

Works of Mercy as a Vital Component to Sanctification: A Reflection on Wesley's Social Ministry and Theology

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INTRODUCTION

The idea that John Wesley's ministry was largely focused upon social responsibility is not a new discovery; social action was an integral component of Wesley's life. For Wesley, works of mercy are a crucial dimension in the Christian life, as shown through his writings, sermons and, actions. Wesley was oriented toward a social lifestyle from the very beginning of his life. A social lifestyle was facilitated by his upbringing, and this commitment took shape in his early days at Oxford with the "Holy Club." More importantly, Wesley pursued the area of social ministry throughout his life, never deserting the cause. Wesley not only regularly wrote and preached about the necessity of "works of mercy," but he exemplified social responsibility through his actions. As Wesley grew older and could no longer actually perform physical work and deeds, he continued to preach diligently on the importance of social action.

The question then becomes, why did Wesley hold works of mercy to be so vital to the Christian life? It is the objective of this essay to explore the contribution that works of mercy have on the Christian life by virtue of their fundamental role in sanctification. Moreover, it is to show that Wesley held works of mercy to be a necessary part of the "imitation of Christ," and more importantly, an essential but often overlooked part of spiritual formation. To begin, it is necessary to examine background information to understand the contribution works of mercy has on spiritual formation. This includes Wesley's accomplishments, Wesley's perception of sanctification in his *via salutis* and Wesley's understanding of final sanctification. It is also useful to juxtapose Wesley's unique ideas against other theologians to highlight important elements of his thought. Only then can works of mercy begin to be understood as a vital component in the process of sanctification.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WESLEY'S CONNECTION BETWEEN WORKS OF MERCY AND SANCTIFICATION

Wesley's Devotion to Works of Mercy

Initially, it is beneficial to present the many different areas of "works of mercy" that John Wesley held to be important. Wesleyan scholar Richard Heitzenrater summarizes some of Wesley's important deeds as being, "teaching, feeding, and clothing poor children; furnishing gainful employment to the jobless; giving loans to struggling entrepreneurs; visiting the sick and the prisoners; providing food, money, clothing shelter, books, medicine, and other essentials to the needy."¹

Heitzenrater maintains that the deeds Wesley performed were uncharacteristic for an individual of such distinction and background. Wesley's interest in social works was not normal for an Oxford don who was educated at one of the best Oxford colleges and was from a background of scholarly parents.²

Wesley was involved in numerous works of mercy throughout his lifetime and therefore each area cannot be examined in detail. However, in order to show Wesley's lifelong devotion to works of mercy, it is beneficial to discuss three specific areas toward which Wesley continually devoted programs. These areas were assisting the poor, assisting the sick, and providing education for children and adults. An understanding of these three areas will be beneficial later to understand the transformative impact of works of mercy.

First, one of Wesley's chief concerns was the issue of money in the assistance of the poor. Wesley's concern for money never left him, partly because the widespread poverty throughout England. One of the ways in which Wesley attempted to make a difference to the poor is by addressing the dangers of money. His beliefs in the dangers of the misuse of money is apparent throughout his life, beginning especially with his 1748-1750 sermons on "The Sermon on the Mount" and continuing through sermons he wrote in his elder years, such as "The Danger of Riches" (1781), "On Riches" (1788), and "The Danger of Increasing Riches" (1790). Additionally, Wesley is noted for his 1760 sermon, "The Use of Money" in which he promotes the three rules, "Gain all you can," "Save all you can," and "Give all you can."³ Wesley epitomized these three rules, especially the latter, by developing programs to give food, clothes, and housing to relieve the helpless. More importantly, Wesley impacted his society by boosting employment, thereby helping those in need to achieve self-sufficiency.

Secondly, Wesley's social ministry was strongly focused upon the sick. One of Wesley's most important sermons, "On Visiting the Sick" (1786), illustrates the depth of his compassion. More than merely writing, Wesley established free medical clinics in London, Newcastle, and Bristol. Wesley's Foundery clinic is sometimes called the first free public medical clinic in London.⁴ Additionally, Wesley is known for instituting the group entitled, "visitors of the sick," in 1741 to minister throughout places with Methodist presence.⁵ Wesley was also interested in the prevention of illness, in addition to the prevention of poverty; consequently, he frequently read and studied about disease prevention.⁶ A primary example of this interest is in his 1747 publication *Primitive Physick; or an Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*.

A last category of programs that Wesley activated is educational programs. Wesley held education to be pertinent not only to train children, but also to liberate uneducated adults. For this reason, Wesley founded schools in many places including the Foundery, Bristol, and Newcastle, but he is most famous for the beginning the ever demanding Kingswood School of 1748. Wesley also established a publishing system on behalf of the adults to provide cheap books or pamphlets to educate the poor on the knowledge of the world and the Christian faith.

Wesley's *Via Salutis*

To begin the examination of sanctification, it is important to understand the role that sanctification plays in Wesley's *via salutis*. The most concise and important document for this purpose is Wesley's 1765 sermon entitled, "The Scripture Way of Salvation." This document shows that Wesley was convinced that salvation is a process consisting of stages in which God's grace is distributed to an individual, grace upon grace.

To understand Wesley's *via salutis*, a few central doctrines and themes from Wesley's sermon need to be examined in a summarized fashion. A first concept Wesley introduces is prevenient grace, or "grace that comes before." This grace is initiated by divine action to show humankind its sinful condition and the availability of something more. It is also representative of Wesley's belief of God as the pursuer.⁷ Wesley further states that everyone receives this grace, and if one chooses to accept it, the grace brings one to "do justly, to love mercy, and to walk

humbly with his God,” bringing one to repentance.⁸ Following the act of repentance, one is prepared for justification and forgiveness by means of justifying grace, and sins are pardoned. One then begins the process of being restored to the image of God.⁹ Furthermore, following the suit of the Protestant reformers, Wesley states that the only condition necessary for justification is faith. Wesley also importantly declares that at justification there is a “real as well as relative change” as regeneration, or new birth, begins.¹⁰ The process of sanctification begins through new birth and a real change occurs in the individual. Here the individual actually begins the process of becoming holy, seeking perfection of love, or Christian perfection, as the ultimate goal and purpose of religion.¹¹ Sanctification should now be understood as the process of becoming holy.

More specific information concerning Wesley’s *via salutis* is needed in two areas to further explore the effect works of mercy plays on sanctification. It has been stated that Wesley believed sanctification to be a process that is separated from justification, but the significance of such a distinction has not been maintained. Therefore, a better description of the distinction between justification and sanctification is needed. Second, there was, and still is, a varying idea of what Christian perfection means. Consequently, there needs to be a more adequate explanation of what Christian perfection meant to Wesley. It is helpful to study these two aspects of Wesley’s theology against other theologians, because some of Wesley’s esteemed ideas are made more intelligible. Moreover, Wesley’s separation of sanctification from justification and his understanding of Christian perfection initiate an understanding of the transforming power in works of mercy.

Wesley’s *Via Salutis* Compared against the Reformers

Wesley’s *via salutis* can be demonstrated as opportunistic for works of mercy when it is juxtaposed against the ideas of the reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. First, Wesley understands sanctification to be a process partly resulting from his distinction between justification and sanctification. Sanctification can be illuminated as a process when it is compared against Luther’s focus on justification. It is also important to examine the influence that the Lutheran-oriented Moravians had upon Wesley. Secondly, one can easily perceive the emphasis of love in Wesleyan theology when Wesley is com-

pared to Calvin. Wesley's emphasis on holy living underlies the theological difference in the way that the two theologians define justification and sanctification. Furthermore, sanctification will be understood as a process wherein works of mercy can make a difference once this comparison is made.

Wesley's teleological outlook on sanctification is very different from that of Martin Luther, who insists that the change of the status of the person is the goal of salvation.¹² Wesley also differs from Luther by restricting justification to be the forgiveness of sin. Luther, on the other hand, connects grace with righteousness at justification. This connection between grace and righteousness principally results from his idea that grace is the "favor of God—not a quality of the soul" and a "living, active and operative spirit."¹³ Furthermore, Luther redefined righteousness from the active and formal state to that "passive righteousness in which the merciful God justifies us by faith."¹⁴ Faith is a gift of God since righteousness is entirely in the mercy of God and not in human efforts.¹⁵ In relation to a doctrine of sanctification, the Christian life is one of repentance, as "discovering and appropriating the grace and forgiveness of God is the supreme goal, and justification is the greatest gift."¹⁶ As Gerhard Ford, a contemporary Lutheran theologian says, sanctification is "the art of getting used to justification."¹⁷

Wesley primarily came into contact with Lutheran theology as a result of the Moravian influence during his mission to Georgia in 1738. Wesley was initially influenced heavily by the Moravians, and consequently continued to seek out the Moravians when he returned to England. A first basic influence the Moravians had on Wesley was the adoption of classes and societies through the influence of Peter Böhler, Count Zinzendorf, and the Herrnhut congregation.¹⁸ The implementation of the classes and societies become an important device for Wesley's focus on transformation and his connection between piety and mercy. Even though Wesley separated sanctification from justification, the Moravians were most successful in orienting Wesley toward the Lutheran centrality of justification by faith alone. Furthermore, the Moravians are famously noted for the influence they had on Wesley at a meeting at Aldersgate Street, when Wesley gained assurance of his own forgiveness and salvation. Moreover, Wesley learned from Lutheran theology and

the Aldersgate experience the importance of Christ's grace to transform and establish a new relationship.¹⁹ Wesley learned that, "grace alone provides and remains the sure foundation for the relation to God. Grace is the substructure on which everything else is built."²⁰

Although Wesley was originally excited by the strong emphasis on faith that the Moravian brethren had, it did not take him long to become weary of their doctrines. The Moravians did not share Wesley's understanding of grace and also followed Luther by rejecting sanctification as a process. Thus, the Moravians and Wesley disagreed on the end and way to salvation.²¹ The disagreement between the two modes of thought is most evident in Wesley's encounter with Philip Henry Molther and the "stillness" controversy. Molther's basic argument states that one should wait upon the Lord and refrain from any works of piety or works of mercy, until persons have true faith in Christ.²² Remaining still before the Lord ran contrary to many of Wesley's beliefs and seriously challenged his understanding of Christian living.

John Calvin's theology of sanctification, on the other hand, is closer to Wesley's primarily because both include the effort to be restored to the image of God.²³ Furthermore, the two traditions both describe sanctification as a process of growth in grace and a conquest of sin and evil; they also believe that there is no sanctification apart from justification and vice versa.²⁴ Although similar, the two traditions do diverge on their overall outlook on the sanctification/final perfection process, and in the vocabulary used. First, differences occur about when final perfection takes place. Calvin taught that sanctification is to be striven for but not expected in this life, therefore equating holiness only to a growth in faith. On the other hand, Wesley encouraged sanctification to be striven for and attained in this lifetime.²⁵ A basic difference between the two is in the vocabulary—Calvinists commonly refer to the process of Christian growth as conflict and temptation, while Methodists speak of development and a governing by love.²⁶ At times, it seems that the two make up a battle of optimism versus pessimism. Howard Marshal, a younger scholar at Didsbury College in Bristol, simplifies this idea by claiming that Calvin preached a

perfection of faith while Wesley preached a perfection of love.²⁷ For Wesley, faith is a means of sanctification and love is the end.

In sum, the differences between Wesley and the reformers point to a few crucial concepts that help understand the process of sanctification. One can now more clearly see why John Wesley diverged from Luther by distinguishing sanctification and justification and by making sanctification a process governed by grace. Luther's concept of justification and sanctification does not have adequate room for works of mercy. This is important because Wesley's process understanding of sanctification allows room for works of mercy. Also, the deviation from Calvin shows the emphasis that Wesley put on love as being a fundamental premise in perfection. The concentration Wesley had on love is vital to an understanding of works of mercy because love is an important underlying element in social action. Furthermore, Wesley's emphasis on love becomes important when the experiential element of works of mercy is evaluated. In sum, Wesley embodies an idea of sanctification that not only has room for works of mercy, but one in which works of mercy can also play an integral role.

Perfection of Love

Second, Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection needs to be clarified to demonstrate Wesley's concentration on love. Initially, it is important to recognize that Wesley did not produce his doctrine of perfection *ex nihilo*, but was constantly learning from the various influences of his age. One strong influence with regard to Wesley's idea of perfection is the Anglican Church. Wesley proclaimed himself always as a high churchman and therefore a successor to primitive Christianity. Furthermore, in an examination of Wesley's ideas of sanctification and Christian perfection as compared to the Anglicans, one will find striking similarities. One important ideal that Wesley retained from Anglican theology is the focus upon transformation, and being "partakers of the divine nature."²⁸ Bishop Beveridge, an Anglican theologian, states, "...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."²⁹

Moreover, there is a strong relationship with Anglicanism on the doctrines of love and sanctification. Jeremy Taylor

states, “perfection cannot be less than an entire piety, a holiness perfect in its parts, wanting nothing material, allowing no vicious habit, permitting no vile action, but contending toward the great excellency, a charitable heart to be pure and pleasing to God in Jesus Christ...”³⁰ Additionally, the Anglican tradition was clear to announce that perfection is not an achieved end, but a dynamic process. Bishop Andrews states, “the farther onward their journey, the nearer their journey’s end, the more perfect; which is the perfection of this life, for this life is a journey.”³¹ Moreover, Wesley retains an Anglican notion of love as being “the predominant fruit of holiness” in which “...having one’s soul fully inclined to God” cannot help but to love one’s neighbor as himself.³²

Wesley’s understanding of Christian perfection is commonly misunderstood today because the meaning of perfection is not in the Western sense meaning “perfected perfection (an achieved state of perfection).” Albert Outler maintains that Wesley, like the Anglicans, refers to perfection in the Eastern context meaning “perfecting perfection.”³³ This means that perfection is a continuous state in which love overcomes sin and the love of God and neighbor reigns.³⁴ In Wesley’s, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” he notes that by perfection he means “...loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. This implies that no wrong temper, none contrary to love in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words and actions are governed by pure love.”³⁵ Wesley began to make it clear that he did not want to use the term sinless perfection, which is also present in his defense, “Thoughts on Christian Perfection.”

Although Wesley did not desire to bring sinless perfection into play, Wesley is at times criticized for having a substantialist understanding of sin—meaning that perfection is the removal of the substance of sin which originated in the Fall. It is first important to note that Wesley retained the idea that in the regenerate being original sin remains a source of temptation. It is later that God will give a divine grace to achieve the promise of being free from all sin when “it shall please our Lord to ‘speak to our hearts again,’ to speak a second time, ‘Be Clean.’ And then only ‘the leprosy is cleansed.’ Then only the evil root, the carnal mind, is destroyed, and inbred sin subsists no more.”³⁶ Furthermore, when Wesley was asked whether perfection is instantaneous or

gradual, problems came his way. In answer to the question, Wesley maintains that it is both gradual and instantaneous; it is gradual in the sense that one is growing in grace from the moment one is justified, while also instantaneous, as there must be a moment before death in which sin no longer exists.³⁷ A possible inconsistency arises here, as Wesley is in danger of confirming what he was condemning, that is, predestination. If sin is a substance that is removed by an act of divine grace, it follows that some are chosen and some are not.³⁸ Although there is an inconsistency with Wesley's thought in this area, it only arises when Wesley's message is understood out of context. Wesley never intended to deal with sinless perfection, but with perfection of love.

In conclusion, the heart of Wesley's message is what is important. Wesley's message does not focus on sinless perfection but on what he actually preached and practiced, which is love. Moreover, the teleological element is also important—the idea that love plays a role in defeating sin in the present life and in “being restored to the image of God.”³⁹ An endorsement of perfection of faith rather than love forces one to be less socially minded. A Wesleyan emphasis on perfection of love allows works of mercy to play a defining role in sanctification. This focus on love becomes of paramount importance through Wesley's focus on love of God and neighbor as the primary rule of living. It is in this sense that one can *begin* to understand how love produces the good works that will play a crucial part in defeating sin and in becoming restored to the image in which we were made.

ATTAINING HOLINESS THROUGH WORKS OF MERCY Holiness by Imitating Christ

Once Wesley's *via salutis* is grasped, one can begin to understand the rationale behind Wesley's social ministry. Foremost, drawing from an Anglican influence, Wesley held high regard for the life that Christ lived and for the importance of striving after a similar lifestyle as a reason for social responsibility. For instance, Jeremy Taylor insisted that Christian perfection requires “Christlikeness in human soul and character...to be holy like him or in imitation of him.”⁴⁰ Wesley similarly perceives holiness as resulting from the endeavor to live as Christ did. Furthermore, the venture to imitate Christ led Wesley to deduce several other important values. These are the ideals of

poverty, a view of salvation as holistic, and the importance of the apostolic church. The imitation of Christ and the ideals deduced from it point to a social lifestyle and thus begin to show rationale for works of mercy in sanctification. With that said, these ideals do not make the connection between works of mercy and sanctification fully intelligible, but show that the imitation of Christ is groundwork for works of mercy.

The first and most important ideal for Wesley in relation to works of mercy is the endeavor to live out the example that Christ set forth. To begin, it can be argued that Wesley participated in works of mercy so fervently because Jesus commanded him to do so. In addition, because a renewal to the image of God is the goal of sanctification, and God's nature is revealed in Jesus, an imitation of Christ plays an important role in becoming holy.⁴¹ More plainly, a basis of the connection between works of mercy and sanctification is located in imitating Jesus, the example of God's nature. The imitation of Christ creates a few important values for Wesley. First, a key example that Christ set forth is the poverty and self-denial he demonstrated. For Wesley, Christ's poverty is not to be lived out in the medieval sense of absolute poverty, because Wesley himself embraced wealth in order to give money away. Rather, the poverty that Christ embraced becomes more important in terms of self-denial.⁴² In Sermon 48, "Self-Denial", Wesley proclaims the importance of self-denial partly because Christ embodied it. Wesley maintains, "It is absolutely necessary, in the very nature of the thing, to our coming after Him and following Him; insomuch that, as far as we do not practice it, we are not his disciples. If we do not continually deny ourselves, we do not learn of Him, but of other masters."⁴³

It is also essential to note that Wesley was influenced by Christ's attitude toward the poor. In the sermon "On Pleasing All Men," Wesley explains that we are to honor the poor for our Creator's sake and to love them for the sake of our Redeemer. In Wesley's eyes, we are to love the poor because Christ loved them.⁴⁴ Wesley followed Christ's example and made the poor an integral part of his ministry to whom he could show affection and with whom he could enter into solidarity.⁴⁵ Further evidence for this idea can be seen in Christ's "Sermon on the Mount," which was an essential doctrine to Wesley. The importance of

the “Sermon on the Mount” is evident; he preached on it at least one hundred times by the time his numerous sermons on it were published.⁴⁶ Moreover, Wesley believed that the works of mercy in the sermon such as anti-wealth, anti-mammon, charity, peacemaking, and the idea of social religion to be part of the orthopraxis that were essential to salvation.⁴⁷

Wesley also embodied Christ’s attitude toward the sick, leading him to view salvation as holistic. Before one can understand the relationship between Christ’s attention to the poor and Wesley’s attention to the poor, it is important to understand the theology behind Wesley’s understanding of holism. This belief originates with the idea that one is sick from sin, and during sanctification one is therapeutically becoming delivered from the plague of sin.⁴⁸ This inward plague extends to the physical body, making both the inward and outward body crucial to the spiritual state. Wesley held that God was not only a physician of the soul, but also to the total well being of an individual including the body.⁴⁹ It is clear that the mind and the body are both crucial elements to a good spiritual state. Moreover, Wesley thought that the mind and body were connected, meaning the mind can cause disorder to the body and the body can do the same to the mind.⁵⁰ It is obvious that to Wesley a poor physical condition may become detrimental to one’s spiritual standing; thus, works directed toward one with a poor physical condition may have great impact on their spiritual state.

Wesley’s holistic view of salvation is patterned after Christ’s ministry. Christ’s work with the physical needs of people becomes more than an offering; it is an “integral part of his saving work.”⁵¹ When works of mercy contribute to an individual with poor physical health, there may be an impact evangelically by showing Christ’s character and overcoming the lack of authentic Christian witness.⁵² In this sense Wesley’s theology is again practical as he shows rationale for works of mercy and evangelism.

Lastly, Wesley held apostolic poverty and communalism important because the apostles were trying to live like Christ. This ideal is most evident when dealing with Wesley’s rules for the “select society,” or those who claimed entire sanctification.⁵³ The three rules Wesley fixed were: “maintain confidence about their discussions; submit to their minister as spiritual director;

and bring all the money they could spare once a week 'toward a common stock.'⁵⁴ Furthermore, in Wesley's 1783 sermon, "The General Spread of the Gospel," Wesley says that communally sharing goods is an eschatological goal to be realized when Pentecost fully comes. Wesley says, "None of them [the Church] will say, that aught of the things which he possesses is his own; but they will have all things common. Neither will there be any among them that want: For as many as are possessed of lands or houses will sell them; and distribution will be made to every man, according as he has need." All their desires, meantime, and passions, and tempers will be cast in one mould.⁵⁵ This Anglican commitment to the apostolic church was an ideal that Wesley held dearly and was one he strove to revive through the Methodism revival movement.⁵⁶ Wesley was promoting cultural change as well as works of mercy by trying to recover the imitation of Christ embodied by the early church.

In sum, it is evident that for Wesley the imitation of Christ imparts motivation to undertake works of mercy. Moreover, the imitation of Christ is an element that connects sanctification to works of mercy. Because God is revealed in Jesus, it follows that one can become sanctified (restored to the image of God) through the imitation of Christ. Although this is true, there is more to the picture; an important element is missing. By understanding the imitation of Christ as the only incentive for works of mercy, one is likely to misunderstand works of mercy as only a duty and not a response to God's love and grace. If works of mercy are not grounded in an initial experience of God's love, one is in danger of works-righteousness and human efforts to become holy. The missing element allows for a simpler illustration of God's prevenience and the human response—one response being works of mercy. Moreover, if the imitation of Christ is the only rationale for works of mercy, one is in danger of limiting the means to holiness to one area.

Expanding the Means to Holiness

The missing element that completes the connection between works of mercy and sanctification lies in grace. Wesley views sanctification as a process governed by grace, because it is through God's grace that one begins to defeat the presence of sin and become perfect in love. As Randy Maddox states, "When one understands sanctification on Wesley's terms, as a life-long process of healing our sin-distorted affections, there is

an obvious need for continually renewing the empowerment for this healing.”⁵⁷ This empowering dimension is referred to as the “means of grace,” or the “outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby God might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”⁵⁸ Here, grace through faith becomes the central means in sanctification. Wesley defended works of mercy as a means of grace to allow for the change and transformation that takes place in the individual. Additionally, Wesley defended works of mercy as a means of grace to allow for an element that compels a response to God’s leading and convicting. This understanding of works of mercy is the connecting element that reaches beyond imitating Christ, provides rationale for a life filled with love, and bestows a continual reliance on God for sanctification.

Wesley understands there to be three types of means of graces. The first group is commonly termed the general means of grace. This group is typified by the outlook and basic characteristics of the Christian life such as keeping the commandments, universal obedience, taking up the cross daily, and self-denial. A second category is the instituted means of grace. This category contains the universal means of grace appointed by God such as The Lord’s Supper, fasting, Christian conference, prayer, and searching the Scripture. A last, less objective, category is the prudential means of grace that vary from time to time and person to person. The prudential means include occasions and practices, such as Wesley’s class/band meetings, rules of holy living, love feasts, visiting the sick, doing all the good one can, etc. Lastly, although not a group, Wesley makes a clear distinction between works of piety and works of mercy as types of human activity.⁵⁹

The Necessity of Piety and Mercy

It is important to understand that for Wesley the means of grace were more than just individual activities or “works of piety.” This is true in the sense that Wesley thought works of piety to be of no value unless connected with works of mercy.⁶⁰ Wesley distinguishes works of mercy over works of piety in various documents. Maddox quotes Wesley’s Sermon 92, “On Zeal,” to show the comparison of these different aspects of Christianity. Wesley states:

“In a Christian believer love sits upon the

throne...namely, love of God and man....In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers: long-suffering, gentleness, meekness....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 that are usually termed works of piety: reading and hearing the word; public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord's Supper, fasting or abstinence."⁶¹

In this passage, Wesley not only shows works of mercy to be a crucial dimension of the means of grace, but he also places them higher than works of piety. Wesley even states that when works of piety and works of mercy interfere, the latter are to be preferred.⁶²

This relationship between works of piety and works of mercy is one that is often viewed as disharmonious even today. For Wesley, orthopraxis (right practice) and orthodoxy (right belief) have a necessary connection in which they rely on each other. Essentially, works of mercy and works of piety are congruent because they are characterized by love of God and love of neighbor. The major problem for most people, especially in today's society, is that they have forgotten or do not know that works of mercy is a means of grace. This one-sided concern was also on the mind of Wesley as he was concerned that people would fall from grace due to a preoccupation with inner holiness, and not the manifestation of inner holiness in outward actions.⁶³ Furthermore, Wesley was worried that the transformative element that works of mercy includes would be lost if only works of piety were practiced.

Rieger makes it clear that Wesley thought works of piety to be distorted without works of mercy by saying, "The singular concern for the move from God to humanity might lead to an implicit scheme in which God's grace becomes self-serving to the person. What if the faithful are not interested in anything but themselves and their own salvation?"⁶⁴ By only understanding works of piety as a means of grace, an individual is missing out on the social aspect of Christianity. Reciprocally, self-centeredness is also a potential danger in orthopraxis without orthodoxy. Works become products of human effort and not an outward

expression of an inward experience of love.⁶⁵

The two clearly are not sufficient alone; they must work together toward achieving sanctification. In this sense, works of mercy should not simply be valued over works of piety, but rather should be viewed as beneficial when combined with works of piety. The two are both means of grace that rely on each other to achieve the goal of sanctification. Henry H. Knight defines the differences between the two by describing works of mercy as means of grace that “encourage openness to the presence of God” while the means of grace “describe the character and activity of God.”⁶⁶ Knight’s characterization already suggests the necessity to combine the two. Moreover, works of piety are valuable because they can help guide works of mercy away from self-centeredness and into an area that God is working.⁶⁷ Works of piety and works of mercy cannot be understood as separate starting points for faith, but are meant to work together. Additionally, it is only after one understands the importance of experience in connecting works of mercy and works of piety that one can fully comprehend their indispensable connection.

A “Right Experience” of God’s Love: God’s Prevenience and the Human Response

The element of experience plays a critical role in nearly any study of Wesleyan theology. This is especially true when dealing with the means of grace. In this section of Wesleyan theology, experience not only helps connect works of piety with mercy, but also illustrates God as being the initiator of such action. The connection between experience and means of grace first originates in a variation of the understanding of grace. Wesley, along with others in his context, began to shift from a metaphysical understanding of grace (held by the Reformers and some Anglicans) to an epistemological encounter with God.⁶⁸ This means that grace is more than a gift, such as through baptism or election, and is characterized by a conscious participation and experience of God.⁶⁹ An experiential understanding of grace influenced Wesley to argue that love is not innate, and our love for God and others only comes through experience of God’s love first.⁷⁰ In other words, Wesley believed that the will motivates human action, but one must be affected by God and experience God first; Wesley does not let

reason be a sole motivator for action.⁷¹ Orthodoxy, or works of piety, is an essential part of this necessary experience of God. Theodore Runyon rightly defines this experience of God as orthopathy (right experience).⁷² Wesley's orthopathy has six characteristics: it transcends subjectivism, is transforming, is social—demands orthopraxy, is rational, is sacramental and lastly, is teleological.⁷³

These six characteristics are illustrative of the role that experience plays in works of mercy as a means of grace. These characteristics all include the element of transformation. Moreover, the characteristics show works of mercy to be more than an obligation commanded by Christ. The transformative element of works of mercy allows for a personal impact; works of mercy are no longer only a duty to fulfill. They show that works of mercy will have “empowering and formative impact on us” and others.⁷⁴ Thus works of mercy become more than obligations to fulfill as Christians, and become actions that ultimately transform us to our original state.⁷⁵ It again must be maintained that the works of mercy are always reliant on God's transforming work in our lives to avoid viewing salvation as works merited. Another characteristic that Runyon rightly places in orthopathy is the social aspect.⁷⁶ A right experience of God's love should flow through an individual to all humanity, especially those in needy situations.⁷⁷ This view of orthopathy is a right extension to a verse Wesley held paramount, Galatians 5:6, in which Paul describes the aim of the Christian life as “Faith which worketh by love.” Furthermore, Wesley reinforces this in his Sermon 130, “On Living without God,” when he says that “True Christianity cannot exist without both the inward experience and outward practice of justice, mercy and truth.”⁷⁸ Thus, a right experience of God's love through piety must result in some sort of social responsibility.

Works of Mercy Uniquely Contributing to Sanctification

Wesley distinguished a variety of areas that constitute works of mercy, and each contributes uniquely as a means of grace. A few of these distinctions will be explained in detail. A first essential category for Wesley is the ministry to the sick. Visiting and assisting the sick is a unique mode of transformation for Wesley. In a letter Wesley reprimands Miss March for not visiting the poor,

“Yet I find time to visit the sick and the poor; and I must do it, if I believe the Bible, if I believe these are the marks whereby the Shepherd of Israel will know and judge His sheep at the great day...I am sorry you should be content with lower degrees of usefulness and holiness than you are called to.”⁷⁹

Therefore, visiting the sick was an obligatory role that also played a helpful role in the process of becoming holy. Wesley believed that one can enter into solidarity with and learn true compassion by encountering those in poor health.⁸⁰

Secondly, Wesley thought self-denial important as it “most directly counters the corruption of our nature by sin,” and it is through self-denial that the other works of mercy are made more affective.⁸¹ In Wesley’s Sermon 48, “Self-Denial,” he states that we often do not contribute in works of mercy because, “he cannot feed the sick, or clothe the naked, unless he retrench the expense of his own apparel, or use cheaper and less pleasing food...therefore, his faith is not made perfect, neither can he grow in grace; namely, because he will not deny himself, and take up his cross.”⁸²

Lastly, it is important to reiterate the influence that love of God and love of neighbor had on each other. As stated earlier, these two commitments of love go hand in hand for Wesley; Wesley thought it impossible for one to have love for God and not love for the neighbor. Consequently, one’s love for neighbor will deepen one’s love for God.⁸³ In this regard, the exhibiter of love and service not only shows God’s grace to the recipient, but also receives God’s transforming grace. The love for neighbor was especially influential to Wesley in terms of his ministry to the poor. Wesley assumed everyone, irrelevant of social standing, to be a child and recipient of God’s love and deserving of human love and service. Wesley characterized sharing with those in need as also sharing with God, thus showing that ministry to the poor is valuable in showing love to God.

In sum, Wesley lived a social life not only because of the obligation he felt toward the imitation of Christ, but also because of his understanding of works of mercy as a means of grace. By holding works of mercy as a means of grace, Wesley allowed room to define the experience of God that initiates action, and the experience that results from social action. In his

ministry, Wesley began to recognize the unique contributions each act of love held in transforming him into the image of God. Moreover, Wesley recognized that works of mercy were often looked over as secondary, although they were a requisite ingredient in sanctification. Wesley believed that limiting works of mercy limits one's own spiritual development and ultimately God's love.

CONCLUSION

In correlation with Wesley's context, today's church seems to overlook works of mercy as an essential means of experiencing and receiving God's grace. A denomination that proudly proclaims Wesleyan heritage has forgotten or is not insisting upon works of mercy as a definitive element in sanctification. This is not to say that the Methodist Church is not promoting works of mercy as a necessary part of the Christian life. Rather, the capability and necessity of works of mercy to act as a means of grace is not being recognized fully. Somewhere along the way works of piety has taken the position of providing the chief element of transformation, and the transformative element of works of mercy has been overlooked. Furthermore, instead of going hand in hand with works of piety, the two often struggle against each other. As a result, the Wesleyan harmony of the two has been lost, and works of mercy have become duties and obligations to fulfill.

This point of view is more applicable to the local church and not necessarily pertinent to the national or worldwide Methodist movement. A foremost component to the problem is the failure to include works of mercy as a vital means of grace. This component may be a cause of some of the social apathy at the local level. A first step in alleviating the indifference to works is to proudly proclaim the magnitude of works of mercy as a means of grace. When the transformative aspect that works of mercy can bear on one's spiritual standing is proclaimed, then giving to the poor will become more than a seasonal event, getting involved in mission work will become more than sending a check, and the overall selfishness of the American society will begin to change. Furthermore, a ministry to the poor might override church maintenance, the American Dream may be overtaken by the Great Commission, and people of the laity will begin to see themselves as ministers.⁸⁴

This change of attitude toward works of mercy and the real-

ization of its vital role in sanctification might be a missing element that leads people to social apathy, but it might also be a missing link in the state of one's own spiritual life. Works of mercy cannot be overlooked as a means to experience God and to receive God's graces, ultimately playing a part in defeating sin and becoming restored to the image of God. Until contemporary churches of Wesleyan heritage address the definitive impact of works of mercy, many Methodists will lack the knowledge of an element that transforms, inspires, and plays a crucial role in the process of sanctification.

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FOOTNOTES

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- 47 Heitzenrater, "The *Imatio Christi* and the Great Commandment," 63.
- 48 See Ted A. Campbell's "The Image of Christ in the Poor: On the Medieval Roots of the Wesley's Ministry with the Poor" in *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*. ed., Richard Heitzenrater, 59-81. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002), for an interesting account that indicates mendicant values in Wesley's ministry.
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