of grace for our purposes of transformational spirituality. It is *responsible grace*. It is the corrective I, and

21. John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols., ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 3:34 (hereafter cited as *Letters* (Telford)).

my congregation, need. I have Randy Maddox and John Cobb to thank for educating me on this aspect of John Wesley's grace.

Maddox and Cobb write that from Wesley's viewpoint, God's love is for all, but it is only in our response to that love, a response that is enabled by God's power, that we will be transformed and ultimately saved. This is what Randy Maddox has termed responsible grace. As Randy Maddox writes in *Responsible Grace*,

I discerned in Wesley's work an abiding concern to preserve the vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity: without God's grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God's grace *will* not save. I have chosen to designate this as a concern about "responsible grace." The formulation of this designation is quite specific. It focuses on Wesley's distinctive concern on the nature of God and God's actions, rather than on humanity. It makes clear that God's indispensable gift of gracious forgiveness and empowerment is fundamental, while capturing Wesley's characteristic qualification of such empowerment as enabling rather than overriding human responsibility.²²

John Cobb quotes from John Wesley's sermon on "The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God," then sums up Wesley's emphasis on responsible grace beautifully:

...the life of God in the soul of a believer is...the continual inspiration of God's Holy Spirit: God's breathing into the soul, and the soul's breathing back what it first receives from God...It plainly appears God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul re-acts upon God....He will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again...

This combination of emphases on the primacy of grace, the inability of human nature to do anything good, and the full responsibility of the human person to respond appropriately to God's gift and call are at the heart of Wesley's theology.²³

As I read their words, I find myself thinking about a hymn by Charles Wesley I had grown up singing, "Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast." I realize I have been singing

22. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 19.

23. John Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995), 40, 41.

about responsible grace for years. The hymn expresses the notion of our sinfulness, a notion that my “upbeat universalism” has been ignoring. It expresses the pardon and forgiveness God has given us in Jesus Christ and our need to respond to God’s gracious gift. Charles puts his brother John’s theology into verse as he writes,

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
let every soul be Jesus’ guest.
Ye need not one be left behind,
for God hath bid all humankind.

Sent by my Lord, on you I call;
the invitation is to all.
Come, all the world! Come, sinner thou!
All things in Christ are ready now.

Come, all ye souls by sin oppressed,
ye restless wanderers after rest;
ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind,
in Christ a hearty welcome find.

My message as from God receive;
ye all may come to Christ and live.
O let his love your hearts constrain,
nor suffer him to die in vain.

This is the time, no more delay!
This is the Lord’s accepted day.
Come thou, this moment, at his call,
and live for him who died for all.²⁴

Coming Home to Wesley: Grace as Therapeutic

I first heard the terms “prevenient grace,” “justifying grace,” and “sanctifying grace” when I was twelve years old in my confirmation class. It is hard for me to imagine anyone becoming a United Methodist and not being given at least a perfunctory lesson on

24. Charles Wesley, *The United Methodist Hymnal* “Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast” (Nashville, Tenn.: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), # 339. (hereafter cited as *Hymnal*).

these words, which constitute Wesley's *Via Salutis* or way of salvation. I did not realize it at the time, but I was being taught at a young age that grace is *therapeutic*, that it has the power to heal our brokenness.

Wesley's definition of grace is twofold. At times he means the "undeserved favor,"²⁵ mercy, and free love of God. This is the aspect of grace that my congregation is most aware of, as reflected in their definitions of grace. In other instances grace, for Wesley, is the actual power, help, or energy of God. The former is expressed through Jesus Christ; the latter through the person of the Holy Spirit. Harald Lindström claims that "it is not the idea of solace, but the idea of power that moulds Wesley's conception of grace."²⁶ And Lycurgus Starkey emphasizes that when Wesley speaks of grace, "the term is used as an equivalent for the Holy Spirit who is continually breathing his presence into the soul of man." Starkey considers Wesley's belief in the empowering nature of the Holy Spirit to be Wesley's major contribution to the Protestant doctrine of grace.²⁷

Concerning the relationship of the two kinds of grace, Wesley writes:

As soon as ever the grace of God in the former sense, his pardoning love, is manifested to our souls, the grace of God in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit, takes place therein. And now we can perform, through God, what to man was impossible.²⁸

Wesley's understanding of grace as the power of the Holy Spirit within us is key to understanding how grace is *therapeutic*.

25. John Wesley, "Salvation by Faith [1738]," in *Works*, 1:117.

26. Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Stockholm: Nya Bokförlags Aktiebolaget, 1946), 123.

27. Lycurgus M. Starkey, Jr., *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 36–37.

28. John Wesley in Robert V. Rakestraw, "John Wesley as a Theologian of Grace," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (June 1984): 195.

To give some context, Wesley believed the purpose of the Christian life is our transformation into the image of Christ, where we are able to fully love God and fully love our neighbors. We see this expressed in his “marks of a Methodist.” Our transformation into the image of Christ is the Eastern concept of *theosis*. As Stavropoulos writes of theosis,

In the Holy Scriptures, where God Himself speaks, we read of a unique call directed to us. God speaks to us human beings clearly and directly and He says: “I said, ‘You are gods, sons of the Most High – all of you.’” (Psalm 82:6 and John 10:34)...As human beings we each have this one, unique calling, to achieve Theosis. In other words, we are each destined to become a god; to be like God Himself, to be united with Him...This is the purpose of your life; that you be a participant, a sharer in the nature of God and in the life of Christ, a communicant of divine energy...²⁹

The influence of such early church fathers as Macarius, Chrystolom, and St. Gregory³⁰ over Wesley is seen in his emphasis on the *therapeutic* nature of grace, rather than a more juridical, legal aspect. In other words, it is seen in his belief that grace is primarily for the inward healing of our nature as opposed to something that is just externally applied. As Maddox writes,

...the soteriology of the main strands of Western Christianity (both Protestant and Roman Catholic) came to be characterized by a dominant *juridical* emphasis on guilt and absolution, while Eastern Orthodox soteriology typically emphasized more the *therapeutic* concern for healing our sin-diseased nature. The point is that these scholars have become convinced that the defining emphasis of Wesley’s understanding of sin and Christian life is also therapeutic and they see his exposure to early Greek theologians as part of the explanation for this. My ongoing dialogue with Wesley convinced me that he is indeed best understood as one fundamentally committed to the therapeutic view of Christian life.³¹

29. Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers in the Divine Nature* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1976), 17–18.

30. Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley*, A Library of Protestant Thought Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 9.

31. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 23.

Wesley believed that our transformation is uncoerced. It is a joint effort between the Holy Spirit and our response to the Holy Spirit's promptings. This view is evident in "Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast." It is up to us to respond and we are able to respond because God has made us response-able. And now, where *responsible grace* meets *therapeutic grace*: it is in our responding to God's undeserved grace that we grow in grace, grow in our likeness to Christ, and continue on the path of theosis. A verse from another Charles Wesley hymn that I have sung since childhood expresses this well:

Finish, then, thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.³²

Developing a Curriculum of Responsible and Therapeutic Grace to Promote Transformational Spirituality

The goal of my research is to develop an educational tool to teach the Wesleyan concept of grace as responsible and therapeutic. Part of the curriculum needs to communicate Wesley's understanding of the way of salvation, which for him was enabled and empowered by grace. There needs to be a strong emphasis on what I believe are the two key aspects of Wesley's understanding of grace for transformational spirituality: grace as responsible and grace as therapeutic. Wesley's ideas need to be taught clearly, as

32. Charles Wesley, *Hymnal*, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," #384.

Dallas Willard discusses at the conclusion of his book, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*.³³

This discussion may sometimes have seemed remote, scholarly or merely philosophical. It is an unavoidable fact, however, that *what we do or do not understand, in any area of our lives, determines what we can or cannot believe and therefore governs our practice and action with an iron hand*. You cannot believe a blur or a blank, and the blanks in our understanding can only be filled in by careful instruction and hard thinking. It will not be done on our behalf.³⁴

Those who participate in the class will be encouraged to do some hard thinking as we seek to understand Wesley's concept of grace as responsible and therapeutic with the aim of this impacting our beliefs and, ultimately, our practices.

The curriculum needs to provide not only educational knowledge of Wesley's understanding of grace, but also the encouragement and opportunity to reflect theologically through the lens of responsible and therapeutic grace, and to use Wesley in this way as a "theological mentor."³⁵ This will be done in two ways: First, by giving the

33. Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 193; previously published under the title *In Search of Guidance* in 1984 by Regal Books.

34. Ibid., 193.

35. This term is Maddox's. He expresses the hope that his book *Responsible Grace* will cause "Wesley's modern descendant's to reconsider him as a 'theological mentor.'" Maddox continues: "But this poses for me a crucial question: What would it mean to take Wesley as a mentor? Or how would one engage in authentic *Wesleyan* theological activity today?...the one thing that it certainly would *not* mean is simple collation and repetition of Wesley's theological pronouncements as a scholastic activity. Rather it would mean – at the very least – to bring theological activity into the service of nurturing contemporary Christian life and witness, just as he did. I believe that it would also mean to bring the orienting concern of *responsible grace* to that situation-related theological activity." (Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 256). Two wonderful examples of bringing Wesley as a theological mentor "into the service of nurturing contemporary Christian life and witness" are Walter Klaiber and Manfred Marquardt's *Living Grace: An Outline of United Methodist Theology* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2001) original title: *Gelebte Gnade. Grundriße einer Theologie der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus GmbH, 1993) and John Cobb's, *Grace and Responsibility*.

class members the opportunity to reflect on their own lives, and second, by utilizing five contemporary works on responsible and therapeutic grace.

Giving people a theological framework from which to process their experiences is all well and good. But ultimately, they need some tools of grace in their “tool kit.” Consequently, the curriculum needs to contain some “means of grace,”³⁶ to use Wesley’s term. He did not see his means as ends in themselves. Just praying, celebrating Holy Communion, reading the scriptures, fasting, or participating in a small group does not ensure your growth in grace. However, these are means by which God can enable you to grow.

So, here is my journey toward an understanding of responsible and therapeutic grace—both as John Wesley saw it and as it manifests itself in contemporary thought—and toward discovering how that grace can be communicated in a way that will unleash its power.

36. John Wesley, “The Means of Grace [1746],” in *Works*, 1:381.

CHAPTER TWO

JOHN WESLEY'S JOURNEY

In this chapter, we will look at the various influences that led John Wesley to see grace as *responsible* and *therapeutic*. He was shaped by England's social circumstances, the Church of England, his upbringing, his education, his life experience, and his devotional practices. All these elements worked together to lead him to the conclusion that, first of all, grace involves interaction between God and humanity—God empowers us, making us response-able, and we respond back, growing in grace as the dance repeats itself over and over. Secondly, the various influences led him to believe grace is therapeutic; in other words, it does not just cover up or make up for our sin, but its power transforms us from the inside out.

When John Wesley was five years old, some disgruntled parishioners of his father's church in Epworth, England, set fire to the parsonage. John was the last child to be rescued. His mother, Susanna Annesley Wesley, saw divine intervention in his rescue, writing that she would be "more particularly careful of the soul of this child, which God had so mercifully provided for."¹ She believed he was saved by God to achieve something great. Susannah was right. John Wesley was not a man without flaws; however, God was able to use him in a powerful way to start what began as a renewal movement within the Anglican Church, a movement that some claimed "spared England the kind of bloody revolution which France had experienced."²

1. Stanley Ayling, *John Wesley* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1979), 20.
2. D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meetings: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 29.

Albert C. Outler, the preeminent Wesley historian of our time, describes him like this:

He was a truly humble man, at home with great and small; he loved and was loved by little children everywhere. But he also commanded respect, even from the mobs, and was immensely popular with many of Britain's "plain people." He was a High Church Tory who made it a point to wear his clerical vestments whenever he preached, even in the fields. He also understood himself as an Anglican theologian with a special mission to teach the masses, well content for his teachings to be judged by the immemorial canons of "Scripture, reason and Christian antiquity."³

This complex and contradictory man was discounted for years as a theologian. After all, he had not developed a systematic theology, as all the great theologians had. Wesley's concern, according to Steve Harper, was "developing a faith that worked in everyday living."⁴ Thomas Langford writes, "In the theology of John Wesley...theology both derives from Christian experience and under-girds Christian experience. Practice and theory are held inseparably together."⁵ This union resulted in his movement providing "a new experience for thousands of faceless men and women—experiences of worth before God, of new dignity and status in intensive small groups, together with unaccustomed leadership roles, etc."⁶ As theologians have come to value theological reflection that is not just an academic exercise but is more practical and related to everyday life,⁷ John Wesley's stock as a theologian has risen. Let us examine the life of

3. Albert C. Outler, [Introduction to vol. 1 of *Works*] in *Works*, 1:11–12.

4. Steve Harper, *John Wesley's Message for Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 18.

5. Thomas A. Langford, *Methodist Theology* (Great Britain: Epworth Press, 1998), 3.

6. Albert C. Outler, "John Wesley as Theologian – Then and Now," *A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* 12 no. 4 (July 1974): 63-82.

7. Randy L. Maddox, "The Recovery of Theology as a Practical Discipline," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650.

this now-acknowledged theologian and discover the influences that led to his understanding of grace as *responsible* and *therapeutic*.

England and The Church of England in John Wesley's Day

At the beginning of Wesley's life in 1703, England was just entering its Industrial Revolution. Many people who had previously lived in the country moved into the cities to work in the mines and factories. Most of these people were impoverished and lived in squalid conditions. Disease, filth, backbreaking work, and hopelessness were a part of everyday life for many living in the cities in Wesley's England. "Wesley's England was a wretched contrast between the newly rich and the newly poor, with the growing miseries of the urban ghettos added onto the ancient inequities of the feudal past,"⁸ writes Outler. What we refer to today as a social conscience was not "a prevailing state of mind in Wesley's day. The Church of England preached that man's station in life was a reflection of his state of grace...in this world of little hope and options, John Wesley appeared on the scene."⁹

While those workers who moved into the cities became increasingly impoverished, those who owned the factories, mills, and mines were getting increasingly wealthy. A vast gap arose between rich and poor. The poor were not welcome in church, and the wealthy had no interest in it. A social commentator of Wesley's time lamented:

I suppose it will be granted that hardly one in a hundred among people of quality or gentry appears to act by any principle of religion; that great numbers of them do entirely discard it, and are ready to own their disbelief of all revelation in

8. Outler, "Wesley as Theologian," 69.

9. Wilson Engel, "Revival and Revolution," *Christian History Magazine* 2 no. 1 (1983): 8.

ordinary discourse. Nor is the case better among the vulgar, especially in the great towns.¹⁰

The Church of England at this time was complacent and self-satisfied, even encouraging the wealthy to ignore the poor and their plight. The churches were supported by the state. Of the 11,000 clergy who were paid to be pastors, 6,000 never even set foot in their own parishes.¹¹ Religion did not play a large part in the lives of the people, whether they were lay or clergy. “English religion was as dry as dust,” comments Michael Henderson.¹² It was in this context of dry, meaningless religion and impoverished, oppressed, ignored masses that John Wesley received his call to bring a spiritual revival to England.

John Wesley’s Parents

His early years as the son of a hard working and earnest, if fairly ineffectual, Anglican priest and a bright, organized, well-educated woman had a tremendous influence on Wesley. John’s father Samuel was a priest who took his calling seriously, too seriously at times for his own parish. He spent forty years in what he considered the exile of Epworth. His parishioners set fire to the rectory twice, maimed his cattle, and committed other acts of vandalism to his property.¹³ Samuel remained committed to his beliefs, even in the midst of the reviling persecution. John also faced much criticism, resentment, and misunderstanding in his life. He was probably encouraged by the example of his father’s willingness to stay the course when it would have been easier to relent or retreat.

10. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meetings*, 20.

11. *Ibid.*, 20.

12. *Ibid.*, 21.

13. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996), 12.

Samuel possessed a wide-reaching and liberal education and he encouraged his sons to read widely themselves. As his contemporary Charles Gildon wrote:

He was a man of profound knowledge, not only of the Holy Scriptures, of the councils, and of the Fathers, but also of every other art that comes within those called liberal. His zeal and ability in giving spiritual direction were great. With invincible power he confirmed the wavering, and confuted heretics. Beneath the genial warmth of his wit the most barren subject became fertile and divertive.¹⁴

He obviously influenced John's wide-reaching educational pursuits and helped develop his love for Scripture and the early church fathers.

John's mother, Susanna, who emphasized excellence in both academic and spiritual pursuits, is commonly believed to have had an even stronger influence on him than his father.¹⁵ Susanna was a remarkable woman who bore 19 children, provided them with their earliest education, was widely read herself, ran the household, ran prayer meetings in her husband's absence, and employed a methodical, disciplined approach to all her duties. She considered "self-will the root of all sins and misery, and so she taught her children that the essence of Christianity was doing God's will rather than their own."¹⁶ Henderson states that "[Susanna's] emphasis on personal discipline and spiritual submission became an essential component of John Wesley's educational strategy as he applied it, not to children, but to the urban masses who crowded into England's industrial centers."¹⁷

Susanna was also committed to the Puritan idea of the "care and cure of souls."

She visualized the family as "a little gathered church, where prayer, Bible-reading,

14. John A. Newton, *Susanna Wesley and the Puritan Tradition in Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1968), 78.

15. Yrigoyen, *Heart and Life*, 12.

16. Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meetings*, 36.

17. *Ibid.*, 37.

catechizing, and detailed personal instruction in the Christian faith provided a framework for the whole shared life of the home.”¹⁸ One of the ways she implemented this family church idea was by meeting individually with one or two of her children each night to determine how they were progressing in their spiritual lives. John’s evening was Thursday and he looked forward to this time with his mother. There were echoes of this in Wesley’s class meetings, where time was designated for people to share the state of their souls.

The seeds for his life as preacher and evangelist were sown at Epworth. Between the influences of both his parents, he was given a love for scripture, and for the Church of England’s prayer book, and a “respect for scholarship, the teachings of the church, the disciplines of the Christian life, and missions.”¹⁹

His Oxford Education and Experience

Even though his family was impoverished, John Wesley received the very best education of his day. While attending Oxford University he read Bishop Jeremy Taylor, Thomas à Kempis, and William Law. Their thoughts profoundly influenced the young John Wesley and brought him to his first formal conversion²⁰ experience. He describes it, among other places, in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*:

In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor’s *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*. In reading several parts of this book I was exceedingly affected, by that part in particular which related to “purity of intention.” Instantly I resolved to dedicate *all my life* to God, *all* my thoughts and words and actions, being thoroughly convinced there was no medium, but that *every* part of my life (not *some* only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or to myself; that is, in effect, to the devil...

18. Newton, *Susanna Wesley*, 53.

19. Yrigoyen, *Heart and Life*, 13.

20. Outler, *John Wesley*, 6.

In the year 1726 I met with à Kempis's *Christian Pattern*. The nature and extend of *inward religion*, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw that giving even *all my life* to God (supposing it possible to do this and go no farther) would profit me nothing unless I gave my *heart*, yea, *all my heart* to him.

I saw that "simplicity of intention and purity of affection," *one design* in *all* we speak or do and *one desire* ruling all our tempers, are, indeed, "the wings of the soul," without which she can never ascend to the mount of God.

A year or two after, Mr. Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* were put into my hands. These convinced me more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being *half a Christian*, and I determined, through his grace (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of) to be *all devoted* to God: to give him *all* my soul, my body and my substance.²¹

During these early years of his life, Wesley concentrated his efforts on what *he* needed to do to deserve salvation. He lived a disciplined life, which is seen most clearly through his participation in a club established by a small group of Oxford students, including his brother Charles. They were influenced by monastic practices, particularly those of the fourth-century desert fathers and mothers. The purpose of their group was to engage in Scripture reading, prayer, fasting, partaking of Holy Communion, and outreach, particularly to the poor and those in prison. The goal of their efforts was spiritual growth. It was not long before John became the leader of the "Methodists," the derisive descriptor conferred by fellow students who saw its members as inordinately devout at a time when spiritual devotion was rare.²²

21. John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, Part II," in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d ed., 14 vols., ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1979), 11:366, 367 (hereafter cited as *Works* (Jackson)).

22. Outler writes that various "clever and devastating" nicknames were given the group by "lax undergraduates" including "The Holy Club, The Reforming Club, Bible Moths, Methodists, Supererogation Men, Enthusiasts." (Outler, *John Wesley*, 8). The Holy Club is the name that stuck for the group at Oxford. However, for Wesley's movement, Outler writes, "*Methodist* was the label that stuck fastest. Wesley disliked it, but with characteristic aplomb, he accepted it as a badge of honor and proceeded to define 'the character of a Methodist' as one who really believes and lives 'the common principles of Christianity.'" (Ibid.)

One of the Methodists introduced John to the thought of the patristic fathers. As Taylor, à Kempis, and Law had provided him with the inspiration that brought about a conversion experience, so the thought of the Eastern Church fathers gave Wesley the inspiration for what would become a central aspect of his theology. He was most fascinated by the Eastern fathers' concept of "perfection as a process rather than a state."²³ As Albert Outler writes, "Thus it was that the ancient and Eastern tradition of holiness as *disciplined* love became fused in Wesley's mind with his own Anglican tradition of holiness as *aspiring* love, and thereafter was developed in what he regarded to the end as his own most distinctive doctrinal contribution."²⁴ This contribution is an understanding that grace needs to be co-operant, not something we passively receive, and that the more we co-operate with God, the more we will be healed. In other words, Wesley contributed the idea of grace as responsible and therapeutic. However, although he was synthesizing the patristic fathers' ideas with those of Taylor, à Kempis, and Law, he had not yet developed his personal thoughts on grace, let alone solidified them into a lasting doctrine.

Wesley gave his "landmark statement"²⁵ on the "'holy living' tradition of Jeremy Taylor, William Law, Thomas à Kempis, and the Eastern fathers"²⁶ in his sermon, "The Circumcision of the Heart." It is an example of "holiness as disciplined love." He writes:

None shall obtain the honour that cometh of God unless his heart be circumcised by faith, even a 'faith of the operation of God'; unless, refusing to be any longer led by his senses, appetites, or passions, or even by that blind leader of the blind, so idolized by the world, natural reason, he lives and 'walks by faith,' directs every step as 'seeing him that is invisible'...and governs all his desires, designs,

23. Outler, *John Wesley*, 9.

24. Ibid., 9, 10.

25. Outler, "Wesley as Theologian," 72.

26. Ibid., 72.

and thoughts, all his actions and conversations, as one who is entered in within the veil, where Jesus sits at the right hand of God.²⁷

However, as we will see below, Wesley's emphasis on "holy living" was about to prove inadequate and one-sided as he entered the next phase of his life.

The Mission to Georgia and the Moravians

In 1735 Wesley felt God's call to become a missionary to the Native Americans in Georgia. His unease over his spiritual state is seen in the words he wrote to a Georgia trustee: "My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathens."²⁸ His one-sided emphasis on "holy living" was proving to be inadequate. It is instructive that he speaks of "saving my own soul." He did not yet understand that grace is a partnership between God and humanity.

Wesley's Georgia experience turned out to be an unmitigated disaster, at least from a professional standpoint. He was not able to establish a connection with the Native Americans before he had to flee the colony under grand jury indictment because of a failed romance with a young woman. Eventually, a spiritual awakening arose out of the ashes of this disgrace as significant as the one he had had some years before at Oxford. This time it was not about what he could do to work out his own salvation; it was about what God could and indeed *had* to do for him. As a result, he was able to take a big step toward understanding grace as *responsible* and *therapeutic*.

27. John Wesley, "The Circumcision of the Heart [1732-1733]," in *Works*, 1:410.

28. John Wesley, letter to Dr. John Burton, Georgia Trustee, 10 October 1735, in *Works*, 25:439.

On the voyage to Georgia, Wesley had encountered a group of Moravians, who were German pietists. In the midst of a violent storm, when others had been fearful, the Moravians had appeared to be at complete peace, singing and reading Scripture.²⁹ This kind of faith, this inner assurance, was something Wesley longed for. He had devoted himself to outward disciplines for many years, yet he could not feel or trust God's love for him. He envied the Moravians their personal, experiential faith in God. As he wrote on the way home,

I went to America to convert the Indians; but Oh! Who shall convert me?...I asked long ago, what must I do to be saved? The Scripture answered, "Keep the commandments. Believe, hope, love; follow these tempers till thou hast fully attained, that is, till death, by all those outward works and means."³⁰

In other words, he had not discovered the means to save his own soul or to find the peace of the Moravians while in Georgia.

Two significant influences converged at this point in Wesley's life. The first was William Law, who "prescribed a model for a 'devout and holy life' in obedience to God's law, a model John Wesley respected and used throughout his life," according to Sondra Higgins Matthaei.³¹ The second is Peter Böhler, a Moravian pastor who Wesley met in February 1738. Martin Schmidt tells us that "He [Böhler] helped Wesley in an important way to rid himself of placing too great an emphasis upon a Christian ethic, and so from a certain restrictive factor which had been present in his striving after holiness. He made

29. Warren Thomas Smith, "Eighteenth Century Encounters: Methodist-Moravian," *Methodist History* 24 no. 3 (April 1986): 143.

30. John Wesley, journal entry, 24 January 1738, in *Works*, 18:211.

31. Sondra Higgins Matthaei, *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2000), 45.

him realize that a simple personal relationship to Jesus the Saviour is the heart of the relationship with God.”³²

Wesley and Böhler spent a great deal of time together from February until May of 1738, when Böhler went on his own missionary trip to the Carolinas. After countless hours of discussing “living faith” with Böhler, Wesley was moved to lash out against his longtime teacher, William Law. He blamed him for his faith crisis. In a letter dated May 14, 1738, Wesley accused Law of having an inadequate faith and blamed him for not telling Wesley that his faith was inadequate, as well.³³ The inadequacy, Wesley believed, was in not having a “living faith” in Jesus Christ. As Wesley records in his journal,

In my return to England, January 1738, being in imminent danger of death, and very uneasy on that account, I was strongly convinced that the cause of that uneasiness was unbelief, and that the gaining of a true, living faith, was the “one thing needful” for me. But still I fixed this faith on its right object: I meant only faith in God, not faith in or through Christ. Again, I knew not that I was wholly void of this faith, but only thought I had not enough of it.³⁴

Then on May 24, 1738, a date that every United Methodist has heard, Wesley attended a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. He describes what took place there in his journal:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change, which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death.³⁵

32. Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, 2 vols., trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), 1:241.

33. John Wesley, letter to Law, 20 May 1738, in *Works*, 25: 546-548.

34. John Wesley, journal entry, 24 May 1738, in *Works*, 18:247.

35. *Ibid.*, 18:250.

Aldersgate was not an isolated experience in Wesley's life. Wesley's experience at Aldersgate, insists Outler, "actually stands within a series of significant spiritual experiences, and is neither first nor last nor most climactic."³⁶ Wesley's "series of significant spiritual experiences" is important because it is consistent with his understanding of the Christian life as a process of growing in grace. And, as Yrigoyen adds, "Aldersgate did convince him that the holiness he sought does not begin with human striving but by trusting the pardoning and empowering grace of God in Christ."³⁷ Wesley had moved much closer to his eventual understanding of grace as responsible and therapeutic.

Robert Moore believes that Peter Böhler and Aldersgate had a transformational effect on Wesley's authoritarian image of a God who is to be obeyed. This image changed to one of a God who reaches out to us in love, no matter how undeserving we are.³⁸ For a brief time after his initial discovery of "living faith," Wesley's overemphasis on justification by faith alone led some to accuse him of giving human responsibility short shrift.³⁹ Before long, he was able to achieve the balance of responsible grace. Maddox sees this balance as Wesley's preservation of "the vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity: without God's grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God's grace *will not save*."⁴⁰

36. Outler, *John Wesley*, 14.

37 Yrigoyen, *Heart and Life*, 16.

38. Robert L. Moore, *John Wesley and Authority: A Psychological Perspective* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 104.

39. W. Stephen Gunter, *The Limits of 'Love Divine': John Wesley's Response to Antinomianism and Enthusiasm* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1989), 74.

40. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 19.

By 1740, all of the aforementioned influences from family, to Scripture, to the patristic fathers, to the desert fathers, to the classics, to the Anglican divines, to the Moravians, to the Reformers combined into what Outler considers “an integral and dynamic theology in which Eastern notions of *syntheleisis* (dynamic interaction between God’s will and man’s) were fused with the classical Protestant *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*, and with the Moravian stress upon ‘inner feeling.’”⁴¹

Wesley’s Calling as an Evangelist

All of the factors that had influenced Wesley’s life up until this point were now poised to converge and bring about his unusual calling. Wesley met George Whitefield when they were both members of the Oxford Holy Club. Whitefield was a dynamic, moving preacher who had taken his message to the slums of Kingswood and Bristol. Whitefield encouraged Wesley to come and see the results. What Wesley observed—coupled with the influence of reading about Jonathan Edwards’ success in America,⁴²—led him to enter the world of evangelism. As Wesley records in his journal,

At four in the afternoon, I submitted to the more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in the ground adjoining to the city to about three thousand people. The Scripture on which I spoke was this... “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”⁴³

Wesley was a spectacular success and, not only that, he loved it. He had discovered his calling. As he writes in his journal for July 28, 1757, “About noon I

41. Outler, *John Wesley*, 14.

42. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meetings*, 27.

43. John Wesley, journal entry, 2 April 1739, in *Works*, 19:46.

preached at Woodseats, in the evening at Sheffield. I do indeed *live* by preaching!”⁴⁴ He saw preaching as the principal means by which he could communicate his message of the need for holy living. This calling led Wesley to travel over 250,000 miles on horseback and to preach over 44,000 times in the next fifty years. He wisely coupled his preaching with the innovative establishment of small groups, enabling people to support, nurture, and encourage one another in the pursuit of holiness.

Even though Wesley was a highly educated man, when he was preaching to miners who had come up from a mine or to mill workers who had gathered in a field near the desperately impoverished places they called homes, he vowed “to forget all that ever I have read in my life.”⁴⁵ He wanted to proclaim “plain truth for plain people.”⁴⁶ And, from all accounts, he connected with them extraordinarily well. In addition to his clear, forthright communication, he appealed to the underclass of the day with his message of salvation that is available to all. He also connected by coming to them; he delivered the message of salvation on their turf. This was important because the people he reached would not have been welcome in many Anglican churches.

Another important way John communicated his message was through the hymns of his brother Charles. Outler writes that

from the days of the Holy Club, Charles Wesley had been an almost constant companion to his brother, and his contributions to the Methodist Revival—in his remarkably effective preaching but chiefly in his incomparable facility as a hymn-writer—were very substantial indeed. One may speak realistically of the theology of John in the hymns of Charles Wesley.⁴⁷

44. John Wesley, journal entry, 28 July 1757, in *Works*, 21:118.

45. John Wesley, “Preface to Sermons,” 1746, in *Works*, 1:104.

46. Ibid.

47. Outler, *John Wesley*, 18.

Yrigoyen concurs: “He [John] had great respect for the hymns of the church and a special regard for those written by his brother Charles, which were permeated with scriptural teaching, stirred people’s faith, and knit the Methodists together in a worshipping and ministering community.”⁴⁸

Lastly, he appealed to the underclass through implementing small groups. Modeling these small groups after his experiences with the Anglican religious societies of his day, the Moravian groups he had been a part of, and the Oxford Holy Club, was a stroke of genius. He had a small group for everyone, from the struggling sinner to the advanced saint. Wesley preached the message of *responsible, therapeutic grace* and then, through the accountability and support of these small groups, provided a means by which this message could be actualized.

Wesley’s Means of Grace Provided Strength for his Journey of Responsible and Therapeutic Grace

Wesley believed these small groups were one of five “instituted means of grace” in Jesus’ life. The others were the Lord’s Supper, prayer, fasting, and scripture.⁴⁹ Wesley employed these means of grace throughout his life. He celebrated the Eucharist as often as possible. He spent hours in prayer each day. He fasted once a week. As for scripture, he described himself as a “man of one book,”⁵⁰ even though he had read extensively and published approximately six hundred works of his own.

Wesley also believed in and practiced “prudential means of grace.” Whereas he viewed the instituted means of grace as timeless and universal, Wesley believed these

48. Yrigoyen, *Heart and Life*, 24,25.

49. Harper, *John Wesley’s Message for Today*, 19.

50. John Wesley, “Preface to Sermons,” 1746, in *Works*, 1:105.

prudential means of grace were variable from age to age and from situation to situation. Such means could vary, notes Ole Borgen, “according to the person’s needs and the circumstances, thus showing Wesley’s simple concern for man’s particular historical situation.”⁵¹ Henry Knight’s list of several prudential means of grace give us further insight into the devotional practices of John Wesley, for he practiced them regularly:

1. Particular rules or acts of Holy Living
2. Class and Band Meetings
3. Prayer meetings, covenant services, watch night services, love feasts
4. Visiting the sick
5. Doing all the good one can, doing no harm
6. Reading devotional classics and all edifying literature⁵²

Wesley’s employment of both instituted and prudential means of grace informed and inspired his theology and ministry. The means kept his faith alive and growing until the end. They enhanced his “*response-ability*” and facilitated his *therapeutic, transformational* growth into the image of Christ.

The End of Wesley’s Earthly Journey

When John Wesley died in 1791, *The Gentleman’s Magazine* printed a eulogy that gives us not only an idea of how he was viewed by the upper classes of his contemporaries, but also of his extraordinary contribution:

51. Ole E. Borgen, “John Wesley: Sacramental Theology, No Ends Without the Means,” in *John Wesley: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. John Stacey (London: Epworth Press, 1988), 105.

52. Henry Hawthorn Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: A Contemporary Understanding of John Wesley’s Means of Grace* (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1987), 7.

Whatever may be the opinions held by his inspiration, it is impossible to deny him the merit of having done infinite good to the lower classes of the people. By the humane endeavors of him and his brother Charles a sense of decency in morals and religion was introduced in the lowest classes of mankind, the ignorant were instructed and the wretched relieved and the abandoned reclaimed...He met with great opposition from many of the clergy and unhandsome treatment from the magistrates...He was one of the few characters who outlived enmity and prejudices, and received in his later years every mark of esteem from every denomination...His personal influence was greater perhaps than any private gentleman in the country. All the profit from his literary labors, all that he could receive or collect (and it amounted to an immense sum) was devoted to charitable purposes. Instead of being an ornament to literature, he was a blessing to his fellows; instead of the genius of the age, he was the servant of God.⁵³

This remarkable man died proclaiming, “The best of all, God is with us,” and singing the words of Isaac Watts, “I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath...” until he was so weak he could only repeat, over and over, “I’ll praise....”⁵⁴ He may not have achieved the perfection he sought. However, he had traveled an incredible distance from the rather desperate, doubt-ridden young scholar who strove to save himself through good works to the faith-full evangelist whose soul was at peace with God. His was a journey of responsible, therapeutic grace.

Now that we know Wesley’s background, including some of his life experiences and some of the ideas that influenced him, we can examine his theology of grace as *therapeutic* and *responsible*. We will do so in the next chapter.

53. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meetings*, 159.

54. Ayling, *John Wesley*, 315.

CHAPTER THREE

GRACE AS RESPONSIBLE AND THERAPEUTIC

We need to address the problem of “upbeat universalism” and we need to find an alternative understanding of grace, one that will encourage transformation into the image of Christ. John Wesley’s *responsible and therapeutic grace*, which we will explore in this chapter, seems like an appropriate corrective. Two important themes are threaded throughout Wesley’s understanding of grace: 1) God and humanity are in this together, for true grace requires divine-human interaction and response; and 2) God’s grace is therapeutic, changing us from within, as opposed to being something that can just be externally applied.

After exploring those themes, we will look at how Wesley perceived the natures both of God and of humanity. Wesley believed in God’s loving nature and in his healing role; this belief was juxtaposed with his belief in human depravity. Both of these, taken together, form an important part of the picture of Wesley’s responsible and therapeutic grace.

Next, we will examine Wesley’s *Via Salutis*, or way of salvation, which will give us insight into how he translated his notion of responsible and therapeutic grace into a theological construct of salvation. Finally, we will review the instituted and prudential means of grace. For Wesley, these means of grace were ways in which Christians can be responsive to God and, consequently, be healed.

A Simple Definition of Grace From a Wesleyan Perspective

Grace is a difficult term to define. The members of my congregation came against this reality when they were asked to define grace. The vast majority of the responses had to do with “unconditional love,” while a few responses diverged in creative ways, such as, “what we say before meals.” These two responses show the wide variety of ways the term “grace” can be used. Richard Heitzenrater gives insight into why it is so difficult to define grace and where some of the confusion comes from:

A large proportion of writers, from biblical times to the present, use the term “grace” without providing a careful philosophical or theological definition. Grace is often described by such terms as free, unmerited, or prevenient, or justifying, or sanctifying, or saving, as if those adjectives determine or define the nature of grace. Grace is portrayed as a gift, but it is also seen as bestowing gifts. It is the source of salvation but also the consequence of salvation...¹

How, then, would Wesley define grace? Can we, amidst the confusion of adjectives and attributes used to define grace, see what grace was for Wesley? Wesleyan scholars seem to agree that for Wesley, grace was “undeserved favor”² and empowerment, or pardon and power. Pardon is the undeserved mercy and love of God, as manifested in the sacrifice of Jesus. Power is the work of the Holy Spirit within us, giving us the ability to change into the image of God. Wesley himself

describes the relationship of the two thus:

By ‘the grace of God’ is sometimes to be understood that free love, that unmerited mercy, by which I, a sinner, through the merits of Christ am now reconciled to God. But in this place it rather means that power of God the

1. Richard P. Heitzenrater, “God with Us: Grace and the Spiritual Senses in John Wesley’s Theology,” in *Grace Upon Grace: Essays in Honor of Thomas A. Langford*, ed. Robert K. Johnston, L. Gregory Jones, and Jonathan R. Wilson (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1999), 89.

2. John Wesley, “Salvation by Faith [1738],” in *Works*, 1:117.

Holy Ghost which 'worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.' As soon as ever the grace of God (in the former sense, his pardoning love), is manifested to our souls, the grace of God (in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit), takes place therein. And now we can perform, through God, what to man was impossible.³

Wesley was not unique in his view of grace as pardon and power. However, as we will see during our discussion of his understanding of grace, it was his emphasis on the empowerment of grace (which is a more Eastern understanding) that set him apart from the Reformers, who emphasized pardon. Lycurgus Starkey believes that Wesley's emphasis on the power of God's grace, administered through the Holy Spirit, was his major contribution to the Protestant understanding of grace.⁴

To help us understand the difference between the typical Protestant and Eastern understandings of grace, and the role of the Holy Spirit in each, Maddox writes, "Protestants have typically understood grace to be primarily God's extrinsic act of forgiveness. If they include the notion of power for obedient life, it is typically understood as a 'supernatural' power that irresistibly reforms human nature."⁵

According to Maddox, this is in contrast to the Eastern church that believes:

while grace enables a realization of God-likeness that we could not achieve on our own, it does not act irresistibly or extrinsic to our cooperation. [And] in contrast with the Western distinction between the Spirit and grace, Orthodoxy views grace as the actual, though not exhaustive, presence of God's Spirit rejuvenating human life."⁶

Wesley's Eastern understanding, both of the co-operant power of grace to transform human life and of grace as the actual Presence of the Holy Spirit, makes his

3. John Wesley, "The Witness of Our Own Spirit [1746]," in *Works*, 1:309.

4. Starkey, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 36–37.

5. Randy Maddox, "John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences and Differences," *Asbury Theological Journal*, 45 no. 2 (Fall 1990): 37.

6. Ibid.

view of grace *responsible* and *therapeutic*. We will see these two threads of responsible and therapeutic grace woven into Wesley's belief about salvation.

Wesley's View of God

A good summary of Wesley's view of God is contained in the following hymn by his brother Charles. We see portrayed a God who is the eternal Creator; a God who is all present, all knowing, and all-powerful; a God who is merciful, gracious, and loving:

Hail! Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
One God, in Persons Three!
Of Thee we make our early boast,
Our songs we make of Thee.

Thou neither canst be felt, or seen;
Thou art a Spirit pure,
Who from eternity hast been,
And always shalt endure.

Present alike in every place
Thy Godhead we adore,
Beyond the bounds of time and space
Thou dwell'st for evermore.

In wisdom infinite Thou art,
Thine eye doth all things see;
And every thought of every heart
Is fully known to Thee.

Whate'er Thou wilt, in earth below
Thou dost, in heaven above:
But chiefly we rejoice to know
The' almighty God is Love.

Thou lov'st whate'er Thy hands have made;
Thy goodness we rehearse,
In shining characters display'd
Throughout our universe.

Mercy, and love, and endless grace
O'er all Thy works doth reign;
But mostly Thou delight'st to bless
Thy favourite creature, man.

Wherefore, let every creature give
To Thee the praise design'd:
But chiefly, Lord, the thanks receive,
The hearts of all mankind.⁷

Charles beautifully expressed John's emphasis on God's attribute of love.

"Chiefly we rejoice to know the almighty God is love;" "Thou lov'st what'er Thy hands have made;" "Mercy, and love, and endless grace o'er all Thy works doth reign." As John wrote God is "a God of unblemished justice and truth: but above all is his mercy."⁸

Wesley's understanding of God as merciful and loving led to one of the ongoing theological debates in which he was engaged throughout his life. The subject was predestination. He saw it as blasphemous because it represented God as withholding her love from the majority of her children. Once again Charles articulated John's thoughts in verse (this time in the *Arminian Magazine*):

Tis thus, O God, they picture Thee,
Thy justice and Sincerity;
Thy truth which never can remove,
Thy bowels of unbounded Love:
Thy freedom of Redeeming Grace,
With-held from almost all the Race,
Made for Apollyon to devour,
In honour of thy Sovereign Power!⁹

Predestination was incompatible with Wesley's understanding of grace as responsible and therapeutic. It was incompatible with responsible grace because it

7. Charles Wesley, in *Works*, 7:367, 368.

8. John Wesley "The Unity of the Divine Being [1789]," in *Works*, 4:62.

9. Charles Wesley, "Address to the Calvinists," stanza 3, *Armenian Magazine* 3 (Aug. 1778): 383, 384.

was coercive, not co-operant. It was incompatible with therapeutic grace because it was salvation externally applied to a few chosen ones.

Wesley valued God's role as "the great Physician of souls,"¹⁰ which reflected Wesley's *therapeutic* emphasis regarding sin and the Christian life. He writes that "the proper nature of religion, of the religion of Jesus Christ [is] God's method of healing a soul which is *diseased*. Hereby the great Physician of souls applies medicine to heal *this sickness*; to restore human nature, totally corrupted in all its faculties."¹¹ God gives us grace and the ability to respond to that grace so we can be not just forgiven, but changed, transformed, *indeed healed*.¹²

While Wesley's sermons tell his listeners about God's nature and roles, they do not mention "proof" for the existence of God. Wesley believed that giving intellectual arguments was not necessary because of God's direct intervention in our lives. As Colin Williams writes,

These [traditional arguments about the existence of God] are quite irrelevant, for God makes himself known directly; first in a preliminary way (through conscience) by prevenient grace, and then in a direct way (through the gospel) by convincing grace. The task therefore of theology and preaching is to explain God's immediate relation to man and to urge man to accept the grace by which God seeks to bring us to himself.¹³

Before we continue looking at the way God has made himself known directly and then at the relationship between God and humanity, I'd like to summarize this section in light of responsible and therapeutic grace. Wesley was convinced that God, whose primary characteristics are love and mercy, does not work irresistibly, as the

10. John Wesley, "Original Sin [1759]," in *Works*, 2:184.

11. Ibid.

12. There will be a more extensive discussion of Wesley's therapeutic emphasis in the section on sanctification.

13. Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1960), 42.

proponents of predestination believed, but co-operantly. This leaves humanity with *responsibility*. Since the “proper nature” of the Christian religion is the healing of our souls, grace becomes *therapeutic* as the “great Physician” works to restore us to health.

Wesley’s View of Humanity

We have seen what it is about God and God’s nature that makes responsible and therapeutic grace possible. Now, as we examine Wesley’s view of humanity, we will see why responsible and therapeutic grace is necessary.

In his sermon, “Justification by Faith,” Wesley states his belief regarding God’s original design for humanity:

In the image of God was man made; holy as he that created him is holy, merciful as the author of all is merciful, perfect as his Father in heaven is perfect. As God is love, so man dwelling in love dwelt in God, and God in him. God made him to be ‘an image of his own eternity,’ an incorruptible picture of the God of glory. He was accordingly pure, as God is pure, from every spot of sin. He knew not evil in any kind or degree, but was inwardly and outwardly sinless and undefiled.¹⁴

What a beautiful, optimistic view of humanity. As seen above, Wesley believed we were created in the moral image of God. He also believed we were created in the natural image of God. This belief can be seen in his sermon, “The Image of God,” where he writes that we are made in the image of God, “first in regard to his understanding. He was endued, after the likeness of his Maker, with a power of distinguishing truth from falsehood.”¹⁵ Wesley continues, “far greater and nobler was his second endowment, namely, a will equally perfect...His affections

14. John Wesley, “Justification by Faith [1746],” in *Works*, 1:184.

15. John Wesley, “The Image of God [1730],” in *Works*, 4:293.

were rational, even, and regular... man was what God is, Love.”¹⁶ Wesley considered liberty the third attribute that demonstrated the image of God in humanity. As he writes, “He was the sole lord and sovereign judge of his own actions.”¹⁷

Wesley did not believe we had totally lost the natural image of God.¹⁸ We still retained bits of understanding, will, and liberty, albeit in distorted and at times perverted forms.¹⁹ What we had lost completely was our moral image: “The life of God was extinguished in his soul. The glory departed from him. He lost the whole moral image of God, righteousness and true holiness. He was unholy; he was unhappy; he was full of sin, full of guilt and tormenting fears.”²⁰

The full extent to which Wesley believed we had fallen away from the image of God can be seen in his sermon “The Way to the Kingdom”:

Know thyself to be a sinner, and what manner of sinner thou art. Know that corruption of thy inmost nature, whereby thou art very far gone from original righteousness, whereby “the flesh lusteth” as always “contrary to the Spirit,” through that “carnal mind” which “is enmity against God,” which “is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” Know that thou art corrupted in every power, in every faculty of thy soul; that thou art totally corrupted in every one of these, all the foundations being out of course.²¹

Wesley’s view of humanity was about as negative and pessimistic as one could get. He believed human beings are “corrupted in every power, in every faculty of the soul.”²² As a matter of fact, we are so corrupted, so “sin sick,” that we “cannot

16. Ibid., 4:294.

17. Ibid., 4:295.

18. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1997), 30.

19. John Wesley, “The Image of God [1730],” in *Works*, 4:298.

20. John Wesley, “The End if Christ’s Coming [1781],” in *Works*, 2:477.

21. John Wesley, “The Way to the Kingdom [1746],” in *Works*, 1:225, 226.

22. Ibid., 1:226

discern God, or the things of God.”²³ Wesley’s basic understanding of human nature after the Fall had come from the Reformation, with a touch of the English Enlightenment and Roman Catholicism added in via the High Church Anglican tradition.²⁴

Wesley’s agreement with Luther and Calvin can be seen in their own descriptions of our condition after the Fall. Luther declares that original sin has led to “the loss of all uprightness...it is a proneness toward evil; the loathing of the good; the disdain for light and wisdom but fondness for error and darkness.”²⁵ Calvin states, “For our nature is not only destitute and empty of good, but so fertile and fruitful of very evil that it cannot be idle.”²⁶ Wesley, according to William Cannon, “goes all the way with Calvin, with Luther, and with Augustine in his insistence that man is by nature *totally* destitute of righteousness and subject to the judgment and wrath of God.”²⁷ However, Wesley differed with Calvin and Luther on how the gap was bridged between God and humanity.²⁸

In sum, Wesley has now given us a picture of humanity as sinful and incapable of acknowledging or even seeing God, let alone being capable of responding to God. This is juxtaposed with a picture of a gracious, just, merciful God who loves her creation—humankind—and desires its recovery of her image, but who

23. Ibid.

24. M. Elton Hendricks, “John Wesley and Natural Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18 (Fall 1983): 9.

25. Martin Luther, “Lecture on Romans,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 25: 67-68.

26. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 1:253.

27. William Ragdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), 200.

28 This will be addressed in the section on prevenient grace.

refuses to coerce a response. The dilemma—how to bridge the gulf between the two—is answered by Wesley’s understanding of grace as *responsible* and *therapeutic*. We will see the bridge between God and humanity as we turn next to Wesley’s way of salvation, which could also be called a journey of responsible and therapeutic grace.

Wesley’s Way of Salvation

Maddox contends “Not only did Wesley view growth in the Christian life as a continual possibility, it was his normative expectation.”²⁹ Wesley believed that this growth begins when God first reaches out to us, before we are even aware of God or of our eventual need to respond to this outreach; it ends with our being made perfect in love. In other words, the growth is never-ending.

John Wesley succinctly summarizes his process of salvation, which is a picture of responsible and therapeutic grace, in his sermon, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) *preventing* [*preventient*] *grace*; which includes the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by *convincing grace*, usually in Scripture termed *repentance*; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, “through grace,” we “are saved by faith”; consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God. All experience, as well as Scripture, show this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment, as “a grain of mustard seed, which, at first, is the least of all seeds,” but afterwards puts forth large branches, and becomes a great tree; till, in another

29. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 153.

instant, the heart is cleansed from all sins, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we “grow up in all things into Him that is our Head”; till we attain “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”³⁰

Outler summarizes Wesley’s order or way of salvation, highlighting for us the role of each member of the Trinity along the way:

The Christian gospel is a joyous word from God to man in the depths of his existence. It speaks of the origins and ends of human life, of God as ground and sustaining power of existence, of man under God’s command and blessing, of man in quandary and sin, of God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, of the Holy Spirit making for community of truly matured and fulfilled persons.³¹

We will look next at some of the stops along the way of the journey towards healing and salvation.

Prevenient Grace

Prevenient grace, or, as Wesley sometimes called it, “preventing grace” is how Wesley bridged the initial gap between God and humanity. Prevenient grace, writes Yrigoyen, “literally means the grace that ‘comes before.’ It is the grace of God that is ‘free in all and free for all’ and makes possible for everyone further response to God’s forgiving and reconciling grace.”³² It is the beginning of salvation for Wesley and it “includes the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him...[It] is the

30. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation [1785],” in *Works*, 3: 203, 204.

31. Outler, *Psychotherapy and the Christian Message* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 45–46.

32. Yrigoyen, *Heart and Life*, 108.

beginning of deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.”³³

It has been stated that no other theologian has given prevenient grace as important a role as Wesley,³⁴ and that it became more and more important to him as he grew older.³⁵ This is grace that reaches out to us before we are even aware of God. It is grace that gives us the first stirrings of conscience and the ability, albeit faint, of being able to respond to God. This is a grace that is given to all. As Irwin Reist puts it, “Wesley’s fundamental truth was the possible salvation of all men, who are totally depraved sinners, by the all-embracing grace of God in Christ.”³⁶ Prevenient grace is what makes possible the salvation of “totally depraved sinners” who are incapable of responding to God.

Prevenient grace allowed Wesley to maintain his belief in the total depravity of humanity *and* his belief in humanity’s free will. Wesley was disturbed by the Calvinistic concept of a sovereign God, who predetermines the actions his creatures. For Wesley, this concept was inconsistent with the message of the gospels and with his concept of a loving, merciful God.³⁷ Prevenient grace, freely given to all at the moment of birth, meant for Wesley that even though we are unable by ourselves to even recognize God, let alone respond to God, we have free will.

As Hendricks writes, “Prevenient grace has spanned the gulf (between God and humanity) and set man on the near edge of the stream, still in danger, but able to

33. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation [1785],” in *Works*, 3:203.

34. Hendricks, “John Wesley and Natural Theology,” 11.

35. *Ibid.*, 14.

36. Irwin W. Reist, “John Wesley’s View of Man: A Study in Free Grace versus Free Will,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 7 (1972): 25.

37. Outler, *John Wesley*, 426.

respond. At this point man *must* (and most significantly, *can*) trust in faith or he will slip into the torrent.”³⁸ Hendricks vividly depicts John Wesley’s understanding of both prevenient grace and the need for us to respond. Wesley himself reflects this in the following statement: “God worketh in you; therefore you *must* work: you must be ‘workers together with him’ . . . otherwise he will cease working.”³⁹

Whereas Calvinists believed some people seemed totally unresponsive to God because they did not possess grace, Wesley believed it was because they were not exercising the prevenient grace they had been freely given; a grace that, if accepted, would enable them to grow in grace. As he states in his sermon, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation”: “You can do something, through Christ strengthening you. Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace.”⁴⁰

This understanding has profound implications. As Umphrey Lee writes, “man exists as a natural man plus the Prevenient Grace of God. And this grace is not the forgiving favor of God granted in what the Reformed theologians called justification; this grace is the empowering grace.”⁴¹ Randy Maddox agrees:

Wesley adopted the western proclivity to term the guilty, powerless condition of fallen humanity our “natural” state. And yet, he was quick to add that no one actually exists in a state of “mere nature,” unless they have quenched the Spirit. At issue here is Wesley’s affirmation of a gift of prevenient grace to all fallen humanity. This grace removes the guilt inherited from Adam and re-empowers the human capacity to respond freely to God’s offer of forgiving and transforming grace.⁴²

38. Hendricks, “John Wesley and Natural Theology,” 11.

39. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation [1785],” in *Works*, 3:208.

40. Ibid.

41. Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville, Tenn.: Cokesbury, 1936), 125.

42. Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 35.

And the thought is reaffirmed, in Wesley's own words:

For allowing that all souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere *nature*; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the Grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called *natural conscience*. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, *preventing grace*... So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.⁴³

Where does this leave us? God, acting out of unmerited love, reaches out to all of us, no matter who we are. Through this prevenient grace, each of us has been given the capacity to know God and to respond to God (even though Wesley would allow that some are given more capacity than others). We are then called upon to respond by “[using] the grace which [we] hath.”

Prevenient grace restores our ability to see ourselves for who we are. Original sin made us spiritually blind,⁴⁴ prevenient grace opens our eyes and gives us understanding of our sinful condition. In his sermon, “Original Sin,” Wesley says, “As soon as God opens the eyes of their understanding, they see the state they were in before; they are then deeply convinced, that ‘every man living,’ themselves especially, is by nature, ‘altogether vanity;’ that is, folly and ignorance, sin and wickedness.”⁴⁵ Wesley states this positively in his sermon, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” when he writes,

The joy of a Christian does not arise from any *blindness of conscience*, from his not being able to discern good from evil. So far from it, that he was an utter stranger to this joy, till the eyes of his understanding were opened (Eph. 1:18), that he knew it not, until he had spiritual senses, fitted to discern spiritual good and evil.⁴⁶

43. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation [1785],” in *Works*, 3:207.

44. Wesley, “Original Sin [1759],” in *Works*, 2:176.

45. *Ibid.*, 2:176, 177.

46. Wesley, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit [1746],” in *Works*, 1:311.

In sum, prevenient grace is a critical component of *responsible* and *therapeutic grace*. This grace that “comes before” gives us the beginning of the ability to respond. We will see in the sections on sanctification and Christian perfection that as we continue to respond, grace’s therapeutic properties heal us from within.

Awakening

Wesley, with his understanding of grace as co-operant and never coercive, believed that we could be the recipients of prevenient grace and yet never be aware of it. As he states, “None will come to the Physician but they that are sick, and are thoroughly sensible of it.”⁴⁷ What are some ways that we can become “thoroughly sensible” of our diseased nature? Wesley tells us in his sermon, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” that we can become aware “by some awful providence, or by his Word applied with the demonstration of his Spirit, [for] God touches the heart of him that lay asleep in darkness and in the shadow of death. He is terribly shaken out of his sleep and awakes into a consciousness of his danger.”⁴⁸ As Collins writes,

Conviction may occur either within the church or beyond its walls. In particular, Wesley highlights the importance of hearing, and conversation—presumably with godly people—reading serious books, and meditating on what one reads. But if there is any one activity that Wesley elevates above the others in his writings, it is perhaps the clear and consistent proclamation of the Word of God.⁴⁹

47. John Wesley, “The Doctrine of Original Sin, Part II,” in *Works* (Jackson), 9:305.

48. John Wesley, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption [1746],” in *Works*, 1:255.

49. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, 50.

In sum, Wesley believed that if we are to be transformed, we must awaken to our need for healing. Since grace is responsible or co-operant, if we are not aware that we need God's grace, we are not going to set one foot on the path toward healing and wholeness. *Responsible and therapeutic grace* loses its power.

Repentance

Wesley believed that awakening to our need will lead us to repentance. Wesley's definition of repentance in his *The Complete English Dictionary* is instructive: "a thorough conviction of sin, an entire change of heart and life."⁵⁰ The two distinct parts of this definition point to Wesley's view that repentance is a process. There are two clear and distinct parts to this definition that point to repentance being a process for Wesley. As he states in "The Repentance of Believers,"

First, in what sense are we to repent? Repentance frequently means an inward change, a change of mind from sin to holiness. But we now speak of it in a quite different sense, as it is one kind of self-knowledge—the knowing ourselves sinners, yea, guilty, helpless sinners, even though we are children of God.⁵¹

In his sermon, "The Way to the Kingdom," Wesley writes, "repent, that is, know yourselves."⁵² This shows us Wesley's view of co-operant or responsible grace yet again. God reaches out to us in love with prevenient grace; we need to respond with contrition and repentance. We will then experience the therapeutic grace of "inward change, a change of mind from sin to holiness."⁵³

50. John Wesley, *The Complete English Dictionary*, 3d ed. (London: Hawes, 1777), s.v. "repentance."

51. John Wesley, "The Repentance of Believers [1767]," in *Works*, 1:336.

52. John Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom [1746]," in *Works*, 1:225.

53. Ibid.

In the beginning, our ability to respond will be limited. Wesley, because of the influence of Peter Böhler and the Moravians, initially assumed that once people understand their need for God's healing grace, the change will be instantaneous and complete. He soon discovered from his own experience that this was not always, or even usually, the case. After his Aldersgate experience, Wesley continued to have self-doubt and sinful impulses. From observing his own life and the lives of others within his revival movement, he came to the conclusion that for most Christians, the way of salvation is gradual.

Repentance, in Wesley's theology, is something that needs to happen over and over for people; it is not just something that happens once, upon their initial awareness of their fallen state. Wesley believed that unless we are constantly practicing responsible grace, we will regress. The state of salvation is not static and not to be taken for granted. And as Maddox writes, "Through this integral connection between our recognition of need and our awareness of God's pardoning *grace*, repentance within the Christian life revitalizes our continuing *responsible* growth in holiness."⁵⁴

An entire change of heart and life" is certainly a good summary of what Wesley felt every Christian was called to—a transformation, a metamorphosis into the image of God. This transformation is a life-long process. This is *therapeutic grace*. We will look at it more fully when we address sanctification.

54. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 165, 166.

Justification

For Wesley, initial repentance was “the very first motion of the soul towards God;”⁵⁵ he saw this first movement as the “porch” of religion.⁵⁶ If religion is a house and repentance is the porch, Wesley considered justification the door. Wesley’s *Dictionary*, which contains a number of very succinct definitions, defines justification as simply “forgiveness.”⁵⁷ In his sermon, “The Scriptural Way of Salvation,” he expands this definition a bit:

Justification is another word for pardon. It is the forgiveness of all our sins, and (what is necessarily implied therein) our acceptance with God. The price whereby this hath been procured for us (commonly termed the ‘meritorious cause’ of our justification) is the blood and righteousness of Christ, or (to express it a little more clearly) all that Christ hath done and suffered for us till ‘he poured out his soul for the transgressors.’⁵⁸

Jesus’ role in our justification is vitally important, according to Wesley. This idea is underscored by Watson when he writes that,

atonement is wholly God’s initiative in Christ, and it is complete. It is not the beginning of salvation—it *is* salvation...Because of Christ’s atoning passion, the sinner is completely forgiven and restored to favor in the sight of God...The condition of justification, however, is not as radical as its work. The work of justification is Christ’s and Christ’s alone.⁵⁹

Christ is at the heart of justification for Wesley. Christ is the one who is born so that we can be reconciled to God. In one of his most famous hymns, Charles

55. John Wesley, *The Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, vol. 1, (London: Bowyer, 1755; reprint ed., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), Acts 20:21. (Hereafter cited as *NT Notes*).

56. John Wesley, “Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained,” in *Works* (Jackson), 8:472.

57. John Wesley, *The Complete English Dictionary*, s.v. “forgiveness.”

58. John Wesley, “The Scriptural Way of Salvation [1765],” in *Works*, 2:157, 158.

59. David Lowes Watson, “The ‘Much-Controverted Point of Justification by Faith’ and the Shaping of Wesley’s Evangelistic Message,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 21 nos. 1 and 2 (Spring–Fall 1986): 10.

Wesley, once again, relates John's theology through verse as he testifies to the salvation Christ brings to us:

Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ, the everlasting Lord;
Late in time behold him come,
Off-spring of the virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the god-head see;
Hail th'incarnate Deity,
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King!"

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that we no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth,
Born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King!"⁶⁰

Justification: Instantaneous or Gradual?

In the midst of Wesley's crisis of faith, Böhler told him that when people are justified or converted, the change is instantaneous and recognizable by their peace and absence of sin. This led Wesley further into the crisis because he knew he had not had such an experience. Wesley states in "The Principles of a Methodist" that it was not Peter Böhler who convinced him that justification was instantaneous. Wesley did not blindly accept Böhler's view of justification. His belief came from scripture and others' experiences. As he writes,

I could not comprehend what he spoke of as *an instantaneous work*. I could not understand how this faith should be given in a moment; how a man could

60. Charles Wesley, *Hymnal*, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" (1739), # 240.

at once be thus turned from darkness to light...I searched the Scriptures again touching this very thing...to my utter astonishment I found scarce any instances there of other than *instantaneous* conversions...I had but one retreat left: "Thus, I grant, God wrought in the *first ages* of Christianity; but the times are changed. What reason have I to believe he works in the same manner *now*?"

But on Sunday 22 I was beat out of this retreat too, but the concurring evidence of several living witnesses who testified God *had thus wrought in themselves*; giving them *in a moment* such a faith in the blood of his son as translated them out of darkness into light, out of sin and fear into holiness and happiness. Here ended my disputing. I could now only cry out, "Lord, help thou my unbelief."⁶¹

At the 1753 Methodist conference, Wesley went so far as to claim that if people were the recipients of "scriptural preaching," ninety-nine out of a hundred would know the exact moment of their justification.⁶² Over the years, as Wesley reflected on his own life and the lives of his parishioners, he changed his mind. He saw that people's experiences of justification were much more variable than he had originally believed. As he wrote on October 30, 1785, to Mary Cooke, who was obviously concerned that she might not have had a "proper" or "correct" justifying experience:

There is an irreconcilable variability in the operations of the Holy Spirit on [human] souls, more especially as to the manner of justification. Many find Him rushing in upon them like a torrent, while they experience "The o'erwhelming power of saving grace"...But in others He works in a very different way: "He deigns His influence to infuse; Sweet, refreshing, as the silent dews." It has pleased Him to work the latter way in you from the beginning...in a gentle and almost insensible manner. Let Him take His own way: He is wiser than you; He will do all things well.⁶³

61. Ibid, 9:57, 58.

62. John Wesley, *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, from the First, held in London, by the Late Rev. John Wesley, A.M. in the Year 1744* vol. 1 (London: John Mason, 1862), 718.

63. John Wesley, letter to Mary Cooke, 30 October, 1785, *Letters* (Telford), 7:298.

Faith and Justification

In Wesley's time, there were several prominent and very distinct understandings of how people might be justified. Wesley definitely wanted to avoid being placed in the camp of those who believed in "works-righteousness," that in order to be justified people needed to earn their salvation through good works. He also had also become very uncomfortable with the "quietist" position of the Moravians,⁶⁴ who believed in waiting quietly for God to save. He also did not want to fall into the camp of those who believed that an assent to certain beliefs was all people needed for justification or pardon, with no evidence of changed lives. For Wesley, "the condition of justification is faith, and faith alone, which also comes directly from God as a gift—a sure confidence in the merits of Christ's Passion."⁶⁵ In "The Marks of the New Birth," Wesley defines justifying faith for us:

(Faith) is not a bare assent to this proposition, 'Jesus is the Christ'; nor indeed to all the propositions contained in our creed, or in the Old and New Testaments... For all this is no more than a dead faith. The true, living, Christian faith, which whosoever hath is born of God, is not only assent, an act of understanding; but a disposition, which God hath wrought in his heart; 'a sure trust and confidence in God, that, through the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he is reconciled to the favour of God.'"⁶⁶

Wesley sees faith, then, as more than something we possess through our intellect. It is also more than merely a subjective experience. Faith, for Wesley, is an objective experience⁶⁷—where we can really *feel*, really *experience* God's pardon through Christ. He states this in "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion":

Faith, according to the scriptural account, is the eye of the new-born soul. Hereby every true believer in God 'seeth him who is invisible.'...It is the ear

64. Outler, *John Wesley*, 347.

65. Watson, "Much-Controverted," 10.

66. John Wesley, "The Marks of the New Birth [1748]," in *Works*, 1:418.

67. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 173.

of the soul, whereby a sinner ‘hears the voice of the Son of God, and lives;’ ...It is the palate of the soul; for hereby a believer ‘tastes the good word.’ ...It is the feeling in the soul, whereby a believer perceives, through the ‘power of the Highest overshadowing him,’ both the existence and the presence of Him in whom ‘he lives, moves and has his being;’ and indeed the whole invisible world, the entire system of things eternal. And hereby, in particular, he feels ‘the love of God shed abroad in his heart.’⁶⁸

It is the “love of God shed abroad,” or the faith that justifies us. This is what Wesley calls “the door”⁶⁹ of religion; Wesley believes it will motivate us to continue on into the “house,”⁷⁰ which is sanctification, the next concept we will explore.

In sum, up until this point, we have seen that God reaches out to us in love through her prevenient grace in the form of the Holy Spirit. We are given just enough power to begin responding. God pardons us through Jesus and when we really experience the love that is shown in this action, and consequently have faith, we are born anew⁷¹ and begin the process of sanctification. In other words, *responsible grace* and *therapeutic grace* are finally able to intertwine completely.

Sanctification

Finally, we have come into the “house of religion” for Wesley. Steve McCormick believes that Luther’s predominant question, “How can I be justified or

68. John Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” in *Works* (Jackson), 8:4, 5.

69. *Ibid.*, 8:472.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Wesley suggests that the new birth is a bridge between justification and sanctification. However, his differentiation between justification and the beginning of regeneration (the new birth) gets a bit confusing. He writes that they are “different expressions denoting the same thing, and yet he says “justification and the new birth are in point of time inseparable from each other, yet they are easily distinguishable as being not the same, but things of a widely different nature. Justification implies only a relative, the new birth a real, change. God in justifying us does something *for* us; in begetting us again he does the work *in* us.” John Wesley, “The Great Privilege of Those that Are Born of God [1748],” in *Works*, 1:431–432.

pardoned?” was not Wesley’s. Wesley’s primary concern was “How can I be healed?”⁷² As Alexander Knox writes, “But what has John Wesley done? In my mind, in a manner unprecedented, he has not overlooked the forgiveness of sins, but he has, indeed, looked much above it, and beyond it...”⁷³ How has Wesley looked beyond justification, beyond the forgiveness of sins? By believing that grace is more than mere pardon, that it is a dynamic *process* that leads to our healing and transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴ In his emphasis, Wesley stands with the Eastern Orthodox.⁷⁵ McCormick states that “the most notable hallmark of eastern soteriology: salvation is not just what God does ‘for us’: it is also what God does ‘in us.’”⁷⁶ This thought is an echo of Wesley’s:

It is evident from what has been already observed, that justification is not the being made actually just and righteous. This is *sanctification*; which is, indeed, in some degree, the immediate *fruit* of justification, but, nevertheless, is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature. The one implies, what God *does for us* through His Son; the other, what He *works in us* by His Spirit.⁷⁷

72. Steve McCormick, “Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley: An Eastern Paradigm on Faith and Love,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 26 no. 1 (Spring 1991): 42.

73. Alexander Knox, *Remains of Alexander Knox, Esq.*, 4 vols. (London: Duncan and Malcolm, 1844), 3:162. (4 vols; London: Duncan and Malcolm, 184

74. Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 37.

75. It is important to note there are scholars who believe that John Wesley’s predominately Eastern understanding of soteriology can be found in Anglican spirituality. See Allchin, Collins, Ramsey and Shonz. For example, there is Bishop William Beveridge, who wrote, “He [Jesus] did not only merit by His death that I should never die for sin, but likewise that I should die to it. Neither did He only merit by His life that I should be accounted righteous in Him before God, but likewise that I should be made righteous in myself by God.” William Beveridge, *The Theological Works of William Beveridge, D.D.* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1852), 8:174. VIII: 174.

76. McCormick, “Theosis,” 47.

77. John Wesley, “Justification by Faith [1746],” in *Works*, 1:187.

John Meyendorff's words on Eastern Christianity echo Wesley's

understanding of the *responsible* process and *therapeutic* goal of sanctification:

Whether one deals with Trinitarian or Christological dogma, or whether one examines ecclesiology and sacramental doctrine, the main stream of Byzantine theology uncovers the same vision of man, called to "know" God, to "participate" in His life, to be "saved," not simply through an extrinsic action of God's or through the rational cognition of propositional truths, but by "becoming God." There is then no mystery in the fact that as they conceive salvation they perceive its goal and its process as inseparable. The "foundation of faith" is inseparable from the "fullness of faith" because the goal (which is to "know God," to be renewed in the *imago dei*) is that which shapes the process (which is a matter of divine-human participation) of *theosis*.⁷⁸

We return, yet again, to the notion of *responsible grace*, of the divine-human participation we saw in Wesley's notion of prevenient grace—"First, God worketh in you, therefore you can work...Secondly, God worketh in you, therefore you *must* work."⁷⁹ Wesley is saying that our transformation, our sanctification, is not something that just "happens." As Eastern theologian Vladimir Lossky writes, our sanctification "is not the result of an organic or unconscious process: it is accomplished in persons by the cooperation of the Holy Spirit and our freedom."⁸⁰ In other words, the *responsible grace* found in the "cooperation of the Holy Spirit and our freedom" meets the *therapeutic grace* found in being "renewed in the *imago dei*."

At this point, it is important to clarify Wesley's view of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit's role in sanctification. First of all, Wesley understood the Holy Spirit in this way:

78. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 3.

79. John Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation [1785]," in *Works*, 3:206, 208.

80. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystery Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 216.

I believe the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy...but the immediate cause of all holiness in us: enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of the adoption of sons, leading us in our actions, purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies to a full and eternal enjoyment of God.⁸¹

A number of scholars affirm the Holy Spirit's pivotal role in Wesley's theology. For example, according to Staples, not only did Wesley feel that the Holy Spirit is "equal with the Father and the Son," but that the Spirit is "none other than the personal God himself in His outgoing relational activity."⁸² Randy Maddox writes that Wesley "placed the Spirit at the center of his understanding of the Christian life... Wesley *equated* the Holy Spirit with God's gracious empowering Presence restored through Christ."⁸³ Starkey says that Wesley saw the Holy Spirit as "a living, active, 'personal,' presence who enters into an intimate interpersonal fellowship with man, and is addressed as a recipient of prayer, praise and worship."⁸⁴

We can see the truth of all three scholars' words in Wesley's sermon, "The New Birth." His words provide a vivid image, not only of the power and place of the Holy Spirit in sanctification, but also of our responsible role.

The [enlivened person] 'feels in his heart' 'the mighty working of the Spirit of God'...; he is inwardly sensible of the graces which the Spirit of God works in his heart...By the use of these, he is daily increasing in the knowledge of God, of Jesus Christ whom he hath sent, and of all the things pertaining to his inward kingdom. And now he may properly be said *to live*...God is continually breathing, as it were, upon his soul and his soul is breathing unto God. Grace is descending into his heart, and prayer and praise ascending to heaven. And by this intercourse between God and man, this fellowship with the Father and the Son, as by a kind of *spiritual respiration*, the life of God in

81. John Wesley, "A Letter to a Roman Catholic," in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler, 495.

82. Rob L. Staples, "John Wesley's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 21 nos. 1 and 2 (Spring-Fall 1986): 92.

83. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 119.

84. Starkey, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 26.

the soul is sustained and the child of God *grows up*, till he comes 'to the full measure of the stature of Christ.'⁸⁵

In sum, as an end result of God “continually breathing” upon our souls and our response of “prayer and praise,” we grow “to the full measure of the stature of Christ.” In other words, the *responsible grace* of spiritual respiration leads to the *therapeutic grace* of transformation into Christ’s image. Wesley believed that we should not settle for anything less. That is why he felt the natural extension of sanctification was Christian perfection.

Christian Perfection

When I was working towards my ordination as an Elder in the United Methodist Church in 1981, the final step in the process was to stand before the gathered body of clergy and laity from across the Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference and respond to questions from the bishop. Three of those questions were: 1) “Are you going on to perfection?” 2) “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” and 3) “Are you earnestly striving after it?” We were admonished to take these questions seriously and not to snicker or make sarcastic remarks, as some of the previous candidates had. As Outler points out, few of the ordinands to whom these questions are addressed have taken the time to wrestle seriously with Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection and with its implications for their own lives. They really do not understand what they are assenting to. Outler sees two reasons for this. First of all, in modern culture the belief that one is going to be made perfect in love in this lifetime is viewed as “symptomatic of psychotic delusion.” The second reason is

85. John Wesley, “The New Birth [1760],” in *Works*, 2:193.

what Outler calls “the greatest tragedy in Methodist history: the nineteenth century conflicts that swirled around Wesley’s emphasis upon ‘holiness of heart and life.’”⁸⁶

The nineteenth century conflicts stemmed from the “absolutism evident in his early writings.”⁸⁷ A number of critics attacked Wesley’s doctrine, including his friend George Whitefield. He admonished Wesley in a letter for “talking of *sinless perfection* as you have done in the preface to that hymn book...[for taking perfection] “to such an exalted pitch.”⁸⁸ Another critic was an Anglican bishop who wrote an anonymous pamphlet in 1744 charging the Methodists with setting the standard of religion so high that some people gave up while others became spiritually prideful.⁸⁹

Criticisms such as this caused Wesley to reevaluate his understanding of Christian perfection over the years. He did indeed moderate his views as time went on, dropping the belief that people can attain sinlessness.⁹⁰ In his sermon, “Christian Perfection,” he provides a disclaimer of sorts to answer the critics. He moderates his position, revealing his belief that no one can ever be too perfect to grow more in grace:

Christian perfection therefore does not imply (as some men seem to have imagined) an exemption from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus everyone that is perfect is holy, and everyone that is holy is, in the Scripture sense, perfect. Yet we may, lastly, observe that neither in this respect is there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no ‘perfection of degrees,’ as it is termed; none which does not admit of a continual increase.

86. Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources – Tidings, 1975), 66, 67.

87. Orville S. Walters, “John Wesley’s Footnotes to Christian Perfection,” *Methodist History* 12 no.1 (October 1973): 20.

88. George Whitefield, *George Whitefield’s Journals* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 588.

89. Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of John Wesley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 1:454.

90. Walters, “John Wesley’s Footnotes,” 20, 21.

So that how much so ever any man hath attained, or in how high a degree so ever he is perfect, he hath still need to 'grow in grace,' and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Savior.⁹¹

Outler asserts that Wesley was influenced in this understanding of perfection by the early church fathers:

What fascinated him in these men was their description of "perfection" as the goal of the Christian in this life. Their concept of perfection as a process rather than a state gave Wesley a spiritual vision quite different from the static perfectionism envisaged in Roman spiritual theology of the period and the equally static quietism of those Protestants and Catholics.⁹²

Wesley's understanding of perfection as a process was consistent with his way of salvation. Both consist of continual "growth in grace." It was important to Wesley that the "people called Methodists" not become complacent in their journeys of faith.⁹³ He certainly never became complacent in his own life or felt as if he had "arrived." As Maddox writes,

... it is extremely important that both of Wesley's early manifestos on Christian Perfection were prefaced by the maxim "not as though I had already attained." While his focal goal in these pieces was to qualify the type of Christian Perfection which he believed *could* be attained, his qualifications also insured that it was a Perfection that would always have more *to be* attained. "Not as Though I had already Attained" is an appropriate motto indeed for all who are seeking and claiming the type of Christian Perfection that Wesley believed could be attained. His clear concern was to preserve a dynamic tension that could celebrate whatever God's *grace* has already made possible in our lives, without relinquishing our *responsibility* to put that grace to work in the new areas that God continually brings to our attention.⁹⁴

Christian Perfection, for Wesley, is "the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbor, ruling our tempers, words and actions."⁹⁵ It is a state in which we

91. John Wesley, "Christian Perfection [1741]," in *Works*, 2:104, 105.

92. Outler, *John Wesley*, 9, 10.

93. Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility*, 109.

94. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 190.

95. John Wesley, "Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection," in *Works* (Jackson), 11:446.

possess “such a love of God and others as produces all inward and outward holiness.”⁹⁶ According to Outler, holiness, for Wesley, is

...the love of God and of man—the *perfect* love of God and of our neighbor reigning over *all* other loves and interests. And it comes down, finally, to this—“that we love God because *he* first loved us”—and in the power of *his* love, we can learn to love our neighbors, grace-fully.⁹⁷

Wesley describes this perfect love of God and neighbor when he defines Christian perfection as “love filling the heart, expelling pride, anger, desire, self-will.”⁹⁸ Robin Maas puts it this way: “*loving to full capacity*—however small or great that capacity may be.”⁹⁹ Wesley did not believe that this love makes people flawless. He writes, “the most perfect...need the blood of atonement, and may properly for themselves, as well as for their brethren, say, ‘Forgive us our trespasses.’”¹⁰⁰ As Henry Spaulding asserts, “Wesley qualifies what he means by perfection, not some flawless standard, but a reorientation of life by an ‘expelling love.’”¹⁰¹

In sum, Wesley’s understanding of Christian perfection was a logical extension of his understanding of grace as *responsible* and *therapeutic*. By the therapeutic grace of God and by our continual cooperation with this grace, he believed that it was at least theoretically possible to attain a state where love of God

96. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 174.

97. Outler, “Wesley as Theologian,” 76.

98. John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” in *Works* (Jackson), 11:418.

99. Robin Maas, *Crucified Love: The Practice of Christian Perfection* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1989), 30.

100. John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” in *Works* (Jackson), 11:419.

101. Henry W. Spaulding, “‘To Shew the Fly the Way Out of the Fly-Bottle’: A Reconstruction of the Wesleyan Understanding of Christian Perfection,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33 no. 2 (Fall 1998): 160.

and neighbor came naturally all the time. To think anything less would be to deny the power of God's grace.

Wesley's Understanding of How We Can Sense God's Grace

We can be awakened, repentant, justified, and on the road to sanctification, and yet miss God's voice. Knowing that God is communicating with us is obviously vital for responsible grace. Therefore we need to look at Wesley's understanding of how we can sense God's presence and power in our lives.¹⁰² The first way is by direct testimony—God's spirit communicating directly to our spirit. He writes,

How does he "bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God?...one might say..., the testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly 'witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God'; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; that all my sins are blotted out, and I even I am reconciled to God."¹⁰³

In the discussion on faith above, we read Wesley's words from "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion." Faith is when we can *see* God "who is invisible," *hear* God's voice, *taste* the "good word," and *feel* "both the existence and the Presence" of God.¹⁰⁴ This quote incorporates the next two ways Wesley believed we can sense God's presence and power. Wesley believed we possess "spiritual senses" that lie dormant until they are awakened by the Holy Spirit. Our awakened "spiritual senses" are another way we can sense God's presence, according to Wesley.

As he writes in his sermon, "The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God":

The Spirit or breath of God is immediately inspired, breathed into the new-born soul; and the same breath which comes from, returns to, God..."The eyes of his understanding" are now "open," and he "seeth Him that is

102. Thomas Langford, "Grace and the Spiritual Senses," 99.

103. John Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit, I [1746]," in *Works*, 1:274.

104. John Wesley, "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," in *Works* (Jackson), 8:4.

invisible"...His ears are now opened, and the voice of God no longer calls in vain...All his spiritual senses being now awakened, he has a clear intercourse with the invisible world.¹⁰⁵

Wesley believes that the language of feelings is a third way that we can sense or know God's grace. Wesley was daring enough, in an age of "reason" and at a time when any "enthusiasm" was suspect, to speak of feeling. During that several year period of darkness after Aldersgate when he was sorting out his life and faith, he wrote, "I *feel* this moment I do not love God, which therefore I *know*, because I *feel* it. There is no word more proper, more clear, or more strong."¹⁰⁶

In a brighter moment, he writes of feelings affirming God's presence. He writes that a person who has experienced the new birth

'feels in his heart'...'the mighty working of the Spirit of God'... He feels, is inwardly sensible of, the graces which the Spirit of God works in his heart...He feels 'the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost.'¹⁰⁷

In sum, according to Wesley, we can sense God's power and presence in our lives (in other words, God's grace) through the messages, the direct revelations we receive from our spiritual senses and our feelings. We need to be aware of these messages so that we can respond back and receive the resultant healing.¹⁰⁸ Only then will we receive the full benefits of *responsible, therapeutic grace*.

105. John Wesley, "The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God [1748]," in *Works*, 1:434-435.

106. John Wesley, journal entry, 4 January 1739, in *Works*, 19:30.

107. John Wesley, "The New Birth [1760]," in *Works*, 2:193.

108. We will receive further assistance on the topic of sensing God's power and presence in our lives when we come to the discussion on Dallas Willard's *Hearing God* in chapter 4.

The Means of Grace

Wesley believed that *responsible, therapeutic grace* can give us tools that enable us to respond to God and be open to the healing, renewing influence of God's spirit. Wesley saw the "means of grace," the "outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying or sanctifying grace."¹⁰⁹ He believed that "persons who had been 'awakened' to inquire about God [found] in these means of grace signposts which [helped] them continue on their way."¹¹⁰ There were many Methodists who disagreed with him. Because they were so enamored with their conversions and "baptisms of the spirit," some did not have any use for "outward observances."¹¹¹ In addition, Wesley's Moravian friends took a "wait on the Lord" approach that rendered the means of grace an affront to God.¹¹²

As important as the means of grace were to Wesley, he was concerned that they never be seen as an end in themselves. If the means of grace do not enable growth in "Christ likeness," they are worthless. They are not to become the legalistic way we "earn" our salvation.¹¹³ They do not provide pardon; only Christ provides that. Our practice of them is not to be a source of pride. The means of grace are not to be seen as a way we can gain power apart from God. The means only possess power because of the Spirit. We can see all of this in Wesley's words:

In using all means, seek God alone. In and through every outward thing look singly to the *power* of his Spirit and the *merits* of his Son. Beware you do not

109. John Wesley, "The Means of Grace [1746]," in *Works*, 1:381.

110. Walter Klaiber and Manfred Marquardt, *Living Grace*, 231.

111. Outler, [Introduction to "The Means of Grace,"] in *Works*, 1:376.

112. Ibid.

113. Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 25.

stick in the *work* itself; if you do, it is all lost labour. Nothing short of God can satisfy your soul. Therefore eye him in all, through all, and above all.

Remember also to use all means *as means*; as ordained, not for their own sake, but in order to the renewal of your soul in righteousness and true holiness. If therefore they actually tend to this, well; but if not, they are dung and dross.

Lastly, after you have used any of these, take care how you value yourself thereon; how you congratulate yourself as having done some great thing. This is turning all into poison...God is all in all...Give him all the praise.¹¹⁴

Wesley believed that even if people do not have access to even the most important means of grace, such as communion or Scripture, God's grace can still work within them. And Blevins writes, "the means are available to all, even to those who do not yet experience what Wesley would call 'salvation,' (or witness of the Spirit)." ¹¹⁵ Wesley admonishes us in his sermon, "The Means of Grace,"

It behooves us, first, always to retain a lively sense that God is above all means. He doth whatsoever and whensoever it pleaseth him. He can convey his grace, either in or out of any of the means which he hath appointed...therefore *before* you use any means let it be deeply impressed on your soul: There is no *power* in this. It is in itself a poor, dead empty thing: separate from God...¹¹⁶

Opinions vary widely concerning what Wesley's means of grace actually were. As for what are considered Wesley's means of grace, there is a wide range of opinion. Part of this is due to the fact that Wesley discussed them "in a number of contexts, with slightly differing lists in nearly every case."¹¹⁷ Below, I will closely examine the five means of grace Wesley designated as "instituted," as opposed to those he considered "prudential."¹¹⁸ Wesley identified prayer, communion, and

114. John Wesley, "The Means of Grace [1746]," in *Works*, 1:396, 397.

115. Dean G. Blevins, "The Means of Grace: Toward a Wesleyan Praxis of Spiritual Formation," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 32 (Spring 1997): 72.

116. John Wesley, "The Means of Grace [1746]," in *Works*, 1:396.

117. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 192.

118. Henry H. Knight, III, *Eight Life-Enriching Practices of United Methodists* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2001), 28, 29.

searching the Scripture as the instituted means of grace established by Jesus himself. He later expanded the list by adding fasting and Christian conference (or conversation). Whereas all the instituted means were established by Jesus, the prudential means of grace have been established by the church over the years. The instituted means are timeless and universal, but the prudential means can vary, says Borgen, “according to the person’s needs and circumstances, thus showing Wesley’s simple concern for man’s particular historical situation.”¹¹⁹ We will consider several examples of prudential means of grace from Wesley’s time after examining more closely the timeless, universal means of grace, which Wesley termed “works of piety.”

Instituted Means of Grace

The Lord’s Supper

My earliest memories of communion are from when I was a child in the 1960s. At that time, we celebrated communion once a quarter. As a seminarian in the late 1970s, I was taught communion should occur once a month, in keeping with its importance to Wesley. In reality, Wesley would be much chagrined at our lackadaisical attitude toward communion. He attributed incredible power to it as a means of grace—so much so that when others were limiting who could receive it, he tried to ensure its accessibility to all, because it might be just the means of grace to lead someone to faith.¹²⁰ In his sermon, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, VI,” Wesley writes, “It was the judgment of many of the ancient Fathers that we are here

119. Borgen, “John Wesley: Sacramental Theology,” 105.

120. John Wesley, “The Duty of Constant Communion [1787],” in *Works*, 2:7–10.

to understand the sacramental bread...as the grand channel whereby the grace of his Spirit was conveyed to the souls of all the children of God.”¹²¹ Communion was so important to Wesley that he partook of it, on average, every four or five days.¹²² This was highly unusual for an Anglican in his day, for most Anglican parishes were celebrating communion only three times a year.¹²³

Wesley believed that the elements of bread and wine are not changed into the actual or even the spiritual body of Christ. Rather, Wesley believed that Christ is present through the power of the Holy Spirit. As Maddox writes,

As his [Wesley’s] equation of grace with the Presence of the Holy Spirit ...matured, he more frequently specified that it was through the Spirit that Christ’s benefits are present to faithful participants in the communion service...what we encounter in communion is not the static presence of a ‘benefit’ but the pardoning and empowering Presence of a ‘Person.’¹²⁴

To reiterate, Wesley, in keeping with his *therapeutic* emphasis, saw this Presence, this power offered to us as a means of our healing. And because grace is *responsive*, we need to avail ourselves of this means. He encourages us,

The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins by enabling us to leave them. As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls: this gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection. 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.¹²⁵

121. John Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, VI [1748],” in *Works*, 1:584, 585.

122. Yrigoyen, *Heart and Life*, 48.

123. James F. White, introduction to *John Wesley’s Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, Quarterly Review Reprint Series (Nashville, Tenn.: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1984), 17. Originally published in 1784.

124. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 204.

125. John Wesley, “The Duty of Constant Communion [1787],” in *Works*, 3:429.

Prayer

Wesley was a man of prayer. The evidence is in his journals. He began and ended every day with prayer. In the hours between, he engaged in times of prayer, both formal and informal, private and public. He calls prayer “the grand means of drawing near to God.”¹²⁶ And he writes, “all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the way of *prayer*. This is the express direction of our Lord himself.”¹²⁷ Wesley believed in the efficacy both of formal, written prayer and extemporaneous, spoken prayer. During Wesley’s time, a group of dissenters believed formal, written prayers were “dead.” They believed in prayers that were led by the Spirit. This was initially disconcerting to Wesley, but he eventually conceded the importance of extemporaneous prayers to supplement written prayers.¹²⁸

However, he remained committed to the use of formal prayers, which can move us beyond our blind spots and prejudices.¹²⁹ Wesley used *The Book of Common Prayer* extensively, but he relied on the written prayers of others, as well. He was so convinced of the value of written prayers that he published collections of prayers for every day, for children, and for families.¹³⁰

Searching the Scriptures

John Wesley’s knowledge of and devotion to scripture are immediately apparent when one reads his sermons and his writings. They are full of scriptural

126. John Wesley, *Letters* (Telford), 4:90.

127. John Wesley, “The Means of Grace [1746],” 1:384.

128. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 206.

129. *Ibid.*, 207.

130. Yrigoyen, *Heart and Life*, 44, 45.

references and allusions to biblical texts. Wesley, who was highly educated and widely read, nonetheless wrote,

To candid, reasonable men I am not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of my heart. I have thought, I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God; just hovering over the great gulf, till a few moments hence I am no more seen—I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: to this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me that book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be “*homo unius libri*.” I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.¹³¹

Wesley not only read his Bible daily and wrote many sermons on scriptural texts, but he also wrote explanatory notes for the Old and New Testaments as well. In his *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 1765, he included practical suggestions for reading scripture. They are: (1) Set aside time in the morning and the evening for reading the Bible; (2) Read a chapter from the Old Testament and from the New Testament everyday; (3) Remember that your single purpose is to know the will of God; (4) Look for the connections between the passages being read and for the foundations of the Christian faith; (5) Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as you read; (6) Put into practice what God has revealed to you through your study of scripture.¹³²

These suggestions demonstrate yet again Wesley’s *responsible* and *therapeutic grace*. It is not sufficient simply to read the words contained in scripture. We need to interact with them through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thomas Langford writes that for Wesley, “underlying all valid interpretations of

131. John Wesley, “Preface to Sermons, 1746. in *Works*, 1:104–106.

132. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 3 vols. (Bristol: Pine, 1765; reprint, Salem, Ohio: Schmul, 1975)

Scripture is the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The internal witness of the Holy Spirit is the foundation upon which the authority of the Bible is built.”¹³³ Reading scripture with the guidance of the Spirit is expressed in Charles Wesley’s hymn in which he articulates John’s belief:

Whether the Word be preached or read,
no saving benefit I gain
from empty sounds or letters dead;
unprofitable all and vain,
unless by faith thy word I hear
and see its heavenly character.

If God enlighten through his Word,
I shall my kind Enlightener bless;
but void and naked of my Lord,
what are all verbal promises?
Nothing to me, till faith divine
inspire, inspeak, and make them mine.

Jesus, the appropriating grace
‘tis thine on sinners to bestow,
Open mine eyes to see thy face,
open my heart thyself to know.
And then I through thy Word obtain
sure present, and eternal gain.¹³⁴

Fasting

In 1789, very near the end of his life, John Wesley wrote a sermon that reflected his frustration with the Methodists who had become complacent and self-satisfied in their relative prosperity. As Outler writes, Wesley’s problem was “the embarrassing disparity between Christianity’s claims and promises (‘a universal

133. Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1983), 264.

134. Charles Wesley, *Hymnal*, “Whether the Word Be Preached or Read,” #595.

remedy for a universal evil') and its actual performances even at its best."¹³⁵ These Christians seem to have lost their ability to practice self-denial. One of the practices he rebukes in them is their abandonment of fasting. Not only have they given up fasting once a week, or even once a month, but many don't even fast once a year. He writes to them,

...what excuse can there be for this? I do not say for those that call themselves members of the Church of England, but for any who profess to believe the Scripture to be the Word of God? Since, according to this, the man that never fasts is no more in the way to heaven than the man that never prays.¹³⁶

In this same sermon, he also warned against fasting in ways that would be injurious to people's health. His normal fast began after dinner on Thursday and ended on Friday afternoon. Wesley did not believe fasting needed to be an act of long duration or intensity. Rather, it presented an opportunity to devote more time to God.¹³⁷

Wesley clearly believed fasting could act as a means of grace; in his sermon, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, VII," he asserted this idea by writing that fasting should be

...done unto the Lord, with our eye singly fixed on Him. Let our intention here-in be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father which is in heaven; to express our sorrow and shame for our manifold transgressions of his holy law; to wait for an increase of purifying grace, drawing our affections to things above; to add seriousness and earnestness to our prayers; to avert the wrath of God, and to obtain all the great and precious promises which he hath made to us in Jesus Christ.¹³⁸

135. Outler, [Introduction to "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,"] in *Works*, 4:85.

136. John Wesley, "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity [1789]," in *Works*, 4:94.

137. Harper, *John Wesley's Message for Today*, 83.

138. John Wesley, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, VII [1748]," in *Works*, 1:608.

Christian Conference

Even though Wesley spent a great deal of time by himself, in prayer, in traveling from place to place, in reading, in writing, and in reflection—he believed that it was not possible to be a Christian in isolation. He would have learned this at an early age, if not from his father’s parish work, then certainly from being part of a large family with a mother who led in prayer and worship. He learned from relatively early experiences with the Holy Club. And then, of course, his experiences with the Moravians would have reiterated those early lessons. In his refutation of mysticism as the way to holiness, Wesley writes in his *Preface to the 1739 Hymnbook*,

Directly opposite to this [mysticism] is the Gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. “Holy solitaires” is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than holy adulterers. The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.¹³⁹

Wesley knew that small groups needed to be an essential part of his revival. He knew these groups would be conducive to accountability and growth as members supported and inspired each other, helping each other practice responsible grace in a supportive atmosphere.¹⁴⁰ It is important to underscore the words “accountability” and “growth.” Gayle Turner Watson goes so far as to say that “in adopting class meetings as the basic format of early Methodism, Wesley was not only being practical but was also drawing on the cardinal principle of grace: Authentic Christian

139. John Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, 13 vols. ed. Grant Osborn. (London Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1868-72), 1:ix.

140. David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origin and Significance* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 116.

discipleship consists of learning how to say yes to God and holding another accountable for doing so.”¹⁴¹

Wesley developed groups for people at every level of the Christian life. John Drakeford gives the following description of Wesley’s five levels:

- 1) Associational ((the Society): primarily for fellowship and encouragement, including non-believers
- 2) Behavioral (the Class): primarily for examining the behavior of Christians and providing encouragement and correction
- 3) Motivational (the Band): extended examination beyond behavior to the very intent of the Christians
- 4) Aspirational (the Select Society): for the most enthusiastic member, seeking as full a Christian life as possible
- 5) Reclamation (the Penitent Band): for those who had failed in other groups but were willing to attempt to return¹⁴²

Prudential Means of Grace

Wesley’s class meetings and bands allowed instituted and prudential means of grace to converge.¹⁴³ His special services, such as the love feast, based on the agape meals of the early church; the watch night on New Year’s Eve; and the covenant renewal on New Year’s Day¹⁴⁴ are prudential means of grace. Wesley’s first two General Rules, “do no harm” and “[do] good of every possible sort, and as far as

141. Gayle Turner Watson, *Guide for Covenant Group Leaders* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 19, 20.

142. John W. Drakeford, *People to People Therapy* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), 11–20.

143. Blevins, “Means of Grace,” 79.

144. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 210.

possible, to all..."¹⁴⁵ are in this category. These two General Rules are ones of "outward holiness," and they include "works of mercy."

As we saw in the chapter on Wesley, he devoted himself to "works of mercy." He did not just preach about eighteenth-century English conditions like poverty, illiteracy, inhumane treatment of prisoners, and poor medical care. Wesley actively worked to make those conditions better.¹⁴⁶ As we saw in the sections on sanctification and Christian perfection, Wesley believed that the goal of life is a "holiness of heart and of life" that reveals itself in love for God and neighbor.

In the quotation below, we have a good summary of Wesley's thought on the Christian life and his inclusion of "works of mercy" as means of grace. It reflects his understanding of the progressive nature of this life—moving from the church, to the "means of grace," to the "holy tempers" or Christ-like qualities that which result in the ultimate goal of the Christian life for Wesley—the love of God and neighbor.

In a Christian believer *love* sits upon the throne, which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all *holy tempers*: long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, temperance—and if any other is comprised in 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus.' In an exterior circle are all the *works of mercy*, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real *means of grace*, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed *works of piety*: reading and hearing the Word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord's Supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one—the *church*, dispersed all over the earth; a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation.¹⁴⁷

145. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2000* (Nashville, Tenn.: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000), 48.

146. Yrigoyen, *Heart and Life*, 58–68.

147. John Wesley, "On Zeal [1781]," in *Works*, 3:313, 314.

Wesley's sermon, "On Zeal," reflects his commitment to "faith filled with the energy of love." In his notes on James 2:14-26, Wesley says that faith without works is "the grand pest of Christianity."¹⁴⁸ Again, from "On Zeal," Wesley writes:

Thus should he show his zeal for works of piety; but much more for *works of mercy*; seeing 'God will have mercy and not sacrifice'—that is, rather than sacrifice. Whenever, therefore, one interferes with the other, works of mercy are to be preferred. Even reading, hearing, prayer are to be omitted, or to be postponed, 'at charity's almighty call'—when we are called to relieve the distress of our neighbour, whether in body or soul.¹⁴⁹

There is absolutely no doubt about Wesley's commitment to the "works of piety." However, he knew there needed to be a balance of inward and outward holiness. As Steve Harper writes,

It is this linking of piety and mercy which gave Wesleyan spirituality its life and its ministry. It saved the United Societies from becoming ingrown and self-sufficient. Wesley made the world his parish and wanted his followers to do the same. Consequently, Wesley's interpreters nearly two hundred years later have seen his social ethic as an extension of his individual ethic.¹⁵⁰

By making "works of mercy" means of grace, Wesley is making an important point. Since means of grace are "channels of God's grace," he is saying that when we perform works of mercy, it is not a one-way street.¹⁵¹ From his own experience of performing countless works of mercy, he must have experienced God's healing and transforming power.

The means of grace will be an important element in the curriculum on responsible, therapeutic grace. They will be incorporated into each class session and

148. John Wesley, notes on James 2:14-26 in *NT Notes*.

149. *Ibid.*, 3:314.

150. Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, Tenn.: The Upper Room, 1983), 65.

151. Joerg Rieger, "The Means of Grace, John Wesley and the Theological Dilemma of the Church Today," *Quarterly Review* 17 no. 4 (Winter 199–98):382, 383.

assigned as homework. I hope this will help all the students come away with their own “toolkits” of various means of grace that will assist them on the journey of *responsible* and *therapeutic* grace.

Now that we examined Wesley’s way of salvation which shows his understanding of grace as *responsible* and *therapeutic*, we will examine five modern day proponents of responsible and therapeutic grace.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTEMPORARY VOICES OF GRACE

We are now going to take what we have learned about Wesley and *responsible, therapeutic grace* and apply it to five contemporary books. These books are by Gerald May, Henri Nouwen, Larry Crabb, Anne Lamott, and Dallas Willard. By viewing these modern-day examples in light of Wesley and his idea of grace, we will gain an understanding of grace as responsible and therapeutic that we can use in our curriculum to facilitate transformational spirituality. These works are among thousands which could have been chosen. However, these five represent a diverse cross-section of works I have read that convey a message of responsible, therapeutic grace. As we will see, the messages of these five authors contain many similarities. However, each one has a unique emphasis that is helpful for our understanding of and, ultimately, for our life application of responsible, therapeutic grace.

Gerald May gives us an understanding of how addiction acts as a barrier to our reception of God's grace, then shows our resulting need to detach so that we can respond to God and be healed. Henri Nouwen teaches us of the need for self-awareness, both of our brokenness and of our radical dependence on God's grace, by modeling these qualities. Larry Crabb gives us a vision of the church as a spiritual community engaged in transformational spirituality. Dallas Willard tells us how to listen for God's voice so that we will know how to respond. Anne Lamott's story is a real life example of what changes responsible, therapeutic grace can effect in a life.

As we examine each work more closely, we will be looking for the threads of responsible, therapeutic grace and how they relate to us and can be used in our curriculum.

Gerald May on Addiction and Grace

While researching for the previous chapter, I read an article by Leroy T. Howe. Though he has a less than straightforward writing style, he challenges Wesley's understanding of our freedom in a way that cannot be easily dismissed:

Contrary to what Wesley seems to have supposed, the efficacy of human freedom is always qualified in specific instances...it is never perfectly clear that in every circumstance men possess sufficient freedom either in quantity or in kind to respond to divine grace...It is a postulate of faith that God's prevenient grace remains sufficient for any situation, but experience and reason make this faith-commitment increasingly less plausible; as is well known, both psychological disorders and physiological disorders often render nugatory the powers of free choice by paralyzing the human spirit itself. All of which is to say that the divine will can be defeated, not only by the intentionality of the disbeliever who deliberately misuses his freedom, but in and through the impact of the various worlds of disbelief as they impinge upon God's call to decision, often restricting drastically man's power to make such a decision and to feel sustained through the unfurling of its consequences.¹

From my own experiences and observations, I believe Howe is correct in saying that God's grace is sometimes rejected not just by our intentionally choosing to reject it. There *are* other forces at work that drastically restrict our power to choose or not choose grace, that impair our response-ability and thus our ability to heal. Gerald May, in his book on addiction and grace,² gives a very plausible explanation

1. Leroy T. Howe, "Some Wesleyan Thoughts on the Grace of God," *Perkins Journal* 25 (Fall 1971): 23.

2. Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988).

for our inability to respond to God's grace. He also gives us some insight into how to increase our "response-ability" and thus our "heal-ability."

Let us look then at Gerald May's understanding of grace as responsible and therapeutic. As we will see, this understanding arises from his personal experience of responsible and therapeutic grace.

Gerald May, a psychiatrist and teacher, grew up believing in God. He tells us, "I prayed easily; God was a friend."³ Then, when May was nine, his father died. He expected God to keep him connected with his father in some way. When God didn't, he gave up on God. Or so he thought.

In college, May fell in love with literature and philosophy. Looking back, he thinks his love for them was due to the resurfacing of his desire for God. It was a desire he skillfully suppressed. While in medical school, science became his god because it was within his power to master.

His ability to keep from responding to God's grace began to crumble after a tour of duty in Vietnam. It continued to decay when he became the director of a community drug abuse clinic. May found himself depressed because his best psychiatric tools were not sufficient to "cure" people of their chemical addictions. During this time, he met a faith healer who told him she thought he was "meant to be a healer too," but qualified her statement, saying "I wouldn't take my dog to you, because you think you are the one that has to do the healing."⁴ After this experience, he started asking the few people he could find who had been able to overcome their chemical addictions how they did it. Even though they did not use religious language,

3. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

all of their experiences had a common spiritual element; they had “something to do with turning to God.”⁵ For the first time in years, May allowed himself to contemplate the possibility of a force more powerful than himself.

The realization of a “powerful force” sent him on a spiritual quest; he studied everything from Eastern religions to psychic phenomena to Baba Ram Dass. In addition, he meditated every day. About six months into his quest, he found the simplistic voice of a nine-year-old boy surfacing. It prayed, “Dear Jesus, help me.” He found its lack of sophistication embarrassing, so he tried to repress it. Instead, it grew.

May’s desire for God also grew, and he became aware of his own addictions. May realized that his attachment to such things as nicotine, caffeine, work, success, helping others, and what felt like an almost endless list of other behaviors were keeping him from God. He writes,

...it was my work with addicted people, and the consequent realization of my own addictive behavior, that brought me to my knees. I am glad. Grace was there. If my attachments had not caused me to fail miserably at controlling my life and work, I doubt I ever would have recovered the spiritual desire and the sense of God that had been so precious to me as a child.⁶

May believes that to be human is to be addicted. He defines addiction as “a *state* of compulsion, obsession, or preoccupation that enslaves a person’s will and desire. Addiction sidetracks and eclipses the energy of our deepest, truest desire for love and goodness. We succumb because the energy of our desire becomes attached, nailed, to specific behaviors, objects or people.”⁷ May describes the spiritual effects

5. Ibid., 7.

6. Ibid., 10.

7. Ibid., 14.

of addiction: “we worship those things, people, and behaviors we have attached our desire to; they suck up our time, energy, and attention, leaving no time or place for God. They, in effect, become our gods.”⁸

If addiction is the attachment of our desire to those things that enslave us, then detachment, according to May, is freedom *of* desire. He acknowledges that detachment has been seen as something cold and passionless. Instead, it needs to be seen as an empowering element that enables us to be free—free to choose to love God and to love our neighbor. He writes, “Detachment uncovers our basic desire for God and sets it free. With freedom of desire comes the capacity to love, and love is the goal of the spiritual life.”⁹ In other words, detachment gives us *response-ability* to God’s grace and thus an opportunity to heal.

May defines grace as “the dynamic outpouring of God’s loving nature that flows into and through creation in an endless self-offering of healing, love, illumination and reconciliation.”¹⁰ This definition is very similar to Wesley’s definition of the Holy Spirit, the mediator of grace, whom Wesley describes as “the immediate cause of all holiness in us: enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ...leading us in our actions, purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies to a full and eternal enjoyment of God.”¹¹

8. Ibid., 13.

9. Ibid., 15.

10. Ibid., 17.

11. John Wesley, “A Letter to a Roman Catholic,” in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler, 495.

May and Wesley also agree that we need to continually respond to this grace, to this “dynamic outpouring of God’s loving nature” through the Holy Spirit. We can never stand still, thinking we have “arrived” or that we have “outgrown” the need for grace. As Wesley puts it, “...how much soever any man hath attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to ‘grow in grace,’ and daily advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.”¹² May puts it this way:

Grace is not a pill we are given or a method applied to us so that we can simply go on about our business. Grace always invites us forward. Every liberation requires continued attention, every healing demands continued care, every deliverance demands follow-up and every conversion requires faithful deepening. If we do not respond to these ongoing calls, if we deny our empowerments for continued growth in freedom and responsibility, our healings may well be stillborn.¹³

May sees our addictions as an opportunity for blessing, because they can drive us to our knees. They can drive us to a point where we are well aware that we can no longer handle it ourselves. They can teach us not to be proud and prove to us that we are not gods.¹⁴ May, who makes extensive use of the “Eden story, the exodus experience and Paul’s beautiful portrayal of sin, deliverance, and the life of the Spirit in the Letter to the Romans,”¹⁵ writes that he really can relate to the truth of Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

I was given a painful wound to my pride, which came as Satan’s messenger to bruise me. Three times I begged God to rid me of it, but God’s answer was: “My grace is all you need; my power finds its full strength in weakness.” Therefore I shall *prefer to find my joy and my pride in the things that are my weakness; and then the power of Christ will come and rest on me.*¹⁶

12. John Wesley “Christian Perfection [1741]” in *Works*, 2:105.

13. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 155.

14. *Ibid.*, 20.

15. *Ibid.*, vii.

16. *Ibid.*, 20.

We saw this same sentiment expressed in Wesley's way of salvation, where he writes, "none will come to the Physician but they that are sick, and are thoroughly sensible of it."¹⁷ Elsewhere, he explains how we become "thoroughly sensible" of our sin: "God touches the heart of him that lay asleep in darkness and in the shadow of death. He is terribly shaken out of his sleep and awakens into a consciousness of his danger."¹⁸

May believes this "self-knowledge" of our sickness is vitally important to our recovery from addiction, because recovery begins when we admit we are worshipping things, behaviors, or people and making them our gods. This, according to May, is the beginning of repentance. It is not a time for hysteria, self-flagellation, or endless apologizing. As he writes,

The simple prayer that Jesus taught cuts through all this: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil." It is a matter of recognizing where attachment has made us idolatrous and unloving, admitting it, and, with God's help trying to avoid repeating those behaviors.¹⁹

May has witnessed innumerable people hit bottom time and time again. Each time, they may experience some degree of self-awareness and remorse. And yet, they are not able to overcome their addictions. They do not become "thoroughly sensible" of how sick they are. May spends a great deal of time discussing the physiological, psychological, and spiritual forces that conspire to keep us addicted or attached to those things that prevent us from loving God and neighbor. These extremely powerful forces work together to convince us that we do not want to be healed. We have

17. John Wesley, "The Doctrine of Original Sin," in *Works* (Jackson), 9:306.

18. John Wesley, "The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption [1746]," in *Works*, 1:255.

19. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 164.

learned to live with the self-made gods of power, relationships, and possessions, the gods of behaviors such as overwork and pleasing people, the gods of alcohol, drugs, or food. Our gods may not be comfortable, but they are ours. They are familiar. These gods, which are our addictions, can keep fear, loneliness, and emptiness at bay, at least for a while. They are also keeping us from the One, True God.²⁰

The common thread shared by those who are able to overcome addiction, May discovered, is an ability to live with spaciousness. When May first introduced spaciousness at the beginning of his book, I wondered what he was talking about. As the book progressed, the meaning became clear: it is the ability to not replace one addiction with another, the ability to leave a space open for God and God's grace to work in our lives. The three people May uses as examples faced fears, but chose not to react by substituting one addiction, or one god, for another. Instead, they left space for God to work.

May acknowledges that none of them had an explicitly "religious" experience. But in the quiet, gentle experiences (like the ones they had) lies a mystery. May writes,

The yes that the heart speaks to God, we might assume, would be preceded by great intellectual considerations and emotional upheavals and followed by enthusiastic celebration. Yet, in these stories, the yes was so quiet and so simple that it was barely noticed. Could it be that the heart speaks to God sometimes in ways that escape detection by our cellular representations? Is it possible that the heart can begin an act of consecration while the mind is still wondering what it's all about?

By the grace of God, the answer is yes. Of all the spiritual literature I have read, my favorite quotation is a simple one that was written by a very simple

20. Ibid., 13

person. Brother Lawrence [wrote] “People would be surprised if they knew what the soul said to God sometimes.”²¹

In this passage, we can hear echoes of Wesley’s words to Mary Cooke when he wrote to her, “He deigns His influence to infuse; Sweet, refreshing, as the silent dews. It has pleased Him to work [this] way in you from the beginning; and it is not improbable He will continue (as He has begun) to work in a gentle and almost insensible manner.”²²

May says that we are all receiving an invitation to transform, to come home. In the moments of spaciousness, no matter how fleeting they are, if we answer “yes,” even in the smallest way, our struggle is consecrated. May defines consecration as “dedication to God. It occurs when we claim our deepest desire for God, beneath, above, and beyond all other things.”²³ He says that we will not be able to grasp the full meaning of consecration at first. Maybe we never will. We just know that it has something to do with coming home.²⁴ May writes, “Through grace, with our assent, our desire begins to be transformed. Energies that once were dedicated simply to relieving ourselves from pain now become dedicated to a larger goodness, more aligned with the true treasure of our heart.”²⁵ This act of consecration sounds very similar to Wesley’s understanding of the new birth as that moment when “our sanctification, our inner and outward holiness, begins. And thenceforward we are

21. Ibid., 160.

22. John Wesley, letter to Mary Cooke, 30 October 1785, in *Letters* (Telford), 7:294.

23. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 149.

24. Ibid., 150.

25. Ibid.

gradually to ‘grow up in him who is our head.’” It is the “great work God does *in us*, renewing our fallen nature.”²⁶

May believes, as did Wesley, that we are constantly receiving messages to “come home.” Like Wesley, May identifies some channels or “means by which God can deliver grace. He gives us an excellent list, both of instituted and prudential means, or in other words, both of timeless means and means that are related to our own lives and circumstances. May tells us,

We can search for grace, in both obvious and hidden places. The obvious places, which we might avoid or embrace depending on our religious conditioning, include the sacraments, Scripture, and community of our faith, as well as personal prayer and meditation. The hidden places include times of turmoil and failure, encounters with people we dislike, daily drudgery, boredom, and of course, our addictions. And as we pray and search, we can try to relax our hands to receive grace as a gift. In the middle of beautiful times or ugly ones, peaceful situations or strife, we might just pause, take a breath, and relax. In this little pause, we can look around for God’s love, or we can at least remember it.²⁷

In the section on Christian Perfection in the previous chapter, we examined Outler’s belief that for Wesley, holiness is “the love of God and of man—the *perfect* love of God and of our neighbor reigning over *all* other loves and interests.”²⁸ May agrees that love of God and neighbor is the destination of our journey. As he writes on the first page of his book,

In an outpouring of love, God creates us and plants the seeds of this desire [for God] within us. Then, throughout our lives, God nourishes this desire, drawing us toward fulfillment of the two great commandments: “Thou shalt love thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself.” If we could claim our longing for love as the true treasure of our hearts, we would, with God’s grace, be able to live these commandments.²⁹

26. John Wesley, “The New Birth [1760],” in *Works*, 2:198.

27. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 126.

28. Outler, “Wesley as Theologian,” 76.

29. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 1.

Addictions can prevent “us from truly, freely loving God and one another.”³⁰ Our energy and our will can be hijacked. But May is a great optimist. He states with assurance, “The facts of grace are simple: grace always exists, it is always available, it is always good, and it is always victorious.”³¹

In sum, the special gift May brings to our discussion and understanding of *responsible and therapeutic grace* is the concept of attachment or addiction (which blocks responsible, therapeutic grace) and detachment (which frees space for responsible, therapeutic grace). In our curriculum, May will help us during the session on human sin and brokenness by showing us the role our addictions play in blocking God’s grace. We will briefly refer again to the addictions which inhibit our ability to respond to God’s grace in the session on responsible grace. Finally, in the session on therapeutic grace, we will examine May’s understanding of the role grace plays in our healing.

Henri Nouwen on the Inner Voice of Love

Henri Nouwen has allowed us into his spiritual struggles and personal angst through his many books, some of the best known of which are journals. This priest has written many books, a number of which could have been used in this study of grace. However, *The Inner Voice of Love*³² comes from a time when all of Nouwen’s props and inner resources have been removed. This results in a unique self-awareness of his absolute dependence on God’s grace.

30. Ibid., 4.

31. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 127.

32. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom* (New York: Image Books, 1998).

This book gives us the gift of Nouwen's thoughts during the most agonizing period in his life. He has just lost a deep and meaningful friendship, which has left a gaping wound. Ironically, this is also the time when he finally feels like he has "come home." Nouwen spent the vast majority of his life in the rarified academic atmosphere of institutions like Yale, Harvard, and Notre Dame. But for the last ten years of his life, he lived in Toronto at the L'Arche community for people with mental disabilities. This is where he finally achieved a sense of peace and belonging. It is also a place, he later surmised, where he must have felt safe enough to fall apart, because he lapsed into a deep depression. Nouwen met every day with two guides who gently and lovingly saw him through this dark time. Almost every day, after meeting with them, he went back to his room and wrote a "spiritual imperative"³³ to himself. *The Inner Voice of Love* is a collection of these spiritual imperatives.

There are a number of parallels between Nouwen and Wesley. Many of Nouwen's most powerful works are based on his journaling. Wesley was also a man who found journaling to be a helpful spiritual discipline. Both were highly educated and accomplished, but resisted becoming "ivory tower" theologians. Theology was not an abstract, intellectual exercise for either man, Wesley or Nouwen. It was rooted in real lives—both theirs and the lives of others who were journeying toward God.

Both Nouwen and Wesley saw that people's journeys of faith could be valuable tools in teaching others about God. Nouwen's friends finally convinced him to publish his spiritual imperatives by explaining their instructional value to fellow pilgrims. In *The Arminian Magazine*, Wesley included many spiritual biographies of

³³ Ibid., xvi

people whose stories testified to God's grace. Life stories for Wesley, according to one Methodist theologian, "were the well-spring of both theological interpretation and guidance in Christian living."³⁴

Below is one such life story from Wesley's *The Arminian Magazine*, highlighting a woman named Mary Davey. It will be followed by some of Nouwen's spiritual imperatives. Both examples speak of the painful separation from God that comes from listening, as Mary Davey puts it, to "the voice of the enemy." Both speak of a *responsible grace*, of taking responsibility for listening for God's voice and then obeying God's voice when it is heard. Finally, both speak of a *therapeutic grace*, of the resulting peace that comes from listening and responding to God's voice.

Kingswood, Oct. 30, 1748
Dear and Rev. Sir,

When I look back upon my past life, and see the directing and over-ruling hand of my gracious God, I am astonished, and cry out, Lord what is man? And what am I? ... Even in this last call of his Providence, how have I resisted, and mixed bitter draughts in my own cup, which the Lord never designed for me? But it was my perverseness and littleness of faith: I listened to the voice of the enemy, rather than the voice of God. I could not trust him, though he had been my refuge in every time of trouble. How did he gently strive to subdue my stubborn spirit, calming my fears, and shining in upon my soul with such clear, demonstrative light, that I could not longer withstand. I then rose up, and feebly followed the small still voice. I soon found obedience brings its own reward. My anxiety, my doubts and distrust all vanished, and a sweet calm succeeded, which has continued ever since.³⁵

Now, let us examine Henri Nouwen's imperatives regarding listening, responsibility, and therapeutic grace:

Make the conscious choice to move the attention of your anxious heart away from the waves and direct it to the One who walks on them and says, "It's me. Don't be afraid." Keep turning your eyes to him and go on trusting that he will

34. Thomas A. Langford, *Methodist Theology*, 4.

35. Mary Davey, *The Arminian Magazine* (January 1779): 41.

bring peace to your heart. Look at him and say, “Lord, have mercy.” Say it again and again, not anxiously but with confidence that he is very close to you and will put your soul at rest...³⁶ Keep reminding yourself that your feelings of being unwelcome do not come from God and do not tell the truth. The Prince of Darkness wants you to believe that your life is a mistake and that there is no home for you. But every time you allow these thoughts to affect you, you set out on the road to self-destruction. So you have to keep unmasking the lie and think, speak, and act according to the truth that you are very, very welcome...³⁷ What once seemed like a curse has become a blessing. All the agony that threatened to destroy my life now seems like the fertile ground for greater trust, stronger hope and deeper love.³⁸

Nouwen found journaling to be a means of grace during the despairing time when he wrote *The Inner Voice of Love* because “writing became part of my struggle for survival. It gave me the distance from myself that I needed to keep from drowning in my despair.”³⁹ Another means of grace during this time were his spiritual guides, who also played an essential role in Nouwen’s journey of faith. During the time of “mentally and spiritually debilitating anguish”⁴⁰ in which Nouwen wrote *The Inner Voice of Love*, he “lived through an agony that seemed never to end.”⁴¹ His two guides, he says, “did not leave me alone and kept gently moving me from one day to the next, holding on to me as parents hold a wounded child.”⁴² Their role was essential, Nouwen says, because “it is far from easy to keep living where God is. Therefore, God gives you people who help to hold you in that place and call you back to it every time you wander off. Your spiritual guides keep reminding you of where

36. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, 98.

37. Ibid., 101, 102.

38. Ibid., 117.

39. Ibid., xvi.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

your deepest desire is being fulfilled.”⁴³ Wesley agreed, writing in a letter to his friend Frances Godfrey, “It is a blessed thing to have fellow travelers to the New Jerusalem. If you cannot find any you must make them; for none can travel that road alone.”⁴⁴

The centrality of love is a strong theme that runs throughout *The Inner Voice of Love*. For Nouwen, it is absolutely imperative that we experience God’s love for us. He writes,

What is important is to keep clinging to the real, lasting, and unambiguous love of Jesus. Whenever you doubt that love, return to your inner spiritual home and listen there to love’s voice. Only when you know in your deepest being that you are intimately loved can you face the dark voices of the enemy without being seduced by them.⁴⁵

Wesley also believed in the importance of experiencing God’s love. He believed we could not fulfill God’s calling—to love God and, subsequently, our neighbor—until after we had experienced God’s love. As we have seen, Wesley saw Jesus as our objective evidence of God’s love for us. In his willingness to die for us, we see the depth and breadth of God’s love; we see a love that is “real, lasting, and unambiguous.” The Holy Spirit, for Wesley, is the subjective evidence of God’s love. When we “return to our inner spiritual home and listen there to love’s voice,” which for Wesley is the voice of the Spirit, “we can do all things in the light and power of that love, through Christ which strengtheneth us.”⁴⁶ We can even “face the dark voices of the enemy without being seduced by them.” Wesley would concur with

43. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, 25.

44. Wesley, 2 August 1789, in *Letters*, 8:158. We will return to the use of spiritual guides or directors in the section on Larry Crabb below.

45. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, 93.

46. John Wesley, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit [1746],” in *Works*, 1:309.

Nouwen's belief: "The more you come to know yourself—spirit, mind, and body—as truly loved, the freer you will be to proclaim the good news."⁴⁷

During Nouwen's "time of extreme anguish," he says he found "everything crashing down—my self-esteem, my energy to live and work, my sense of being loved, my hope for healing, my trust in God...everything."⁴⁸ He realized, in the midst of his pain, "what is important is to keep clinging to the real, lasting, and unambiguous love of Jesus. Whenever you doubt that love, return to your inner spiritual home and listen there to love's voice."⁴⁹ Wesley had a similar experience of self-doubt and anguish after his time in Georgia. He wanted desperately to feel God's love, but could not.

Wesley writes,

I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it (though many imagine they have it, who have it not)...[by which] he is freed from doubt, 'having the love of God shed abroad in his heart, through the Holy Ghost which is given unto him'; which 'Spirit itself beareth witness with his spirit, that he is a child of God.'⁵⁰

When Wesley shared with his Moravian friend, Peter Böhler, that he could no longer preach because he did not have faith, Böhler spoke the words that I have found myself quoting many times over the years: "Preach faith *till* you have it; and then *because* you have it, you *will* preach faith."⁵¹ Wesley followed his advice and found it to be sound. When I read the following words from Nouwen, I was reminded of the lesson Wesley learned from Böhler:

47. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, 75.

48. Ibid., xiii.

49. Ibid., 93.

50. John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, standard ed., 8 vols., ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1909-1916), 4:424.

51. John Wesley, journal 4 Feb. 1738, in *Works*, 18:228.

You have to trust the place that is solid, the place where you can say yes to God's love even when you do not feel it. Right now you feel nothing except emptiness and the lack of strength to choose. But keep saying, "God loves me, and God's love is enough." You have to choose the solid place over and over again and return to it after every failure.⁵²

Wesley and Nouwen were able to experience God's love for them because of their ability to allow "spaciousness" into their lives. They were both willing to live with the emptiness and not rush to fill it. Consequently, even though they both knew deep personal suffering, they were able to see its value. Wesley corresponded with Ann Bolton for twenty-nine years. During a time of suffering in her life, he wrote to her, "He is purging away your dross, that you may be a vessel meet for the Master's use."⁵³ Similarly, Nouwen writes of looking back at his excruciating period and realizing it was "a time of intense purification that led me gradually to a new inner freedom, a new hope, and a new creativity."⁵⁴

Ann Bolton wrote Wesley during a period of intense grief in her life that she had experienced God's peace. He responded, "It hath pleased God to lead you in the way of suffering from your youth up until now. For the present this is not joyous, but grievous; nevertheless it has yielded peaceable fruit. Your soul is still a watered garden, as a field which the Lord hath blessed."⁵⁵ Nouwen expresses a similar thought when he recalls the words of his friends, who encouraged him to share his experience with others: "Wouldn't they find it a source of consolation to see that light and darkness, hope and despair, love and fear are never very far from each other, and that

52. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, 8.

53. John Wesley, 15 June 1771, in *Letters* (Telford), 5:258.

54. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, xviii.

55. John Wesley, 1 August 1789, in *Letters* (Telford), 8:157.

spiritual freedom often requires a fierce spiritual battle?”⁵⁶ Both Nouwen and Wesley see suffering as a means of grace.

Nouwen, along with Wesley and May, acknowledges the importance of self-knowledge; of coming to the place where you know you cannot heal yourself. The melody of prevenient grace, awakening, and, finally, *responsible grace* is heard in Nouwen’s words:

Simply start by admitting that you cannot cure yourself. You have to say yes fully to your powerlessness in order to let God heal you. But it is not really a question of *first* and *then*. Your willingness to experience your powerlessness already includes the beginning of surrender to God’s action in you... The more you relinquish your stubborn need to maintain power, the more you will get in touch with the One who has the power to heal and guide you. And the more you get in touch with that divine power, the easier it will be to confess to yourself and others your basic powerlessness.⁵⁷

In sum, the special gift Nouwen gives us is his intense self-awareness of his own brokenness and his subsequent acknowledgement of his need for the responsible and therapeutic grace of God. We will turn to Nouwen in our session on sin and brokenness as a model of vulnerability and self-awareness. He will also serve as a source of hope to us throughout, reminding us that, no matter how broken we may feel, God’s *responsible, therapeutic grace* can heal us.

Larry Crabb on the Safest Place on Earth

Larry Crabb is a psychotherapist, a professor, and a Distinguished Scholar in Residence at Colorado Christian University. In *The Safest Place on Earth: Where*

56. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*, xix.

57. *Ibid.*, 30, 31.

People Connect and are Forever Changed,⁵⁸ Crabb describes a defining moment in his ministry. He and his wife Rachael were exploring Miami Beach. Just a block away from all the luxury hotels was a very different world of concrete, noise, unimpressive shops, and row houses. The couple walked by a retirement home with a huge wooden porch, some ten feet deep and sixty feet wide. Crabb estimates there were at least a hundred chairs arranged in rows on the porch. Those who occupied the chairs were all staring straight ahead. No one was talking. No one was looking at anyone else. He experienced incredible sadness that these people's lives were so empty. Crabb found himself wondering if the Holy Spirit feels the same way when the Spirit walks by a group of Christians. Crabb writes,

There are, of course, some differences. Most often we're chatting, sometimes singing, occasionally (in certain circles) dancing. We're engaging in serious conversations, Bible study, storytelling, and weekend retreat planning, as well as in lively but mundane interactions about sports and juicy "did-you-hear-about-so-and-so" tidbits... We're *doing* a lot. But I wonder if the Spirit, who lives in a circle with two Others who are always *relating*, sees us as Rachael and I saw retired folks on the Miami Beach porch: lined up in chairs facing straight ahead with no life passing back and forth among them... I want us to talk with each other, not merely to make conversation, but to make a difference, to be caught up in another sphere, the world of the Spirit, where first things are first and second things are second. I want us to experience a kind of oneness that makes us aware of what's best inside us and all the bad stuff that blocks its release.⁵⁹

Part of this facing one another would be not always trying to fix each other. As he writes, "we are a community of fixers. We can't stand to see a problem we can't do something about. We're not *curious about the journey*."⁶⁰ We can look at others primarily as problems to be solved instead of "*opportunities for spiritual*

58. Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth: Where People Connect and are Forever Changed* (Nashville, Tenn.: Word Publishing, 1999).

59. Ibid., xii, xiii.

60. Ibid., 18.

companionship.”⁶¹ Trying to “quick fix” ourselves and others is not the road to *responsible, therapeutic grace*.

At the beginning of his chapter entitled “Becoming a Spiritual Community,” Crabb includes a quote by C. S. Lewis. It summarizes the vision of the church Crabb paints for us throughout the book:

He works on us in all sorts of ways. But above all, He works on us through each other. Men are mirrors, or “carriers” of Christ to other men. Usually it is those who know Him that bring Him to others. That is why the Church, the whole body of Christians showing Him to one another, is so important. It is so easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects—education, building, missions, holding services... The Church exists for no other purpose but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose.⁶²

Crabb shows us an alternative vision of a “true church,” where we “put political campaigns and ego-driven agendas and building programs and church activities and inspiring services on the back burner,”⁶³ and where we can go “to participate in spiritual community, to engage in spiritual conversations of worship with God and of co-journeying with others.”⁶⁴ This is a “safe place, a community of friends who are hungry for God, who know what it means to sense the Spirit moving within them as they speak to you.”⁶⁵ The true church should be the place where we can find “brothers and sisters who are not intent on figuring out how to improve your

61. Ibid.

62. C. S. Lewis in Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 177.

63. Ibid., 19.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

life, but on being with you wherever your journey leads. You want to know and be known in conversations that aren't really about you or anyone else but Christ.”⁶⁶

Wesley would say “Amen” to this. He firmly believed that the faith journey is not solitary and individualistic. He learned this at a very early age through the weekly meetings with his mother concerning his spiritual progress and through her leadership during times of family worship and prayer. The communal nature of the journey was reinforced for Wesley at Oxford and through his experiences with the Moravians. His strong belief in the communal nature of the spiritual journey is most clearly evidenced by his small groups.

In his sermon, “On God’s Vineyard,” he writes about the communal nature of our faith journey:

Have you not read, ‘How can one be warm alone?’ And, ‘Woe be unto him that is alone when he falleth?’ ‘But you have companions enough.’ Perhaps more than enough; more than are helpful to your soul. But have you enough that are athirst for God? And that labour to make *you* so? Have you companions enough that watch over your soul as they that must give account? And that freely and faithfully warn you if you take any false step, or are in danger of doing so? I fear you have few of these companions, or else you would bring forth better fruit.⁶⁷

Wesley is expressing his belief that it is not sufficient to simply have warm bodies around us on the journey. We need to have companions who “are athirst for God” and “labour to make [us] so,” companions who are interested in transformational spirituality.

Crabb goes on to write about the need for spiritual directors who are filled with Christ’s energy and are able to guide others along the way. Wesley was also a

66. Ibid.

67. Wesley, “On God’s Vineyard [1787],” in *Works*, 3:517.

firm believer in our need for spiritual guides along our faith journey. He expressed this belief hundreds of times in his correspondence.⁶⁸ For example, he wrote to Ebenezer Blackwell, a wealthy banker, “I am fully persuaded if you had always one or two faithful friends near you who would speak the very truth from their heart and watch over you in love, you would swiftly advance.”⁶⁹

Wesley practiced what he preached by surrounding himself with a group of people who served as his spiritual guides or directors. He invited and encouraged them to speak the truth to him. His correspondence with Ebenezer Blackwell also exemplifies this point:

...you do well to warn me against “popularity, a thirst of power and applause...against an affected humility, against sparing from myself to give to others from no other motive than ostentation.” I am not conscious to myself that this is my case. However, the warning is always friendly...always seasonable, considering how deceitful my heart is and how many the enemies that surround me.⁷⁰

Wesley reflects the spirit of Crabb’s belief that a spiritual community is a group of broken people who have chosen to turn their chairs to face one another because they know they are not going to make it by themselves. Crabb writes, “These broken people journey together with their wounds and worries and washouts visible, but are able to see beyond the brokenness to something alive and good, something whole.”⁷¹

Crabb believes our brokenness occurs because we are driven by what he terms our “Lower Room.” His description of this room is reminiscent of Wesley’s

68. Wesley D. Tracy, “John Wesley, Spiritual Director: Spiritual Guidance in Wesley’s Letters,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 nos. 1, 2. 149.

69. John Wesley, 20 July 1752, in *Letters* (Telford), 3:94–95.

70. John Wesley, 27 June 1753, in *Letters* (Telford), 3:103. .

71. Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 32.

description of the human soul. He said it was covered by “wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores”⁷²:

I’m afraid it’s [the Lower Room] not unlike crawling into a sewer and wading knee-deep in the source of the terrible stench—the stench that rises from dragging a fellow human being three miles behind a pickup truck. The stench that rises from two gunmen opening fire on their classmates. The stench that arises from wishing a friend would have flat tire.⁷³

Crabb believes that “if we are to have any real hope of recovering true spiritual community and rescuing the church from the irrelevance of manufactured inspiration and crowd-pleasing entertainment, we must retrieve the lost idea of a thoroughly evil Lower Room in each of our hearts and see it in ourselves.”⁷⁴ This call to acknowledge our own sinfulness is thoroughly Wesleyan. As Wesley writes, “By the grace of God, know thyself. Know and feel that thou wast shapen in wickedness, and in sin did thy mother conceive thee; and that thou thyself hast been heaping sin upon sin, ever since thou couldst discern good from evil.”⁷⁵

Crabb believes our current emphasis on self-esteem and self-actualization opposes our ability to possess a true picture of ourselves. We really do not want to delve too deeply into knowing the evil we are capable of, nor are we encouraged to. This emphasis on self-esteem has led us to believe that we can handle things ourselves. As Crabb writes, “The power of the Spirit to change life from the inside out was no longer needed... Good training and cultural control would do.”⁷⁶ This leads to the same problem as upbeat universalism: grace becomes superfluous.

72. Wesley, “The Way of the Kingdom [1746],” in *Works*, 1:226.

73. Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 77.

74. *Ibid.*, 78.

75. Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: XIII [1750],” in *Works*, 1:696.

76. Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 78.

For Crabb, there is also an “Upper Room.” At the beginning of his chapter entitled “Two Rooms,” Crabb again quotes C. S. Lewis: “Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself; my own will shall become yours.”⁷⁷ Later on in the book, Crabb writes of the Upper Room as that place where we “are pure, defined now as saints, inclined to love God and to love like God, and empowered to really change.”⁷⁸ We see here a *therapeutic, responsible* understanding of grace that parallels Wesley’s. According to Wesley, we are empowered to “hand over” our natural selves by the Spirit, who transforms our wills so that we are able “to love God and to love like God.” As he wrote to his followers, “there cannot be in any [person] one good temper or desire, or so much as one good thought, unless it be produced by the almighty power of God, by the inspiration or influence of the Holy Ghost.”⁷⁹ Both Crabb and Wesley are writing about transformational spirituality.

In sum, the special gift Crabb brings to our discussion and understanding of responsible and therapeutic grace is his vision of the church as a community where true transformational spirituality is possible. Since our class on responsible, therapeutic grace will be only eight weeks long, there will not be an opportunity to develop the kind of fellowship Crabb envisions. However, the seed of his vision—that the church will be the “safest place on earth,” where true transformation and healing can occur—can be planted. We will talk about spiritual community as an important

77. C. S. Lewis in Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 59.

78. Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, 122.

79. John Wesley, “Advice to the People Called Methodists,” in *Works*, 9:124.

means of grace during the seventh session. We will also encourage interested participants to develop a small group focused on transformational spirituality after the class is over.

Anne Lamott on Traveling Mercies

*Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*⁸⁰ is the critically acclaimed autobiographical exploration of best-selling author Anne Lamott's journey of faith. She begins with a broad overview of her journey and then proceeds to write about specific incidents along the way. In recounting her journey, she gives a powerful portrait of the prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace of God. She puts a human face on the incredible and mysterious work of God's grace. She proves that it is *therapeutic* and testifies to the need for it to be *responsible*. In a way, her story is a summary of all we have seen above. Her story contains elements of overcoming addiction by the power of grace, of hearing and responding to God's still, small voice,⁸¹ of honestly assessing self and acknowledging dependence on God's love, and of needing a spiritual community to support and nurture her, to help her live out of the "Upper Room."

In his sermon, "The Scriptural Way of Salvation," Wesley writes:

[St. Paul] speaks of "the eyes of" our "understanding being opened." By this two-fold operation of the Holy Spirit, having the eyes of our soul both *opened* and *enlightened*, we see the things which the natural "eye hath not seen, neither the ear heard." We have a prospect of the invisible things of God; we

80. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).

81. I Kings 19:12 KJV. The importance of the still small voice of God to grace will be seen in the section on Dallas Willard.

see the *spiritual world*, which is all around us, and yet no more discerned by our natural faculties than if it had no being.⁸²

In Anne Lamott's account of her journey to faith, we will see the grace of God leading her to that place where the eyes of her soul are "opened and enlightened." She can now live as one for whom the spiritual world is as real as the natural world. We will see the power of God's grace as her eyes of understanding are opened, despite her anti-religious upbringing and a severe drug and alcohol addiction.

She does not undergo instantaneous transformation, but experiences a process of growth, consistent with Wesley's understanding that it is "by slow degrees that [we] grow up to the measure of the full stature of Christ."⁸³ Lamott writes,

My coming to faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land, and in this way I moved across the swamp of doubt and fear. When I look back at some of these early resting places—the boisterous home of the Catholics, the soft armchair of the Christian Science mom, adoption by ardent Jews—I can see how flimsy and indirect a path they made. Yet each step brought me closer to the verdant pad of faith on which I somehow stay afloat today.⁸⁴

Anne Lamott grew up in the Bay area in a home where the intellect, not God, was worshipped. To believe in God "meant you were stupid. Ignorant people believed, uncouth people believed, and we were heavily couth."⁸⁵ And yet, Anne went with her grandparents to church occasionally and she loved it. She pretended to think it was foolish because she wanted to please her "first god," her father. When she went to college, she took a religion course because of "this puzzling thing inside me

82. John Wesley, "The Scriptural Way of Salvation [1765]," in *Works*, 2:161.

83. John Wesley, "The New Birth [1760]," in *Works*, 2:198.

84. Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, 3.

85. *Ibid.*, 9.

that had begun to tug on my sleeve from time to time, trying to get my attention. I've read that Augustine said that to look for God is to find him, but I was not looking for God, not really. Or at any rate I didn't know I was."⁸⁶ This experience is a good example of the prevenient grace of God.

At college, Anne and her classmates studied Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*,⁸⁷ reading much of the work aloud, and her life "was changed forever."⁸⁸ In Kierkegaard's retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac, he emphasized that Abraham "understood that without God's love and company, this life would be so empty and barbaric that it almost wouldn't matter whether his son was alive or not. And since this side of the grave you could never know for sure if there was a God, you had to make a leap of faith, if you could, leaping across the abyss of doubt with fear and trembling."⁸⁹

In the moments that followed Lamott's understanding of the story of Abraham and Isaac, she held her breath, and then

crossed over. I don't know how else to put it or how and why I actively made, if not exactly a *leap* of faith, a lurch of faith...I left class believing—accepting—that there was a God...I felt changed, and a little crazy. But though I was still like a stained and slightly buckled jigsaw puzzle with some pieces missing, now there were at least a few border pieces in place.⁹⁰

Even though Lamott had experienced this powerful moment, her life descended into an orgy of alcohol and drugs and bulimia. She was "crossing over to

86. Ibid., 23.

87. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Original published 1939 (London).

88. Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, 27.

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid., 28, 29.

the dark side. I still prayed but was no longer sure anyone heard.” Even in the midst of her desperation, Anne writes that she “never stopped believing in God since that day in Eva Grossman’s class. Mine was a patchwork God, sewn together from bits of rag and ribbon, Eastern and Western, pagan and Hebrew, everything but the kitchen sink and Jesus.”⁹¹

There was a new priest at the Episcopal church where Lamott had attended Christmas Eve services as a child. “Out of nowhere,” it crossed her mind to go talk to him. After listening to her story of addiction and suicidal thoughts, he told her that she was trying too hard to save herself. He said she needed to stop praying for awhile and let him pray for her. Lamott wanted to know what it meant to be saved. The priest gave her the following description of justification: “It’s like discovering you’re on the shelf of a pawnshop, dusty and forgotten and maybe not worth very much. But Jesus comes in and tells the pawnbroker, ‘I’ll take her place on the shelf. Let her go outside again.’”⁹²

It would take four more years for Lamott to become sober. “I was not willing to give up a life of shame and failure without a fight,”⁹³ she explains. During this time, Lamott found herself wandering around a flea market in Marin City, drugged up and hung-over, almost every Sunday. She often wandered across the street to a small Presbyterian church and listened to the singing. The congregants invited her inside, but she always refused. She never stayed to hear the sermon. “I loved singing, even about Jesus, but I just didn’t want to be preached at about him. To me, Jesus made

91. Ibid., 41.

92. Ibid., 43.

93. Ibid.

about as much sense as Scientology or dowsing, ”⁹⁴ she explains. However, the genuine faith, warmth, and loving acceptance of the people kept drawing her back.

After Lamott discovered she was pregnant, she had an abortion. She was deeply sad when she came home, so she washed down the codeine the nurse had given her for pain with a pint of Bushmills. She repeated this behavior for seven days, but on the seventh night, she started bleeding heavily. She went to bed shaky, sad, and completely on edge. After turning off the light and laying in the dark for a while, she became aware of a presence in the room. The feeling was so strong that she turned the light on to check. At first Lamott thought it was her father, whose presence she had felt many times over the years since he had died. But, as she continued to lie there, she became convinced that it was Jesus. And she was “appalled.” She simply could not imagine what her “brilliant, hilarious, progressive” friends were going to think of this. She turned to face the wall and pronounced out loud: “I would rather die.”⁹⁵

She *knew* Jesus was sitting in the corner, watching over her with “patience and love.” The next day, she chalked the frightening experience up to “fear, self-loathing, booze and the loss of blood.” For the next week she felt like a little cat was following her everywhere she went, entreating her to pick it up and let it in. Lamott writes, “I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it...”⁹⁶

94. Ibid., 47.

95. Ibid., 49.

96. Ibid., 50.

At the end of the week, Lamott went to church so hung over she could not stand up for the hymns. For the first time, she stayed for the sermon. During the last hymn, she had the sensation of being held and rocked. She let this feeling wash over her:

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "F--- it: I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in." So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.⁹⁷

Anne Lamott defines grace as both pardon and power. She also speaks to its *responsible, therapeutic* nature:

[Grace is] the force that infuses our lives and keeps letting us off the hook. It is unearned love—the love that goes before, that greets us on the way...I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us. It can be received gladly or grudgingly, in big gulps or in tiny tastes, like a deer at the salt. I gobbled it, licked it, held it down between my little hooves."⁹⁸

We have already been introduced to Wesley's wonderful image of the responsive, cooperative, nature of grace: "God is continually breathing, as it were, upon his soul and his soul is breathing unto God. Grace is descending into his heart, and prayer and praise are ascending to heaven."⁹⁹ Wesley terms this "a kind of spiritual respiration"¹⁰⁰ that enables us to grow in the image of Christ. Lamott,

97. Ibid.

98. Ibid., 139, 143.

99. John Wesley, "The New Birth [1760]," in *Works*, 2:193.

100. Ibid.

throughout her book, refers to praying to God. To use a Wesleyan image, she really works at “stirring up” ¹⁰¹the grace she has.

For example, she decided she needed to work on her ability to forgive. After failing when she tried to will herself to forgive those who had harmed her, she decided she needed to start with someone who had harmed her just a little. She was inspired by C. S. Lewis’ statement in *Mere Christianity*, “If we really want to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo.”¹⁰² So, Lamott chose an “Enemy Lite,” the mother of one of her son’s friends. Lamott perceived this woman to be in constant judgment of her ability as a parent. Lamott took everything this woman said as criticism. One day, this woman informed Lamott that if there was anything she didn’t understand about the classroom, she should just ask the woman, “because I would really love to be there for you.” Lamott smiled back, but she thought such terrible things that she couldn’t even say them out loud because “they would make Jesus want to drink gin straight out of the cat dish.”¹⁰³

Instead of clinging to those feelings and being unresponsive to God’s grace, Lamott reached out to God. She writes that her awful thoughts

drove me to my knees. I prayed about it. I prayed because my son loves her son, and my son is so kind that it makes me want to be a better person, a person who does not hate someone just because she wears latex bicycle shorts. I prayed for a miracle; I wrote her name on a slip of paper, folded it up, and put it in the box I use as God’s In box. “Help,” I said to God.¹⁰⁴

101. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation [1785],” in *Works*, 3:208.

102. C. S. Lewis, in *Traveling Mercies*, 128.

103. Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, 131.

104. Ibid.

Lamott admits that she did not discern much progress for a while. She found herself continuing to react with hateful thoughts. She returned a smile from the woman with a little sneer. She writes, “I felt disgust, but I also felt disgusting. I got out my note to God. I said, ‘Look, hon. I think we need bigger guns.’”¹⁰⁵

One day she went over to “Enemy Lite’s” house to pick up her son, Sam, who had been playing with “Enemy Lite’s” son. Lamott was picking up Sam’s shoes from the mat inside the front door when she found herself comparing their size to his friend’s. All of a sudden, a light came on.

I finally got it. The veil dropped. I got that I am as mad as a hatter. I saw that *I* was the one worried that my child wasn’t doing well enough in school... And that I was trying to get her to carry all this for me because it hurt too much to carry it myself. I wanted to kiss her on both cheeks, apologize for all the self-contempt I’d been spewing out into the world, all the bad juju I’d been putting on her by thinking she was the one doing harm.¹⁰⁶

Lamott was now able to see that while she was sneaking around “like J. Edgar Hoover” checking out her son’s friend’s shoe size, her “Enemy Lite” was the one pouring her more tea, taking care of Lamott’s son, and forgiving her for writing a book that “trashed her political beliefs.” She was the one who had, “like God and certain parents do, forgiven me almost before I’d even done anything that I needed to be forgiven for. It’s like the faucets are already flowing before you even hold out your cup to be filled. Before, givenness.”¹⁰⁷

Further examples of Lamott’s experience of responsible and therapeutic grace involve her church. As she writes,

105. Ibid., 133.

106. Ibid., 137.

107. Ibid.

When I was at the end of my rope, the people of St. Andrew's tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of *home*—that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, "You come back now."¹⁰⁸

When she first arrived at St. Andrew's, obviously hung over and strung out, she was warmly received. When her illegitimate son was born, the women of the congregation, many of whom were "Bible-thumping" elderly black women, celebrated his birth and lavished love upon him. The congregation brought Lamott and Sam clothing, food, and the assurance that Lamott's baby would be a part of the family. They also gave her money; she had ten- and twenty-dollar bills slipped in her pocket routinely by people who lived "pretty close to the bone financially."¹⁰⁹ And there was Mary Williams, one of Lamott's most consistent donors, who gave her plastic baggies full of dimes. Lamott writes,

Mary doesn't know that professionally I'm doing much better now; she doesn't know that I no longer really need people to slip me money. But what's so dazzling to me, what's so painful and poignant, is that she doesn't bother with what I think she knows or doesn't know about my financial life. She just knows we need another bag of dimes, and that is why I make Sam go to church.¹¹⁰

Lamott's experience is a perfect description of what John Wesley wrote about in his sermon, "Of the Church," when he declared,

The 'forbearing one another in love' seems to mean not only the not resenting anything, and the not avenging yourselves; not only the not injuring, hurting, or grieving each other, either by word or deed; but also the bearing one another's burdens; yea, and lessening them by every means in our power. It implies the sympathizing with them in their sorrows, afflictions, and infirmities; the bearing them up when without our help they would be liable to

108. Ibid., 100.

109. Ibid., 101.

110. Ibid., 105.

sink under their burdens; the endeavouring to lift their sinking heads, and to strengthen their feeble knees.¹¹¹

In sum, Anne Lamott puts “flesh” on *responsible, therapeutic grace*. This is the special gift she brings to our discussion. She is our spiritual biography. In our curriculum, her story will be shared to prepare the class members to reflect on their own lives. They will be encouraged to identify the “lily pads,” those places that represent the steps, leaps, or staggers of faith in their own lives.

Dallas Willard on Hearing God

The final book I want us to put through the Wesleyan screen of responsible, therapeutic grace is Dallas Willard’s *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*.¹¹²

Wesley’s wonderful image of “spiritual respiration,” where God is continually breathing on our souls and we are breathing back,¹¹³ sounds good. However, it is not that simple. We have seen how our addictions can keep us from being able to respond to God’s grace, or in other words, to “breathe back.” Another real problem occurs when we are not able to feel God breathing on us, that is, when we cannot hear the voice of God speaking to us. We cannot respond in love to an abstract notion or a comforting concept. We can only respond to a living, *breathing* Being whose voice we are listening for and to.

It would not be a problem if God dealt with all of us as God did with Saul. Being knocked down, having direct communication with Jesus, and being blinded

111. John Wesley, “Of the Church [1785],” in *Works*, 3:55.

112. Willard, *Hearing God*.

113. John Wesley, “The New Birth [1760],” in *Works*, 2: 193.

then led away to the spot of God's choosing is not a very subtle form of communication. It would have been impossible to not get the message and difficult to not respond as God requested.

However, the bulldozer approach is not God's usual *modus operandi*. Wesley speaks of God's communication being as soft as a breath. As he wrote to Mary Cooke, God works "in a gentle and almost insensible manner."¹¹⁴ He knew this from personal experience because God communicated with him through a warmed heart. Dallas Willard also writes of God's subtle means of communication. He uses I Kings 19 as an example, when God did not speak with the power of the wind, or an earthquake, or a fire, but with a "still small voice" (I Kings 19:12 KJV).

Willard asserts,

The still small voice—or the interior or inner voice, as it is also called—is the preferred and most valuable form of individualized communication for God's purposes...In the still small voice of God we are given a message that bears the stamp of his personality quite clearly and in a way we will learn to recognize. But in contrast with other cases, the *medium* through which the message comes is diminished almost to the vanishing point, taking the form of thoughts that are our thoughts, though these thoughts are not *from* us.

Unfortunately this gentle word may easily be overlooked or disregarded, and it has even been discounted or despised by some who think that only the more explosive communications can be authentic. If their view is followed through, a *life* of hearing God must become a life filled with constant fireworks from heaven. But this does not square with the actual course of daily life.¹¹⁵

Wesley believed we could know or sense God's presence in three ways, all of which we have discussed. They include God's Spirit communicating with our spirit

114. John Wesley, letter to Mary Cooke, 30 October, 1785, in *Letters* (Telford), 7:294.

115. Willard, *Hearing God*, 87, 88.

through direct contact¹¹⁶, through our “spiritual senses,”¹¹⁷ and through our feelings.¹¹⁸ These are not extraordinary modes of communication. They could be easily discounted if we were not alertly listening for God’s voice to speak through them.

In the beginning of our faith journey, our part of responsible grace is equally quiet. As Wesley taught, “Salvation begins with what is usually termed *preventing grace*...the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him.”¹¹⁹ We heard the same message from Gerald May. After interviewing three people who had overcome major addictions, he wrote that the process consisted not of “great intellectual considerations and emotional upheavals followed by enthusiastic celebration, [but of a yes that] was so quiet and so simple that it was barely noticed.”¹²⁰

Willard expands the idea of what is possible—from being able to overlook or discount God’s gentle voice to being able to disregard the spiritual world altogether. As he writes, “The visible world bludgeons us with its things and events...But instead of shouting and shoving, the *spiritual* world whispers at us ever so gently... We are hindered in our progress toward becoming spiritually competent people by how easily we can explain away the movements of God toward us.”¹²¹

116. John Wesley, “The Witness of the Spirit, I [1746],” in *Works*, 1:274.

117. John Wesley, “The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God [1748],” in *Works*, 1:434-435.

118. John Wesley, journal entry, 4 January, 1739, in *Works*, 19:30.

119. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation [1785],” 3:203.

120. May, *Addiction and Grace*, 161.

121. Willard, *Hearing God*, 217,218.

Willard warns that if “we are ready and set to find ways of explaining away his gentle overtures, he will rarely respond with fire from heaven. More likely he will simply leave us alone; and we shall have the satisfaction of thinking we are not gullible.”¹²² As we have seen, Wesley gave a similar warning against not cooperating with the gentle overtures of God:

...God worketh in you; therefore, you *must* work: You must be “workers together with him,”...otherwise he will cease working. The general rule on which his gracious dispensations invariably proceed is this: “Unto him that hath shall be given: But from him that hath not,” that does not improve the grace already given,—“shall be taken away what he assuredly hath.”¹²³

It is so easy to ignore our own “slight transient convictions” and God’s still small voice. We are unaware of God’s subtle approach—we have heard too many stories of “explosive communications”¹²⁴ and assume that because they have not experienced these, they are not receiving communication from God. This leads us to ignore God’s prevenient grace—the still small voice whispering words of love, encouragement, and challenge to us.

In other words, if we do not understand that God is attempting to communicate with us, and that this communication is occurring, for the most part, in small, unspectacular ways—if we keep looking up in the sky for a handwritten message or a vision, instead of looking inward to our own thoughts and feelings, we can very easily miss a number of God’s communications. As Willard writes, “*the fact that we do not hear does not mean that God is not speaking to us...* We are not

122. Ibid., 218.

123. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation [1785],” in *Works*, 3:208.

124. Willard, *Hearing God*, 87.

attuned to God's voice."¹²⁵ And, in a further helpful word, he continues, "it seems that at first we must be *told* that God is speaking to us and possibly even be helped to detect his voice."¹²⁶

We cannot count on God to override our will and make us listen. Willard includes a wonderful quotation from John Wood Oman's book, *Grace and Personality*. Oman writes:

To deliver the soul from the sin which is its ruin and bestow on it the holiness which is its health and peace, is the end of all God's dealings with His children; and precisely because He cannot merely impose, but must enable us to attain it ourselves, if we are really to have the liberty of His children, the way He must take is long and arduous.¹²⁷

Willard shares Oman's belief—God speaks to us through our own spirits, "our own thoughts and feelings toward ourselves as well as toward events and people around us,"¹²⁸ because "*it most engages the faculties of free, intelligent beings involved in the work of God as his co-laborers and friends.*"¹²⁹ This is a message of responsible grace. It is also the message of a God who does not coerce us into doing God's bidding; of a God who has granted us liberty.

As we have seen, this is consistent with Wesley's understanding of God—a God who forces humanity to do her bidding is not a God of love. Instead, the true God of love allows us the freedom to decide for ourselves whether or not to respond to her grace. Wesley writes in his sermon, "What is Man?" "I am conscious to myself of one more property, commonly called liberty...I have not only what is termed a

125. Willard, *Hearing God*, 69.

126. *Ibid.*, 169.

127. John Wood Oman in Willard, *Hearing God*, 193.

128. Willard, *Hearing God*, 99.

129. *Ibid.*, 100.

‘liberty of contradiction,’—a power to do or not to do; but what is termed, a ‘liberty of contrariety,’—a power to act one way, or the contrary.”¹³⁰ He goes on to specify what gives him these powers: “through the grace of God assisting me, I have a power to choose and do good, as well as evil. I am free to choose whom I will serve; and if I choose the better part, to continue therein even unto death.”¹³¹

At the end of his book, Willard impresses upon us the fact that we are confronted with the challenge of choosing “*to be a spiritual person, to live a spiritual life*,”¹³² or in other words, to “choose whom [we] will serve.” To those who say, “I cannot. I do not have the power,” Wesley would be quick to reply, “There is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God.”¹³³

Willard uses a quote from Wesley’s sermon, “The Witness of the Spirit,” to address the question of how we can know if the voice that is speaking to us is God’s:

How, I pray, do you distinguish day from night? How do you distinguish light from darkness; or the light of a star, or a glimmering taper, from the light of the noonday sun? Is there not an inherent, obvious, essential difference between the one and the other? And do you not immediately and directly perceive that difference, provided your senses are rightly disposed? In like manner, there is an inherent, essential difference between spiritual light and spiritual darkness...¹³⁴

Even though Wesley makes this discernment sound relatively easy—after years of listening, it probably was easy for him—Willard gives this helpful suggestion to those who are new at listening for God’s voice:

130. John Wesley, “What is Man? [1788],” in *Works*, 4:24.

131. Ibid.

132. Willard, *Hearing God*, 219.

133. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation [1785],” in *Works*, 3:207.

134. John Wesley, “The Witness of the Spirit, I [1746],” in *Works*, 2:282.

With assistance from those who understand the divine voice from their own experience and with an openness and will to learn on our part, we can come to recognize the voice of God without great difficulty... Without qualified help which works alongside our own desire to learn and readiness to cooperate, God's direct word will most likely remain a riddle or at best a game of theological charades.¹³⁵

We have seen that for Wesley the Christian life is a *responsible, therapeutic, transformational* journey. It is not about us getting what we want. Rather, it is about bringing our will into alignment with God's will. The Christian life is about our transformation into Christlikeness. As he writes in "The Character of a Methodist" about the "marks of a Methodist,"

he is a Christian, not in *name* only, but in *heart* and in *life*. He is inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God, as revealed in the written Word. *He thinks, speaks, and lives according to the 'method' laid down in the revelation of Jesus Christ.* His soul is 'renewed after the image of God,' 'in righteousness and in all true holiness.' And 'having the mind that was in Christ' he 'so walks as' Christ 'also walked.'¹³⁶

Wesley would approve of Willard's statement regarding the primary reason God communicates with us: "God does not speak only for us and our purposes, nor does he speak primarily for our own prosperity, safety or gratification. Those who receive the grace of God's saving companionship in his word are by that very fact also fitted to show humankind how to live... In us as in Jesus Christ himself, *the life* is to be '*the light* of all the people.'"¹³⁷

I want to end with Willard's great questions about the process of transformation:

What is the *process* by which we can be fully transformed into children of light—"blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst

135. Willard, *Hearing God*, 169.

136. John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist [1742]," in *Works*, 9:41.

137. Willard, *Hearing God*, 145, 146.

of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world...holding fast to the word of life” (Phil 2:15-16)? How are we to understand the ongoing process—which involves hearing God’s voice—by which our present life is to be redeemed, shaped and conformed to the likeness of the Son (Rom 8:29)? And what is the role of the word of God in this process?¹³⁸

I believe that Wesley’s understanding of the way of salvation as responsible and therapeutic presents a compelling answer to Willard’s questions.

In sum, the special gift Willard brings to our discussion of *responsible and therapeutic grace* is his understanding of the nature of God’s voice and our need to listen for it. Our curriculum will present Willard’s teaching on hearing God and will provide opportunities for the class members to listen for God’s voice, then record what they have heard. They will also be encouraged to share with one another how God has spoken or is speaking to them.

138. Ibid., 147.

CHAPTER FIVE

A CURRICULUM: “RESPONSIBLE AND THERAPEUTIC GRACE AS A PATHWAY TO TRANSFORMATIONAL SPIRITUALITY”

Goal: To facilitate an understanding and experience of the Wesleyan notion of responsible and therapeutic grace, in the hope of leading to the ongoing practice of transformational spirituality.

Audience: My congregation.

Parameters: Eight weekly sessions, one and one-half hours in length, with the exception of the first weekly session, which will run two hours.

Ideal size group: 8-12.

First, a pedagogical word: Howard Gardner wrote his groundbreaking work, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*¹, in 1983. Gardner, who is a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has determined there are many ways of being “smart.” Thomas Armstrong explores seven of them in the book he based on Gardner’s theory. He defines them in the following ways:

- Word Smart: Expressing your verbal intelligence
- Picture Smart: Thinking with your mind’s eye
- Music Smart: Making the most of your melodic mind
- Body Smart: Using your kinesthetic intelligence
- Logic Smart: Calculating your mathematical and scientific abilities
- People Smart: Connecting with your social sense
- Self Smart: Developing your intrapersonal intellect²

1. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Book Paperbacks, 1993 Tenth Anniversary Edition) Originally published 1983 by New York: Basic Books.

2. Thomas Armstrong, *Seven Kinds of Smart: Identifying and Developing Your Many Intelligences* (New York: Plume, 1993), table of contents.

Each human being incorporates all of the above traits in some combination.³ Obviously, there are some areas each of us is smarter in than others. In developing my curriculum I have been cognizant of the need to draw upon a variety of intelligences.

I have also attempted to incorporate exercises that make use of each of the four types of spirituality as developed by Urban Holmes and expanded by Corinne Ware.⁴ Simply put, each of the four types prefers a different path to God. These include

1. Head Path: Theological reflection on the Christian faith
2. Heart Path: Experiences of the heart
3. Mystic Path: Union with God
4. Active Path: Theology in action

Wherever possible, I try to provide options for the members of the class so they can utilize their strengths. However, there are activities that don't include options; these give the class members an opportunity to stretch.

Each week will consist of several different elements:

1. There will be Bible study. Dallas Willard writes that God's "speaking most commonly occurs in conjunction with study of and reflection on the "Bible, the written Word of God..."⁵
2. We will sing a hymn of grace and spend a few moments discussing its message.
3. Class members will be given an opportunity to share, if they wish, from their journals.

3. Ibid. 11.

4. Corinne Ware, *Discover Your Spiritual Type* (Bethesda, Md.: The Alban Institute, 1995).

5 Willard, 195.

4. I will present the topic in a lecture form, based on the foundation of the information contained in this dissertation.
5. Time will be devoted to experiencing the topic.
6. We will debrief as a full group.
7. We will conclude with the celebration of Holy Communion.

In chapter 1, I included Dallas Willard's rationale for presenting material of a scholarly and philosophical nature: "It is an unavoidable fact...that *what we do or do not understand...determines what we can or cannot believe and therefore governs our practice and action with an iron hand.*"⁶ My hope is that through a combination of lecture, individual and group experiences, and discussion, we can come to a greater understanding of *responsible* and *therapeutic* grace. This understanding will hopefully begin to govern our practice, and thus enable us to engage in *transformational spirituality*. We will hence start on the road to it governing our practice and thus positively impacting our ability to engage in transformational spirituality.

We will be practicing all five of Wesley's instituted means of grace—searching the scriptures, prayer, communion, Christian conference, and fasting. In addition, we will practice prudential means of grace by performing acts of mercy.

Week One: Introduction: A Portrait of Responsible and Therapeutic Grace

Because this is the first session, I want to make sure it is as non-threatening as possible. We will begin by watching the movie "Tender Mercies." It is a story about a famous country singer (played by Robert Duvall) who ends up drunk and broke in a very isolated part of Texas. Once rich, powerful, and successful, he has been reduced

⁶ Ibid. , 193.

to working as a handyman at a little gas station and motel in the middle of nowhere. The owner is a young widow whose husband has been killed in Vietnam, and whose grade-school-age boy cannot remember his father. She thanks God every day for God's "blessings and tender mercies."

To summarize and greatly oversimplify, the singer starts out completely broken—he has lost his wife, his career, his child, and his dignity. The story ends with him marrying the young widow, becoming a father to her son, getting baptized, and having the promise of returning to his career. It is a story of responsible and therapeutic grace. However, it definitely does not have a "Hollywood" ending: the penultimate scene is the tragic death of his eighteen-year-old daughter in a car crash. It is a story of "tender mercies" and "subtle mercies." There are not any dramatic conversion scenes or moments of God's voice. The subtle, tender mercies in the movie involve the still, small voice (I Kings 19:12 KJV) Dallas Willard writes about.

After the group views the movie, I will ask for general impressions and responses. However, I want to be very careful not to over-interpret the movie for the class members. I want it to be a common reference point we can refer to talk about each week, an anchoring point that people can interpret for themselves in the light of what we are learning.

I will also share a few words about our need to listen to God's still, small voice and about the importance of keeping a record of moments of grace during the weeks ahead. These moments of grace can come in the form of events, people, thoughts, insights, etc. I will particularly underscore the importance of paying attention to our thoughts and feelings. As Willard writes, [One of the means] through

which God addresses us is our own spirits—our own thoughts and feelings toward ourselves as well as toward events and people around us. This, I believe, is the primary *subjective* way in which God addresses us.”⁷ Reviewing the weeks journal entries (thoughts, feelings, insights, experiences of grace, questions, prayers, drawings, etc.) will be preparation for class. Class members will be given an opportunity each week to share from their journal, if they wish.

Homework: While you are “moving,” i.e.— walking, running, exercising, cooking, cleaning, working in your yard, golfing, rocking in a chair, etc., be aware of the still, small voice of God. Record what your thoughts and feelings in your journal, either by writing or drawing.

General Homework:

- At least twice during the class, do a “work of mercy.” We will generate a list of some suggestions as a class at the end of next week’s class.
- Try fasting.⁸ There will be instruction and a recommendation of mimicking Wesley’s “favorite” fast—begin after dinner and break fast at the next evening’s meal.

Week Two: A General Discussion of Grace

This week will set the stage for the weeks to come. Since there was not time to get acquainted at the first session, we will take time during this session to explain why we are taking this class. We will then look at the three major actors in the work

⁷. Willard, *Hearing God*, 99.

⁸. Marjorie Thompson has an excellent chapter on fasting in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 69-81.

of grace—the Holy Trinity – in order to gain an understanding of the nature and role of each. We need to know whom we are responding to. We will also assess our current understanding of grace, so that we will have a point of comparison when we have completed the study.

Study of the Word: Ephesians 3:14–20. Lectio Divina⁹

Hymn: “Breathe on Me, Breath of God” #420 *Hymnal*)

Sharing from Journals

Information:

1. Wesley’s understanding of grace as “undeserved favor” and empowerment (pardon and power)
2. Role of Creator
3. Role of Jesus
4. Role of the Holy Spirit
5. Lamott’s definition of grace on her pages 139, 143.
6. “Tender Mercies”—Is this a portrait of grace? Why or why not?

Experience:

1. Record in journal your definition of grace
2. Draw a picture or make a clay model of grace
3. Discuss/share in groups of three

Debrief in full group

Celebration of Holy Communion

Homework: Generate a list of persons/events in need of prayer. Take at least five minutes each day to lift them up to God.

Week Three: Our Need for Grace: Human Sin and Brokenness

John Wesley, along with our five authors, stressed that we need to be aware of our own brokenness before we can be healed. This session will consist mostly of

9. This is the ancient practice of praying the scripture. It consists of reading, reflecting, responding, and receiving or resting in God. For a good explanation of Lectio Divina, I would particularly recommend *Soul Feast*, 22-25 and *Companions in Christ*, 91,92.

individual time, since we have not had time to build the kind of relationships yet that would make this feel like a “safe” place to share.

Study of the Word: Psalm 51. John Michael Talbot song¹⁰, then silence

Hymn: “There is a Balm in Gilead” #375 *Hymnal*

Information:

1. John Wesley’s understanding of the nature of humanity
2. Larry Crabb’s understanding of the Lower Room and Upper Room
3. Gerald May’s understanding of addiction as a barrier to grace
4. Henri Nouwen’s quote about knowing our need for God.
5. “Tender Mercies”

Experience:

1. Paraphrase Psalm 51
2. Write, draw, make a clay or Lego model, dance, act out, etc. who you are in your Lower Room and Upper Room

Debrief in full group

Celebration of Holy Communion

Homework: Pray the “Jesus Prayer”¹¹ every day.

Week Four: Grace is a Journey: Wesley’s Understanding of the Way of Salvation

This session sets the stage for the next two sessions. By learning the major stages of Wesley’s way of salvation, we will begin to understand the meaning of responsible and therapeutic grace. Just as importantly, we will be learning to view our lives as spiritual journeys where we are to be continually growing in grace. This week

10. John Michael Talbot, “Healer of My Soul,” *The John Michael Talbot Collection*. Sparrow Collection CD (Brentwood, Tenn.) 1995.

11. This is based on Luke 18:13, where the tax collector prays that God have mercy on him, a sinner. It is extensively used in the Eastern Orthodox church. It is “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” However, it can be shortened and prayer as simply as “Lord Jesus, have mercy on me.” In *Companions in Christ*, 173, they recommend inhaling on the first part and exhaling on the second.

will give the class members an opportunity to reflect on their own journeys and consider what major “lily pads”¹² have helped them along the way.

Study of the Word: Genesis 12:1–9. Group meditation ¹³

Hymn: “Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling” #348 *Hymnal*

Information:

1. John Wesley’s life story
2. His way of salvation
3. Anne Lamott’s quote about the lily pads of her faith journey¹²—discuss her story as a model for the journey of grace
4. “Tender Mercies”—Where did we see prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace?

Experience:

1. What have been your “lily pads?” Draw, prose, song, poem, prayer.
2. Share in groups of three.

Debrief in full group

Homework: Be a living prayer.¹⁴ Find various situations during the week, think “What would Jesus do?” and choose a way to be Christ.

Week Five: Grace as Responsible: The Partnership Between Us and God

We have been building up to this session and the next. Maddox believes responsible grace is the “orienting concern”¹⁵ that influences every aspect of

12. This is a reference to Anne Lamott’s statement, “My coming to faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land, and in this way I moved across the swamp of doubt and fear.” *Traveling Mercies*, 3.

13. Glen Hinson in *Companions in Christ*, 105 gives the following as a suggested way for doing group meditation on scripture: “(1) an opening period of silence or some other centering exercise, (2) a reading aloud of a particular passage of scripture, (3) a second period of silence to permit each person to meditate long enough to enter the passage with the most vivid imagination or serious reflection, (4) a time of sharing insights that came to each person, and (5) some sort of closure.”

14. E. Glenn Hinson, *Companions in Christ*, 153.

Wesley's way of salvation. We will review this way of salvation in the light of responsible grace. We will also look at how can we hear God's voice so that we can respond.

Study of the Word: Luke 15: 11–32. Group discussion - where do we see prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace?

Hymn: "Trust and Obey" #467 *Hymnal*

Information:

1. A second look at Wesley's way of salvation in the light of John Wesley's "orienting concern" of responsible grace
2. A more in depth look at Dallas Willard's listening to the still, small voice
3. "Tender Mercies"—Where did we see responsible grace?

Experience:

1. Look back through journal. Where can you see instances of responsible grace?
2. In groups of three, prepare a way to "act out" responsible grace
3. Share with full group

Debrief in full group

Homework: As you receive the news of the week—through TV, radio, or magazines, etc.—pray for the people and places involved.¹⁶

Week Six: Grace as Therapeutic: Healing Our Brokenness

After looking more closely at the theological underpinnings of therapeutic grace this week, we will gain a vision for the life we are called to live as individuals

15. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 18, 19. Maddox writes here of his understanding of "responsible grace" as an orienting concern of Wesley's. Maddox defines an orienting concern as "an integrative thematic perspective in light of which all other theological concepts are understood and given their relative meaning or value."

16. Don Postema, *Space for God: Study and Practice of Spirituality and Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 1983, 1997), 175.

and as a church community. It is a life that is the result of *therapeutic grace—a life of transformational spirituality*.

Study of the Word: John 5:2–9a. Guided Meditation¹⁷

Hymn: “Have Thine Own Way, Lord” #382 *Hymnal*

Information:

1. Wesley’s therapeutic grace: examination of the Eastern influences that shaped this idea, examination of the Holy Spirit’s role in therapeutic grace
2. Wesley’s “marks of a Methodist”
3. Larry Crabb’s vision of the church as a spiritual community where transformational spirituality can occur
4. Gerald May’s belief on grace in the healing of addictions
5. “Tender Mercies”— Where did we see therapeutic grace?

Experience:

1. Consider these topics: “Do I want to be healed?” and “When have I experienced therapeutic grace?” Journal, draw, write prose, poem, song, etc.
2. In groups of three, write a song expressing therapeutic grace
3. Share with full group Perform the songs for whole class

Debrief in full group – assess the willingness of class members to continue developing spiritual community after this class, discuss the barriers to transformational spirituality in the congregation

Homework: Take a prayer walk in Walmart, the mall, Fred Meyer, etc. Spend at least a half-hour and then write a prayer based on your experience.¹⁸

17. This story of Jesus and the man by the healing pool who had been ill for thirty eight years lends it to a guided meditation. The goal is to make this setting as real as possible and moving from Jesus asking the man “Do you want to be made well?” to Jesus asking us this question.

18. Thanks to Phil Zylla who had our D. Min. cohort take a prayer walk in a very large, busy suburban mall. We are able to relatively easily discern God in nature. What is amazing is to become acutely aware of God’s presence in the midst of a busy, impersonal indoor space.

Week Seven: Pathways to Grace: “The Means of Grace”

After learning about John Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace—what they are and their role in our transformation—we will watch an Ortberg video that discusses the role of the disciplines or means of grace in transformation. The video is not about specific means of grace as much as it is about encouraging the use of whatever “means” seem to help individuals in their transformations. The class members will have an opportunity to reflect on which means of grace they would like to have in their “toolboxes.”

Study of the Word: Isaiah 58: 6 –11. Reflection and sharing about our experiences of performing a “work of mercy”

Hymn: “You Satisfy the Hungry Heart” #629 *Hymnll*

Information:

1. John Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace
2. John and Nancy Ortberg’s video, “Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People, Session Two: Spiritual Disciplines”¹⁹
3. Gerald May’s list of instituted and prudential means of grace in Chapter 4.
4. “Tender Mercies” What means of grace did we witness?

Experience:

1. Reflect on the prudential means of grace in your life, journal about them
2. Picking up on John Ortberg’s idea of training, instead of just trying – what might your training program to “grow in grace” look like?
3. Share in groups of three

Debrief in full group

Homework: Make preparations for our feast of grace (see below).

19. John and Nancy Ortberg, “Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People,” copyrighted by the Tabgha Foundation, 2000.

Week Eight: A Love Feast: A Feast of Grace²⁰

Our modern day love feast will follow the Wesleyan tradition. For Wesley, the love feast was a means of grace because it was an opportunity for faith-sharing that would provide encouragement and support on the journey of faith.²¹

For this last class, everyone will volunteer to bring: (1) a food offering that has personal significance, (2) a contribution for the setting and decorating of the table, and (3) a “gift of grace” in the form of a poem, a prose piece, an original song, a drawing, a game – whatever each one has created as a personal expression of grace. We will eat, share our offerings, and celebrate Holy Communion together at the conclusion of the meal.

Closing Thoughts

Writing this dissertation has been an incredible journey for me. First of all, it has enabled me to return to my roots. I have a new appreciation for my Methodist heritage in general and for the thought and life of John Wesley in particular.

Second, researching and writing the dissertation has really forced me to move beyond a superficial and relatively unreflective understanding of grace. I believe this new understanding has already borne fruit for my congregation. I have found myself articulating the message of responsible, therapeutic grace in sermons, counseling sessions, small groups, and Bible studies.

20. Once again I am indebted to Phil Zylla, for this session’s basic idea. He had my classmates and me participate in a “Feast of Hope” on the last day of class, and I’ve modeled my “Feast of Grace” on this idea. It was a powerful experience to gather around a beautifully set and decorated table, eating delicious food the class had provided and sharing our written offerings of hope with one another. It was indeed a “means of grace.”

21. John Wesley, journal entry, 19 July, 1761 in *Works*, 21:336.

Wrestling with Wesley's ideas in preparation for writing this dissertation has finally brought me to a point where I "get it" enough to communicate the message of grace in accessible, understandable ways. This journey has certainly reminded me that the less I understand something, the more abstractly I speak of it. When I find myself throwing around terms like "prevenient" or making excessively abstract theological statements about grace, I now catch myself. John Wesley knew the importance of making theological concepts understandable. As he wrote in the preface to his collection of sermons,

I design plain truth for plain people. Therefore of set purpose I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations, from all perplexed and intricate reasonings, and as far as possible from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scriptures. I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and in particular those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in bodies of divinity...²²

Finally, and most importantly, this dissertation has helped me conclude something important regarding Wesley's understanding of grace as *responsible* and *therapeutic*: I believe this understanding can play a role in the promotion of *transformational spirituality*. Responsible and therapeutic grace calls us to be alert to God's voice and to be willing to respond. It gives us a vision of the spiritual life that is healing and joyful. It calls us to never be satisfied with where we are, but to always be "stirring up the grace we have" and moving forward. It shows us that we do not need to despair because perfection is so far away, but rather, that we can rejoice at how much closer we are getting to God each day.

And so, my journey of *responsible, therapeutic grace* has begun...

22. John Wesley, "Preface to Sermons," 1746, in *Works*, 1:104.

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Chair of the General Secretaries Election Committee, 1988-1992

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