

WESLEYAN THEOLOGY: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
A RESPONSE:

Mark Maddix, Northwest Nazarene University

It is a privilege for me to respond to my friend, Klaus Arnold's paper entitled, "Wesleyan Theology: A Practical Theology." Arnold's primary thesis is that Wesleyan theology is by nature practical, as defined by whatever agrees with right belief (orthodoxy), right practice (orthopraxis), and genuine experience of the presence of God (orthopathy). Practical theology is always concerned with, and focused on, *the renewal in the image of God (Christlikeness)*---which is the soteriological focus of Wesleyan theology.¹ This soteriological focus is reflected in Wesley's view of salvation as a gift of grace and in the divine-human synergism, enabled by prevenient grace, which leads to the transformation of persons into the image of God.

I am also in agreement with the seven principles of practical Wesleyanism that Arnold proposes in his paper. I believe that each of these aspects of practical Wesleyanism is needed to inform the mission of the Church. I believe, however, that central to a Wesleyan practical theology, and more specifically the implications of our Wesleyan theology for *missio dei*, is a renewed focus on Wesley's view of prevenient grace. I also want to propose that a greater focus needs to be given to Wesley's "means of grace" as an avenue of formation and discipleship.

Prevenient Grace

The key to Wesley's soteriological doctrines is his understanding of God's grace.² But what is grace, and how does it function according to his understanding of salvation? Western theologians generally have defined grace as divine pardon and forgiveness, whereas Eastern theologians have interpreted grace as the power of God working within to renew our nature.³ Wesley employs both aspects and defines grace as God's love for humanity made evident in Christ. This grace, when it is received, both communicates forgiveness and makes renewal possible. Because the very nature of God is love, God's love is intended to be received, and to create that bond which is to receive and reciprocate love.⁴ It is this bond which enables the creature to share in the nature of God, and thus renewed in God's image. This theme of God's

¹ Arnold, Klaus. *Wesleyan Theology: A Practical Theology*, p. 2.

² Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 26.

³ Maddox, 23.

⁴ Runyon, 26

commitment to mercy and love for creation and God's gracious identification in the incarnation is central to Wesley's "optimism of grace." Because grace is God's loving presence, it cannot be forced upon us. It is not irresistible, as some predestinarians assert.⁵ Depriving human beings of freedom is not the nature of God's grace. Yet grace does make possible the human response by the prompting of God's Spirit at work in us both to communicate love and to begin the process of renewal. The work of the Holy Spirit is active in our lives even before we are aware of this activity.

Wesley's argued, on the one hand, that fallen humans cannot save themselves apart from the action of the re-creative Spirit. But he argued, on the other, that God continually intervenes in the human situation to open new possibilities for us to respond in love.⁶ Wesley's intention is to hold together divine initiative and human responsibility, which is referred to as "co-operant grace" or "responsible grace."⁷

The divine-human synergism is central to Wesleyan theology and the practice of ministry. First, it reminds us that we are "co-creators" with God in the redemption of humanity and all creation. As we engage the proclamation of the gospel in our cultural context we can be assured that God is already working seeking to restore all of creation. It also reminds us that regardless of a person's religious background or heritage God is at work in his or her lives, drawing him or her to God.

A Wesleyan view of prevenient grace has implications for evangelism and *missio dei*. Wesley is convinced that God's Spirit is at work everywhere in the world extending prevenient grace among all peoples. Thus, as Christians we can be assured as we go into the world to proclaim the gospel knowing that the Spirit is already present before we arrive, even as God is present in our own lives, making possible the reconciliation and new birth. God's presence in every human life gives each person infinite value as the object of God's caring. If the Spirit is not intimidated by unbelief, should we be? Wesley's "optimism of grace" is a confidence grounded in the universal activity of God.

A Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace may suggest a viable response to the call today for dialogue between other religions.⁸ We need to affirm that those outside the community

⁵ Runyon, 27.

⁶ Runyon, 28.

⁷ Maddox, 92.

⁸ Runyon, 34.

of Christian faith may also have insights and therefore be important dialogue partners.⁹ It also affirms that human existence is not separated between the sacred and the secular. This approach reflects a Wesleyan perspective that is Trinitarian rather than exclusively Christological. The Spirit is wider-ranging than the explicit knowledge of God through Christ and goes where Christ is yet to be known. But the Spirit is not independent of Christ. The God who acts through the Spirit is the God whom Christ reveals as loving, who seeks out human beings wherever they are.

Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace helps us understand the very nature of God as love that enables human freedom. These two fundamental Wesleyan doctrines are often confused in the practice of ministry due to our over emphasis on the sovereignty of God, reflecting a Reformed theology, and our lack of focus on human agency. Maybe a point of discussion for us centers on human freedom and divine sovereignty. How does prevenient grace speak to issues of human freedom, divine sovereignty and theodicy? All of which have implications for a Wesleyan practical theology.

Means of Grace

Wesley's understanding of grace is both *forensic* and *therapeutic*. The forensic metaphors have dominated Western Christianity, including both Protestant and Catholic. The forensic metaphor is the law court, and grace is supplied by the judge who by rights should condemn but chooses instead to be generous and to free the offender, granting the offender the effective forensic status of being pardoned before the law. Wesley also uses therapeutic metaphors, which are more characteristic to Eastern Fathers-the healing and renewing metaphors that indicate not just a release from the burden of sin but a restoration toward health. Thus, grace is not one generous act by a judge but a process involving the constant presence of the Spirit drawing the person into a relationship that will sustain and reinforce a person on his/her journey. Both metaphors are used in Wesley's doctrine of justification which includes releasing and freeing from sin, as well as the healing power of love.¹⁰ The gradual therapeutic process that grows out of our responsive participation in God's forgiving and empowering grace is neither unilateral nor spontaneous in our lives; it must be progressively empowered and responsibly nurtured along the Way of Salvation, which leads to Wesley's understanding of the "means of grace."¹¹

⁹ Runyon, 34.

¹⁰ Runyon, 29

¹¹ It is important to distinguish between grace that is uncreated and grace that is created. Wesley believed that grace is the uncreated Presence of the Holy Spirit and that it can be mediated through created means,

One of the primary orienting concerns of Wesley's practical theology is the "means of grace." In Wesley's sermon "The Means of Grace" he states, "by means of grace are outward signs, words, or actions, ordained by God, and appointed for this end, to be ordinary channels whereby God might convey to men preventing, justifying and sanctifying grace."¹² Wesley uses the word "means" with the word "ordinance" on occasion as an indicator that this participation was expected by God.¹³ While the Means of Grace themselves had no salvific worth, they were channels by which the Holy Spirit works in extraordinary ways. The means, like grace, were available to all, even to those who did not yet experience what Wesley calls "salvation."¹⁴

As grace was dynamic, so were the Means of Grace. The result was there were many different forms which Wesley categorized as either Instituted or Prudential Means of Grace.¹⁵ Wesley believed that the Instituted¹⁶ means were evident in the life of Christ. These means of grace, particularly in their corporate expressions, mirror the intended and ongoing sacramental life of the church. The Prudential Means of Grace were designed to meet the person at his or her point of need, thus they are adaptable to a person particular historical situation or context. Thus, the means of grace have both individual and communal aspects necessary for Christian formation and discipleship.

Wesley didn't confine God's grace to just these practices. Because he understood grace to be God's loving uncreated presence, he believed many other activities could be means of grace. Thus, grace is still active even among those who have no access to specific means like Christian baptism, the Eucharist, or the study of Scripture.

However, Wesley believed that by participation in the instituted means of grace a person can be made aware of God's pardoning and empowering Presence on a regular basis. Wesley's therapeutic focus is evident in his invitation for his people to meditate regularly on the

but is not confined to such means. Thus, it must be active in at least its initial universal dimension among those who have no access to specific means like Christian baptism or the study of Scripture (See Maddox, 192).

¹² John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1832, 1986), vol. 5, 187.

¹³ Wesley, 185.

¹⁴ Dean Blevins, "Worship: Formation and Discernment." *Wesley Theological Journal*, 33: 1 (Spring, 1998), 120-121. See Henry Hawthorn Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1992); Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1985); Staples, Rob. *Outward Signs and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in the Wesleyan Tradition*. (Beacon Hill: Kansas City, 1991).

¹⁵ Blevins, 121.

¹⁶ Instituted Means: The Lord's Supper, Prayer, Scripture, and Christian Conferencing.

affirmation that Christ “sealed His love with sacraments of grace, to breed and nourish up in us the life of love.”¹⁷ Thus, all who need further empowering by God’s grace should faithfully participate in the instituted means of grace.

One might be wondering, what is the relationship between prevenient grace and the means of grace? Wesley employed prevenient grace to invigorate Christians. Wesley assigned to prevenient grace not only the upholding of our partially-restored human faculties but also the initial specific overtures of these faculties. Although prevenient grace is universal, many have stifled these overtures and fallen “asleep.” If the work of God is to proceed in their lives, they must be awakened anew to these overtures and conviction to their need.¹⁸ Thus, participation in the means of grace could nourish and guide a person to “holiness of heart and life.” Wesley also believed that the chief means of grace, the Eucharist, was capable of conveying preventing as well as justifying and sanctifying grace. Therefore, Wesley placed emphasis on the Lord’s Supper as a converting ordinance and “open table.”¹⁹ In our conversations it might be helpful to discuss how the Church of the Nazarene can revision the practices of the “means of grace” in both personal and communal life as a framework for Christian formation and discipleship.

Conclusion

Klaus Arnold’s paper has adequately indicated that Wesley’s theology is a practical theology. His assertion that practical theology is therefore always concerned with, and focused on, *the renewal in the image of God (Christlikeness)*---which is the soteriological focus of Wesleyan theology. I have added to Arnold’s thesis that a more robust view of Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace has implications for evangelism and *mission dei* and the “Means of Grace” has implications for Christian formation and discipleship in the Church of the Nazarene. A renewed focus in these two areas can help the Church of the Nazarene be adapt a more Wesleyan practical theology, without being misguided by mainstream evangelicalism and fundamentalist thought.²⁰

¹⁷ Maddox, 200.

¹⁸ Maddox, 228-229.

¹⁹ Rob Staples, *Outward Signs and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in the Wesleyan Tradition*. (Beacon Hill: Kansas City, 1991)

²⁰ See Maddix, Mark. *Reflecting John Wesley’s Theology and Educational Perspective: Comparing Nazarene Pastors, Christian Educators, and Professors of Christian Education*. (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Ann Arbor: UMI), p. 11-18.

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