

“THE GENERAL MEANS OF GRACE”

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Meeting in Conference in 1745, John Wesley introduced a concept to the people called Methodists that has been overlooked ever since: the general means of grace. Far more well-known are the instituted means of grace and prudential means of grace, two categories that Wesley develops in more detail. Yet a close reading of the material Wesley does provide on the general means of grace reveals that they are of great importance to his understanding of the efficacy of the means of grace generally in practical discipleship. Indeed, without the general means of grace, the very notion of a set of practices that mediate the transformative power of God’s love is rendered hollow. In other words, the general means of grace are necessary for any of the means of grace to have real significance. This essay seeks to articulate Wesley’s understanding of the general means of grace, both in order to illuminate the meaning of the general means of grace *per se* and to explicate their relationship to the other main categories in Wesley’s theology of the means of grace. Following this examination, the essay concludes with reflections on the significance of the general means of grace for a contemplative Wesleyan practice of discipleship.

Description of the General Means of Grace

While the topic of the means of grace is considered with some regularity in considerations of Wesley’s theology, the general means of grace stand as a sub-category within that topic that is typically neglected.² There is some justification for this neglect in the sense that Wesley deals with other sub-categories of the means of grace with greater frequency—the instituted and prudential means of grace or, as he often characterizes them, works of piety and works of mercy.³

¹ The author would like to dedicate this essay to Prof. Richard P. Heitzenrater of Duke Divinity School, whose fascination with the phrase, “exercise of the presence of God,” served as a spark to my initial investigation of the general means of grace and led to the research contained herein.

² The most significant exceptions here are the brief treatments found in Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Definitive Study of John Wesley’s Theology of Worship*, Reprint edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 104-105; and Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 2-5, 122-126, and 173-175.

³ Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to go into detail, it is important to point out that there is not an exact equivalence between “works of mercy” and “prudential means of grace.” The works of mercy are crucially important examples of the prudential means of grace, but they do not exhaust all that can be considered as such. See, e.g., Andrew C. Thompson, “John Wesley and the Means of Grace: Historical and Theological Context” (ThD diss., Duke Divinity School, 2012), 146-150.

We do see the general means of grace named as such in the *Minutes* of the 1745 Conference, where Wesley presents them as follows:

Q. 11. How should we wait for the fulfilling of this promise [of entire sanctification]?

A. In universal obedience; in keeping all the commandments; in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily. These are the general means which God hath ordained for our receiving his sanctifying grace. The particular are prayer, searching the Scripture, communicating, and fasting.⁴

The distinctions between “general” and “particular” offer the first clue about what Wesley means by such a category. The latter term refers to items that Wesley elsewhere calls the instituted means of grace or works of piety; they are discrete practices of worship or devotion the he sees as enjoined in the teaching and example of Jesus Christ in the gospels. General means, on the other hand, refer less to discrete practices and more to broad approaches to the practice of the faith that require an intentional awareness of one’s motivations in thought, word, and action. They are—in the phrase of Henry Knight—“graced responses to grace received” that collectively constitute a kind of faithful disposition toward all that one does in pursuit of sanctification.⁵

Wesley does not appear to utilize the phrase “general means of grace” elsewhere, but he does develop the concept at a number of different points. One of the chief places he does so is found in the body of doctrinal material commonly known as the *Large Minutes*. A late edition of the *Large Minutes* presents Wesley’s most detailed listing of all the means of grace; the instituted and prudential means of grace are explicitly named as such, whereas a version of the general means of grace is listed by item but without using the specific term. Following his explanation of the instituted and prudential means of grace, Wesley writes, “These means may be used without fruit. But there are some means which cannot; namely, watching, denying ourselves, taking up our cross, [and the] exercise of the presence of God.”⁶

The categorization of the means of grace in the *Large Minutes* shows the way in which Wesley views the means of grace as essential alongside those that he calls instituted and prudential (which leaves the contemporary reader at something of a loss as to why he *doesn’t* use the category term). The specific examples he includes have a great deal of overlap with the earlier listing in the 1745 *Minutes*, although some items are left out (universal obedience, keeping all the commandments) while others are added (watching, exercise of the presence of God).

In addition to simply presenting the general means of grace as important for inclusion alongside the instituted and prudential means of grace in the

⁴ Wesley, *Minutes* for the 1745 Conference, in *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, ed. Henry D. Rack, vol. 10 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976—), 155. Hereafter cited as *Works*.

⁵ See Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 125.

⁶ Wesley, *Minutes of Several Conversations between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley, and others, From the year 1744, to the Year 1780*, in *Works* 10:924. Hereafter cited as *Large Minutes*.

Large Minutes, Wesley also gives clues as to the dispositional character of the general means as they are practiced by Christian believers. This fact is somewhat obscured by the actual form of this section of the *Large Minutes*, in which Wesley follows the list of examples of the general means of grace with a series of questions for consideration by the reader. His purpose in posing the questions is to draw out reflections on how the general means of grace are appropriated in daily practice—a technique that can be illuminated by breaking the text into parallel columns and attaching each of the general means with its connected question(s) as seen below:

The Large Minutes of 1780, 1789

General Means of Grace	Questions for Consideration
Watching	1. Do you steadily watch against the world? The devil? Yourselves? Your besetting sin?
Denying Ourselves	2. Do you deny yourself every useless pleasure of sense? Imagination? Honour? Are you temperate in all things? Instance in food. Do you use only that kind and that degree which is best both for your body and soul? Do you see the necessity of this?
	3. Do you eat no flesh-suppers? No late suppers?
	4. Do you eat no more at each meal than is necessary? Are you not heavy or drowsy after dinner?
	5. Do you use only that kind and that degree of drink which is best both for your body and soul?
	6. Do you drink water? Why not? Did you ever? Why did you leave it off? If not for health, when will you begin again? Today?
	7. How often do you drink wine or ale? Every day? Do you want [i.e., need] it?
Taking Up Our Cross	8. Wherein do you ‘take up your cross daily’? Do you cheerfully ‘bear your cross’ (whatever is grievous to nature) as a gift of God, and labour to profit thereby?
Exercise of the Presence of God	9. Do you endeavour to set God always before you? To see his eye continually fixed upon you?

When viewed in this way, the *Large Minutes* support the notion that the general means of grace are intended collectively as a broad approach to the practice of the faith that includes intentional self-examination about all aspects of one’s daily habits. And as Wesley states in the introduction to the section, he believes these are means of grace that cannot but produce fruit when used properly. Wesley echoes that sentiment following the questions for consideration with his closing remark: “Never can you use these means but a blessing will ensue. And the more you use them the more will you grow in grace.”⁷

⁷ Wesley, *Large Minutes*, in *Works* 10:924.

Purpose of the General Means of Grace

The strong claim Wesley makes about the efficacy of the general means of grace to always bear fruit leads to a significant question for his whole theology of the means of grace: Why is it that the general means of grace will always be effective whereas it is possible for the instituted and prudential means of grace to be used in vain? The reasoning behind this distinction is related to the particular kind of discipline that the general means of grace require. The hope is that *all* the means of grace would be engaged with sincere intention and openness to the working of the grace that is conveyed through them; but the reality is that the instituted and prudential means of grace could be undertaken in a rote manner. They could be practiced out of sheer habit and with only the barest mechanical commitment. The instituted and prudential means of grace are discrete practices that are possible to be performed by “going through the motions” or even with an intentional hardness of heart. Such is not the case with the general means of grace, which by their nature call for a searching self-examination and daily reflection on one’s attitudes and motivations. They are, in this sense, forms of inward spiritual discipline that produce a disposition causing one to be constantly attentive to God and the things of God.

Wesley’s assurance about the efficacy of the general means of grace is expressed in his 1760 sermon, “Self-denial,” when he links the practice of the means of grace with conformity to the will of God. His interest in the sermon is, in particular, the two means of grace expressed in Jesus Christ’s call to deny oneself and take up the cross (cf. Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23). In its fallen state, the human will “naturally” pursues forms of life that only contribute to continual sin. The fallen man or woman has a will that is “wholly bent to indulge our natural corruption.”⁸ In just this sense, Wesley juxtaposes the fallen human will against the will of God:

The will of God is a path leading straight to God. The will of man which once ran parallel with it is now another path, not only different from it, but in our present state directly contrary to it. It leads from God; if therefore we walk in the one, we must necessarily quit the other. We cannot walk in both.⁹

Self-denial, in this context, is tantamount to denying these corrupting tendencies resident within us. It consists of denying oneself the sinful thoughts and actions—all of them forms of self-indulgence—that separate one from God. Wesley describes this by stating that “to deny ourselves is to deny our own will where it does not fall in with the will of God, and that however pleasing it may be.”¹⁰ And if self-denial means the removal of obstacles to

⁸ Wesley, “Self-denial,” ¶I.3, in *Works* 2:242.

⁹ Wesley, “Self-denial,” ¶I.4, in *Works* 2:242.

¹⁰ Wesley, “Self-denial,” ¶I.6, in *Works* 2:243. Cf. Wesley’s statement to Ann Bolton, “It is true one grand means of grace is the doing the will of our Lord. But the suffering it [i.e., God’s will] is usually a quicker means and sinks us deeper into the abyss of love.” See Wesley, “Letter to Ann Bolton,” 1 August 1789, in vol. 8 of *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, Standard Edition, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 157-158.

God, then taking up one's cross is the work of conforming oneself to the will of God. He defines a "cross" in this sense as "anything contrary to our will, anything displeasing to our nature."¹¹ Such examples of cross-bearing do not consist of masochistic forms of discipline injurious to bodily health; about this, Wesley is quite clear.¹² He is not altogether clear on exactly what he means by cross-bearing in terms of examples, although he offers such images as "when we voluntarily suffer what it is in our power to avoid," "when we willingly embrace the will of God, though contrary to our own," and "choosing wholesome, though bitter, medicines . . . [and] freely accepting temporary pain, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, when it is either essentially or accidentally necessary to eternal pleasure."¹³ This approach to discipleship is not initially a welcome experience for any person exactly because it goes against the state in which human beings find themselves; but it is possible by the power of the grace that such practices mediate and necessary for those who seek to be "fully a disciple of Christ."¹⁴

By extension the same logic operative in self-denial and cross-bearing can be applied to Wesley's other items among the general means of grace. They are all forms of inward discipline whereby one comes into harmony with God's will through the operation of his grace. All such means of grace will bear fruit because the proper use of them simply *is* the work of becoming inwardly transformed. This process is not an act of the will (as Knight has rightly observed) but rather the result of the gracious activity of God.¹⁵ Furthermore, it is simply not possible to engage in this kind of practice in the rote way that is possible with the instituted and prudential means of grace; unlike the bare activity of verbal prayer or receiving the Lord's Supper, for instance, the kind of contemplative work represented by the general means of grace is not feasible apart from full-hearted engagement. Wesley has a deep and abiding concern for the danger represented by the dissipation of a faith once held; he describes dissipation as "the uncentring of the soul from God" and sees it as a continual threat for even those of robust faith.¹⁶ Dissipation is a danger simply because human beings live in a fallen world where sensible objects and pleasures tend to draw their attention downward and away from God.¹⁷ The general means of grace are central to the very

¹¹ Wesley, "Self-denial," ¶I.7, in *Works* 2:243.

¹² See Wesley, "Self-denial," ¶I.14, in *Works* 2:245, where Wesley cites as examples "tearing our own flesh: the wearing of haircloth, or iron girdles"(!).

¹³ Wesley, "Self-denial," ¶¶I.11-14, in *Works* 2:244-245.

¹⁴ Wesley, "Self-denial," ¶II.7, in *Works* 2:248.

¹⁵ Note, for example, the discussion of the general means of grace as related to the inward transformation of the soul in Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 122-126.

¹⁶ Wesley, "On Dissipation," ¶I.1, in *Works* 3:120. Cf. Knight's interpretation of dissipation in Wesley in Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 32-35 and 104-108.

¹⁷ See Wesley, "On Dissipation," ¶6, in *Works* 3:118, where Wesley offers this extended description about the reality of life in a fallen world: "We are encompassed on all sides with persons and things that tend to draw us from our centre. Indeed every creature, if we are not continually on our guard, will draw us from our Creator. The whole visible world, all we see, hear, or touch, all the objects either of our senses or understanding, have a tendency to dissipate our thoughts from the invisible world, and to distract our minds from attending to him who is both the author and end of our being."

process of sanctification because the kind of inward discipline that they nurture is the best vehicle for keeping one focused on the holy. In his sermon, “On Dissipation” from 1784, Wesley specifically cites the general means of grace he calls “the exercise of the presence of God” as emblematic of the type of religious life required to check dissipation and continue the growth in holiness of heart and life.¹⁸

With the central place of the general means of grace in nurturing faithful discipleship established, there is one further point of consideration to make regarding these means’ purpose. For Wesley, the general means of grace function as the basis from which all the other means of grace can be used effectively. Knight points to this characteristic of the means of grace where he refers to them as “mutually interdependent,” affirming that they “together form a necessary pattern of activity for the Christian life.”¹⁹ Within this pattern of interactivity, there is a kind of logical priority given to the general means of grace over the instituted and prudential means of grace in that they exist as “attitudes which underlie all the means of grace.”²⁰

Evidence for the function of the general means of grace *vis-à-vis* all the other means of grace is found in Wesley at points where he describes how and why some of the means of grace are sometimes used fruitlessly. Citing a version of the General Rules (do no harm, do good, attend upon the ordinances of God), Wesley at one point disparages such outward expressions of faith as “what the world accounts religion.”²¹ Such a comment would seem remarkable, given that the General Rules played a key role in the organization and discipline of all the Methodist societies from the early 1740s onward and that they essentially summarize what he means by instituted and prudential means of grace. Equally striking are comments elsewhere by Wesley that some people can engage in works of mercy like feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, or works of piety such as attending worship and engaging in prayer, while at the same time they “have no religion at all.”²² Yet time and time again, he will assert that persons can use “the means of grace; yea, all of them, and at all opportunities” and still be only an “almost Christian.”²³ His point in such criticisms is related to the possibility of a kind of formalism whereby those means of grace that consist of outward actions can always be used in a purely outward manner. All the instituted and prudential means of grace fall into this category. What is needed for them to be effective is an inward disposition of heart—the right kind of character—that allows them to be engaged for no other reason than as means of drawing near to God.²⁴ It is just at this point that the general means of grace are seen to

¹⁸ Wesley, “On Dissipation,” ¶19, in *Works* 3:123.

¹⁹ Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 13.

²⁰ Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 126.

²¹ Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, II,” ¶II.4, in *Works* 1:496.

²² Wesley, “The Way to the Kingdom,” ¶I.5, in *Works* 1:219-220; and Wesley, “The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption,” ¶IV.3, in *Works* 1:265-266.

²³ Wesley, “The Almost Christian,” ¶I.7, in *Works* 1:134.

²⁴ See, e.g., Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” ¶II.2, in *Works* 1:381.

be indispensable. It is not that the general means of grace produce faith in one who does not have it; faith is a pure gift of God.²⁵ But the general means of grace do serve as the manner by which that faith is safeguarded and built up, assisting the Christian believer in a practice of discipleship that leads to a progressive sanctification.

Significance of the General Means of Grace

Wesley's account of the Christian life is undeniably that of a highly active practice. It is no accident that he counts true faith to be a "faith which worketh by love."²⁶ Given that consistent emphasis, perhaps the most striking feature of the general means of grace is their highly contemplative character. The focus of the general means of grace for the Christian believer is not outward, but inward. They call upon a person to carry out a regular self-examination and, indeed, a regular self-correction so that the heart is devoted fully to the will of God. There is an undeniably meditative quality to such a religious life. There is no reason why this kind of contemplative discipleship must necessarily be at odds with a more active and outward focus alongside it, but it is certainly not the aspect of Wesley's approach to the Christian life that is usually accented in the present.

In fact, the part of Wesley's theological understanding that leads him to make a prominent place for the general means of grace is no outlier in the overall framework of his approach to the Christian life. It originates early on, during his time as a student and then tutor at Oxford University in the 1720s and early 1730s. Wesley's reading of the holy living tradition is one prominent example of how this aspect of his theology finds early expression. He himself cites the influence of Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law in the opening section of the much later *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* as those who showed him the "religion of the heart."²⁷ Added to these are a large number of spiritual writers whom he read with appreciation while at Oxford.²⁸ These holy living divines served as exemplars of the "imitation of Christ" (to echo the title of Kempis' well known work), where imitation is seen not so much as the copying of Jesus' life as it is the embodying of virtues like meekness, humility, and self-sacrifice connected with Christ's character.²⁹

Moreover, the desire to cultivate the inward life went beyond Wesley's reading and became a central part of the devotional practice of the Oxford Methodists. Richard Heitzenrater uses the term "meditative piety" to de-

²⁵ Wesley takes care to make this point regarding the use of any means of grace in the context of salvation *sola gratia* in Wesley, "The Means of Grace," ¶II.6, in *Works* 1:383.

²⁶ See e.g., Wesley, "The Almost Christian," ¶¶II.3-6, in *Works* 1:138-139; "On Charity," ¶III.11, in *Works* 3:306; and *Journal* for 16 June 1741, in *Works* 19:201. Cf. Galatians 5:6.

²⁷ Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, ¶¶2-4 (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1952), 5-6.

²⁸ See, e.g., Geordan Hammond, "John Wesley and 'Imitating' Christ," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45:1 (Spring 2010):198-201.

²⁹ Hammond, "John Wesley and 'Imitating' Christ," 205-206.

scribe the Oxford Methodists' approach—a type of practice that certainly included active studying and social outreach, but which had a deep sense of contemplation at its core.³⁰ As early as 1725, Wesley's diary records such an approach. In recording his attempt to progress in the spiritual life, he does include practical aspirations around avoiding both "freedom with women" and "high-seasoned meats," as well as a desire to "use frequent and fervent prayer."³¹ But in the same breath, he also includes a striking phrase that echoes the general means of grace: "To entertain awful apprehensions of the presence of God."³² Within a few years, Wesley's diary technique had become so rigorous that he used it to examine both his actions and thoughts, as well as their underlying motivations, on almost an hourly basis.³³ He also led his fellow Methodists in Oxford in a daily self-examination around certain prescribed virtues: the Love of God and Love of Man headed the list each week, but they were followed by such items as humility, mortification, self-denial, resignation, and thankfulness.³⁴

Older interpretations of Wesley liked to depict his pre-Aldersgate life as a hopeless kind of legalism that embodied a works' righteousness conception of faith. Such characterizations are unfair and historically inaccurate.³⁵ Wesley clearly had spiritual struggles, both in Oxford and later in the Georgia colony. But his approach to discipleship was not that of works' righteousness. It is best characterized as a "virtue theology," where by the assistance of God's grace one can hope to have Christian virtues formed in the soul.³⁶ It is here that the logic of the general means of grace *vis-à-vis* all the other means of grace (instituted and prudential) finds its origin. When persons embody Christlike virtues, they gain a "right state of soul," which is a "habitual disposition" that is equivalent to what is meant by "holiness."³⁷ This is, for Wesley, the substance of "inward religion." It is not inward to the exclusion of the outward; rather, it is a logically prior inward that, once attained, leads one to certain outward actions and habits. The practice of discipleship that arises out of a virtuous disposition has the ability to further develop that disposition exactly because it is a practice done from a right intention. The outward form of the work is worth nothing on its own; but with a rightly formed heart guiding it, it becomes a true means of grace.

³⁰ See, e.g., Richard P. Heitzenrater, "The Meditative Piety of the Oxford Methodists," in *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 78-105.

³¹ Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 53.

³² Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 53.

³³ See the example in Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 59-62. Heitzenrater characterizes the diary at this stage as "an exacting instrument for taking his spiritual pulse" (59).

³⁴ Heitzenrater, "The *Imitatio Christi* and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley's Ministry with the Poor," in *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 56-57.

³⁵ For the major revision of the Aldersgate paradigm, see the essays in Randy L. Maddox, ed., *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990).

³⁶ This is a major argument of Heitzenrater's in Heitzenrater, "The *Imitatio Christi* and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley's Ministry with the Poor," 49-63.

³⁷ Wesley, "Circumcision of the Heart," ¶¶3-I.1, in *Works* 1:402.

Wesley never lost the meditative piety of his Oxford period. His interest in the contemplative aspect of the Christian life continued and became integrated into his theology of the means of grace. Through his articulation of the general means of grace, he was able to situate the contemplative practice that such means represent within a larger framework of discipleship that included both the contemplative and the active in a unified whole. In that framework, the general means of grace retain a prominent place with explanatory power as to how outward actions can be inwardly efficacious through the operation of God's grace.

Conclusion

Along with the greater attention that the instituted and prudential means of grace have received in explorations of Wesley's theology in recent years, the general means of grace deserve a prominent place. There is clearly not as much development of the general means of grace under that categorical heading in Wesley's writing, but the concept is present and consistent from early to late in his life. Moreover, the theology of the means of grace is not fully coherent without the general means of grace. It is these means in particular, and the pattern of interactivity amongst all the means of grace, that allow Wesley's theology of the means of grace to find real coherence within his understanding of present salvation. The general means of grace may have one other point to commend them as well, in that they provide an excellent resource for a contemplative Wesleyan practice that is equally as applicable in the present as it was in early Methodism.