

THE POOR AND THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS
1729–1999

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CHAPTER FOUR

Between God and the Poor: Rethinking the Means of Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition

Joerg Rieger

A number of years ago a study on John Wesley and the sacraments concluded that modern Methodism has "little spiritual power and very limited intercourse with God."¹ Some people would still agree. Others, however, would contend that our main problem might not be a lack of spiritual power as such but rather what use we make of it.

At first sight, these may seem to be the only two options available in this debate that reflects one of the overarching tensions in the contemporary church. On one side of the gulf are those who focus on the socioethical implications of Christian existence and emphasize orthopraxis, literally "right praxis," including a strong focus on what Christians can do for others. On the other side are those who focus on things they consider more spiritual, such as issues of Christian identity and the divine mystery. Here the emphasis is on orthodoxy, "right belief." The history of conflict between these two perspectives goes back at least as far as the nineteenth century.

My intent is to explore ways of moving beyond these two options that in many ways have steered us to a dead end. My design

¹ An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Quarterly Review* 17 (Winter 1997-98): 377-93, under the title, "The Means of Grace, John Wesley, and the Theological Dilemma of the Church Today."

1. Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), 281.

is to investigate new ways of connecting the spiritual and practical quests in light of alternative ways of relating to God and neighbor. At the basis of my argument is the Wesleyan understanding of the means of grace, which has often become one of the pawns in the struggle between the two dominant camps.

No doubt, each of the two camps—often classified in the terminology of the culture wars as “liberal” and “conservative”—raises important questions of the other. The conservative, or *orthodox*, camp, in keeping with some of the more trendy postmodern critics, points out the limits of the aspirations of the liberal position. Modern liberal Christianity, they argue, relies too much on its own political correctness and moral powers and, thus, takes for granted the workings of grace and the power of God. What if the current mentality of corporate America—best characterized perhaps by the slogan of the Nike Corporation: “Just do it”—were to take over the modern church, thus causing it to lose both spiritual power and intercourse with God? From the conservative perspective, the solution of the dilemma looks rather simple: Just put more emphasis on God’s power and God’s free gift of grace.²

The *orthopraxis* camp on the other hand, often labeled as liberal, is worried that such critiques might lead to the abandonment of Christian social action. They may ask, how can one make sure that faith in God really does make a difference in this world? The church must not abandon uncompromising Christian praxis, the call to make a difference in this world where people are hurting. In this view, the solution to the problem lies in a conscious effort to improve Christian praxis.³

However, both solutions are in danger of becoming self-referential. In liberal theology, God is at times assimilated to the benevolent activism of people, usually white and “first world,” who tend to take things into their own hands and, in the process, turn the things they touch into their own image. Here, neither God nor neighbor can be seen fully for what they are. The orthodox camp, on the other hand, often forgets that even their most sincere efforts of building deeper relationships to God easily become distorted if they are not related to building deeper relationships with their neighbor.

2. Borgen, for example, thought this concern would bring together the “sacramentalists” and the evangelicals.

3. In the process, Wesley’s own praxis often serves as a model that Christians need to imitate in the present. See, for example, Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

Ironically, both approaches end up losing their primary concern; the relation to both God and neighbor suffer. In this context, Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace can provide not only a better grasp of the problem but also a first step beyond the impasse.

The Means of Grace

Generally speaking, the means of grace remind us that God and humanity must not be played off against each other. Keeping with his Anglican tradition, Wesley defines means of grace as “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.”⁴ His initial list of the means of grace includes three elements: “prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon), and receiving the Lord’s Supper.”⁵ Later he adds fasting and Christian conference.⁶

This list brings to mind again images of the two dominant camps. On the one hand are those who see the whole purpose of the Christian life in terms of the means of grace, not always in terms of the whole list of course, but at least of some of its elements. Scripture is still the primary focus, especially in the “Bible Belt,” although others may focus more on the sacraments or on personal relationship to God expressed in prayer. On the other hand are some who feel that we should look elsewhere for what really matters in today’s church.

This dichotomy reflects a basic problem in Wesley’s own time also, and he was not happy with either side.⁷ Although at this point the issue has been clarified, Methodist theologians have usually not considered it further.⁸ Thus, we are left with the challenge to find a more constructive way of dealing with the means of grace.

4. Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” II.1, *Works*, 1:381.

5. Ibid. The three notions of Scripture, prayer, and Holy Communion “have a sound basis in the official Anglican formularies: Prayer Book, Ordinal, Homilies, Catechism,” *ibid.*, 377.

6. *Minutes* (Mason), 1:548-53 (the so-called “Large Minutes”).

7. See Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” 1.1-2, *Works*, 1:378-80.

8. The latest book written on the means of grace still addresses precisely this dilemma. See Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1992).

Expanding the Means of Grace Tradition

How can we make sure that we are not perpetuating the conundrums of that old impasse whose entrenchments are no longer helpful? At a time when even mainstream sociological studies confirm that the opposition between conservatives and liberals is still in full swing, a mere affirmation of the importance of the previous list of the means of grace hardly seems to be sufficient.⁹

Trying to expand our vision, we might find a clue in Wesley's theological focus on Christian love of God and love of neighbor, sparked by God's own love in Christ. This theme is a central element of many of his writings from the beginning,¹⁰ and it leads him to a radical expansion of his definition of the means of grace later on. In his sermon "On Zeal" (1781), Wesley locates the means of grace in a larger framework, unfolding the double focus of his theology in terms of the means of grace.

One can see how seriously the mature Wesley takes the love of neighbor by the fact that he now includes "works of mercy"—good deeds for the benefit of the neighbor—into the list of the means of grace. Although this idea is one of the distinctive marks of his theology, Wesley is fully aware that "this is a point exceeding little considered."¹¹ Developing a vision of what really matters in the Christian life, Wesley worked out a framework of four concentric circles. At the center is love, more precisely the double focus of love of God and love of neighbor. In the circle closest to the center Wesley locates what he calls "holy tempers."¹² The next circle contains works of mercy and in the third circle are works of piety (the traditional means of grace). In the outermost circle Wesley locates the church.

The most remarkable thing about this framework is the place of works of mercy in relation to works of piety, which some of Wesley's interpreters have noted correctly but not developed further. In agree-

9. See, for example, Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). Wuthnow argues that we now have two civil religions—one liberal and the other conservative.

10. On Wesley's emphasis on the primacy of God's love, see Sermon 10, "The Witness of the Spirit," 1st 18, *Works*, 1:274, and Sermon 36, "The Law Established through Faith, II," III.3, *Works*, 2:42. This observation is also affirmed by historians such as Richard P. Heitzenrater; see "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, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 87-109.

11. Sermon 92, "On Zeal," II.5, *Works*, 3:313.

12. *Ibid.* Wesley lists some of those fruits of the Spirit that Paul mentions in Galatians 5:22-23: "long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, temperance."

ment with both the prophet Hosea and the evangelist Matthew, Wesley notes that "'God will have mercy and not sacrifice.'"¹³ Whenever works of mercy and works of piety interfere with each other, the former "are to be preferred." Wesley explains to the surprised reader that "even reading, hearing [the Word], 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."¹⁴

This same pattern can also be found in the present *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* in the General Rules. The three General Rules start with the concern for doing no harm and doing good—thereby integrating the works of mercy—and then conclude with the attendance "upon all the ordinances of God"—thereby reminding us of the importance of the works of piety.¹⁵

Works of mercy are commonly acknowledged to be of fundamental importance to Wesley. However, one must try to understand the purpose of his including them in the means of grace tradition. In this new model, works of mercy are more than just correct actions, or orthopraxis. As real means of grace, they are channels that convey God's grace to the one who acts mercifully. A work of mercy is, therefore, no longer a one-way street leading from the well-meaning Christian to the other in need. Something comes back in return, which transforms the doer of mercy as well. In doing works of mercy—and this is absolutely crucial—a real encounter with God takes place that cannot be separated from the encounter with the other.¹⁶

A fresh reflection on works of mercy as means of grace might help us overcome the old impasse to which the opposition of orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis ("politically correct" praxis) has led us. By bringing together both works of piety and works of mercy as means of grace, Wesley keeps together the love of the divine Other and the human other in a special way. This union is the fundamental challenge. Can the fact that the relation to the divine Other cannot be

13. *Ibid.* II.9, *Works*, 3:314 (the footnote cites Hos. 6:6; Matt. 9:13, 12:7).

14. *Ibid.* On this background, Borgren (*Wesley on Sacraments*, 105) lays too much emphasis on the works of piety, which he says are "of the greatest importance for Wesley."

15. Cf. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 1992 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 71-73. In the first two parts of the General Rules, there is an extended list of works of mercy.

16. For Wesley, the works of mercy are not just "prudential" in the sense that they would be optional means of grace that may or may not be used according to changing circumstances. Many authors, such as Knight (*Presence of God*, 5) have overlooked that Wesley's distinction between "instituted" and "prudential" means of grace does not apply here, for works of mercy are not listed in either category. See *Minutes* (Mason), 1:548-57.

separated from the relation to the human other help to overcome the current impasse in the church?

We must consider the full range of this challenge, following the lines of this argument. It has been argued, for instance, that works of mercy are means of grace that point to God's presence but not to God's identity. In that model, God's identity would be defined solely by works of piety.¹⁷ But is not God's identity also at stake in works of mercy, for instance when we encounter Christ's presence in the face of the neighbor? Can someone have an encounter with God's presence without receiving even a glimpse of God's identity? We need to see the relationship between works of piety and works of mercy in more constructive ways.

Between the Other and the other

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1 John 4:20 NKSV)

The platitude that both works of piety and works of mercy are important is obvious. No one would disagree with that. My basic point is more specific: We need to give a theological account of the fact that works of mercy are to be understood as means of grace. Whether we realize it or not, works of mercy are actually means of grace. All that the church can do is acknowledge this reality. The problem is that people in both the orthodoxy and the orthopraxis camps have blind spots at this point.

The problem has two distinct aspects. First, a one-sided concern for works of piety and orthodoxy denies to works of mercy their status as means of grace. Second, a one-sided concern for the works of mercy and orthopraxis often forgets the same thing, namely, that works of mercy are not only good deeds but also real means of grace.

Works of Mercy

Let us examine the latter problem first. If works of mercy are not seen as real means of grace, we are stuck on a one-way street. In that

17. Knight defines works of mercy as means of grace that "encourage openness to the presence of God" as opposed to means that "describe the character and activity of God." According

case, works of mercy might promote good deeds, or "outreach" projects, whereby Christians are doing good things for others. But even if those works are done out of love for the neighbor, a certain condescending and controlling attitude is hard to avoid. In that case, the fate of the other in need is placed in the hands of the one who is acting in a merciful way. What is less clear to them, and usually overlooked, is that the encounter with people in need might also have a powerful impact on the doer of mercy—an impact that goes far beyond "feeling good about oneself" for charitable activities.

This lack of clarity is still one of the major blind spots of some Christians who honestly seek to help others in need. Many social action programs have had to deal with this misunderstanding. In the Civil Rights movement, for instance, some well-meaning white Americans ended up turning their backs on the African American struggle when they did not recognize that their own liberation was at stake too. The exclusive concern for what one can do for the other is not only incomplete, it is also problematic. The contribution that the other might make in return is overlooked. Worse yet, the inability to take others seriously in their difference from us leads to the temptation to mold them into our own image.

This attitude has had detrimental consequences for those who were supposed to be the recipients of works of mercy. George Tinker, a Native American scholar, tells the "history of good intentions" of the missions to Native Americans.¹⁸ The missionaries facilitated exploitation despite their moral integrity and the fact that they did not benefit from exploitation themselves.¹⁹ Tinker traces this phenomenon back to an unconscious attitude of condescension tied to the idealization of the missionaries' own white culture. At the root of the problem is the inability to enter into relationship with and learn from the Native American other.²⁰

In regard to the more recent context, Robert Allen Warrior, another Native American scholar, sees a problem with "liberals and conservatives alike" who have decided to come to the rescue of Native Americans. They are "always using their [own] methods, their

to Knight, God's character is described by "Scripture, preaching, the Eucharist, and the prayers of the tradition" (*Presence of God*, 13).

18. George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 112.

19. *Ibid.*, 17.

20. *Ibid.*, 3.

ideas, and their programs."²¹ Warrior sees hope only where Christians finally start to listen more carefully to the other in need.

Among those who promote orthopraxis apart from the means of grace, a similar pattern of condescending control also seems to be present in the relation to God, a problem that the orthodox critics have sensed very well. The patronizing tendency for the charitable self to usurp the other in need is also implicit in its relation to God. The focus on orthopraxis, centered in the power of the modern human self, tends to concentrate on the self's reach for God. There is a very real danger that God becomes a function of the well-meaning individual.

If, however, works of mercy are understood as means of grace, they can be seen as what they are: channels of grace not only to the recipients of mercy but also to the acting self. The one-way street of liberal charity, leading from the self to the other and from the self to God, opens up into a two-way street. The self becomes a recipient of grace by acting on behalf of the other. In working for others, Christians become recipients of the grace of God. Those who do works of mercy are themselves transformed in their encounters with the other. In this connection, their relationship to the other person contributes to their relationship to the divine Other as well. Liberated from turning around ourselves, we gradually open up to the transforming power of God's grace. Only as orthopraxis becomes a two-way street can we realize what many of the oppressed have known all along: The liberation of the oppressed and the transformation of those who volunteer to help are inextricably connected.

This account helps explain the experience of many present-day Christians of all walks of life who have, on occasion, been forced out of their personal safety zones. Some people in the church have been transformed when they encountered their neighbors, whether on mission trips to other countries or in places of need close to home. Once again, praxis precedes theology. Unfortunately—and this is the problem much of my work seeks to redress—we do not have the theological tools yet to interpret these experiences.²² At this point, the

21. Robert Allen Warrior, "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 1991), 288.

22. See also my book, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998) and my essays, "Whaling Our Way into the Twenty-First Century," in *Theology from the Belly of the Whale: A Frederick Herzog Reader*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 1-19, and "Developing a Common

contemporary church faces the problem of being unable to lead people to the next steps, not so much due to a complete lack of praxis but rather due to a lack of adequate theological reflection.

Works of Piety

The one-sided concern for the works of piety, which also forgets that works of mercy are means of grace, is perhaps more difficult to analyze. Wesley was quite concerned about this because he knew that people fall from grace simply because they do not pay attention to works of mercy.²³

No doubt, an exclusive focus on works of piety, including prayer, Scripture reading, and Holy Communion, would appear to be inadequate. But what, beyond that, is precisely the problem? One might assume that those concerned with works of piety might know what those concerned with works of mercy did not know: that Christianity is not a set of one-way streets moving from ourselves to the other and from ourselves to God. For those who correctly understand the significance of works of piety, the focus is reversed. The divine-human relationship is no longer initiated by humanity leading to God but rather is begun by God reaching out to humanity. Means of grace are channels of God's grace and must be used accordingly.

While it may appear that the only necessity, then, is to add works of mercy on top of works of piety, the real problem cuts deeper. A singular focus on works of piety may cover up yet another blind spot. The most drastic problem occurs when the means of grace are mistaken for the thing itself, the grace of God. One example in many Protestant circles is the confusion between the Bible as *containing* the Word of God and as *being* the Word of God itself. If reading the Bible is a means of grace and a channel of God's speech, that does not necessarily make the Bible itself identical to the Word of God. This problem is addressed by Wesley in his sermon "The Means of Grace" and picked up faithfully by his interpreters.²⁴

But even when this confusion is cleared, an exclusive focus on the works of piety tends to neglect a concern for the other person in need, which is God's own concern. The problem is that, with a singular

Interest: Theology from the Underside," in *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 124-41.

23. See Sermon 98, "On Visiting the Sick," §1, *Works*, 3:385.

24. For example, Knight, *Presence of God*, and Borgen, *Wesley on Sacraments*.

focus on God's relation to humanity in the works of piety, the grace-filled character of one's involvement with the neighbor cannot be fully appreciated. Simply adding works of mercy on top of works of piety without accounting for their interrelation does not make much of a difference. Such works of mercy become mechanical actions, mere applications of a more important set of truths.²⁵

Another problem, perhaps even more troublesome, is often overlooked. When the relation to the neighbor is not taken into account as a means of grace, even the traditional means of grace—reading the Bible, participating in Holy Communion, and praying—are easily distorted. 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? In this case, the Christian self is not transformed, and the works of piety lose their challenge. The simple addition of works of mercy on top of works of piety does not lead automatically to the quantum leap that we seek.

In this way, both the liberal and the orthodox modes ultimately miss the love of not only the human other but also the divine Other. The orthodox concern for God's relation to us in works of piety is in constant danger of covering up Christian self-interest in the name of God. If the relation to the other person is lost, there is no double-check of our relation to the divine Other, as the writer of 1 John knew. A heightened concern for God does not automatically overcome the self-centeredness of theology. Theologians must constantly be aware of the various ways that the concern for God's sovereignty can be misused to disguise the self-centeredness and parochial character that is so typical of contemporary "first world" theology.

On the other hand, the simple concern of orthopraxis, even if pursued with the purest of intentions, is in danger of leading to a form of self-centeredness that is unable to find anything in the other but a mirror image. It is no wonder that one is not able to find God present there either! The people who focus on right praxis need to clarify how a concern for others properly functions. How can the

other become a channel of God's grace that helps us better understand who God is and who we are? Those who take this approach must be able to face the self-critical question, *Who put the other in this place?* and thus become aware of their own need for God's liberating and transforming power.

Beyond Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis

The challenge of taking a clue from Wesley's position is that often the results cannot easily be appropriated either by the orthodoxy or the orthopraxis camp. Preaching on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley made it clear that orthodoxy is not sufficient: "Whatever creeds we may rehearse, whatever professions of faith we make; whatever number of prayers we may repeat, whatever thanksgivings we read or say to God," we may still miss the mark.²⁶ The same is true for those in the orthopraxis camp who follow the first two General Rules of doing no harm and doing good.

Nevertheless, simply seeking a middle road, one of the biggest temptations of the Methodist mainline, is not enough either. Wesley's concern for the means of grace and the power of the Spirit was not simply "high-church" evangelicalism," as Albert Outler assumed, in the sense of having it both ways.²⁷ While Outler noted correctly that Wesley was not interested in playing off works of piety and works of mercy against each other,²⁸ this assertion does not mean that Wesley was leaving both virtually unchanged in a harmless division. Wesleyan spirituality transformed both elements—orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

First of all, love of God and love of neighbor, seen in proper relation, can transform one's understanding of the orthodox and High Church traditions. Mainstream Anglican theology did not include works of mercy in the means of grace tradition in the same way that Wesley did. Following in the tradition of Wesley, we need to explore how faithful Christian praxis (which does not forget about people in need) helps reshape matters of doctrine. Outler's helpful point that Wesley was a "folk-theologian"²⁹ must be understood in a more fundamental and dialogical sense. Most people assume that, as a folk-

25. There seems to be a connection between this theological analysis and the findings of a recent study by the Pew Research Center that "religious teachings have remarkably little influence in shaping people's attitudes on broad social issues like welfare and the role of women in the workplace." Quoted in the *New York Times*, 25 June 1996. At the same time, the survey found that religious teaching had its greatest effect on moral and sexual issues, especially abortion and homosexuality.

26. Sermon 33, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, XIII," 1.1-3, *Works*, 1:688.

27. Introduction to Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," *Works*, 1:377.

28. Sermon 14, "The Repentance of Believers," *Works*, 1:343 n. 65.

29. Introduction, *Works*, 1:67.

theologian, Wesley was mainly concerned about transmitting the Christian faith to common people. But in taking works of mercy seriously, he also developed theological tools that (even though perhaps only in preliminary form) allowed him to listen to and learn from the people. And, more importantly, we must expand the commonly accepted insight that Wesley always related doctrine to issues of Christian praxis. Wesley's emphasis on the relation of works of piety and works of mercy was aimed at reconstructing both elements.

Second, Wesley's spirituality also transforms the concern for right action. The inclusion of works of mercy into the means of grace—and thus relating love of God and love of neighbor—is a radical challenge, both for those who are *not* concerned about right action and especially for those who *are*. Works of mercy can no longer be understood as one-way streets. Combined with works of piety, they invite an encounter with God that offers a substantial reconstruction of the modern liberal self and its tendency to assimilate everything to its own interests. This reality is what many of the so-called contextual theologies still need to realize. The theological task is not simply to adapt Christianity to one's own context. The works of piety (reading the Bible, celebrating Holy Communion, praying) help guide works of mercy in the search for those contexts where God's saving presence is most needed today.³⁰ The basic challenge for the church, then, is to look for God's own actions among those in need and to join God there.

Holy Communion is an example of how both works of mercy and works of piety come together. The Christ whom we meet at the Communion table and in the liturgy of the church cannot be another Christ than the one we meet in the other person, the marginalized. Holy Communion is communion with Christ who is both "sitting at the right hand of God" (as we confess in the Apostolic Creed) and walking the dusty roads of this world. Communion is, therefore, no longer merely a mystical and private transaction between God and the church. Communion includes God's concern for all of creation (especially those who are most needy), eating and drinking together with them at the table.³¹

30. For a discussion of the difference between what is now called "contextual theology" and liberation theology, see my essay, "Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Underside."

31. See the work of Frederick Herzog and my "Whaling Our Way into the Twenty-First Century," 14-15.

Any attempt to combine the concern for orthodoxy and orthopraxis into a muddle road between both would, therefore, be fatal. To leave it there would mean to perpetuate the bifurcation commonly found in the contemporary church. If the orthodox and liberal camps do not communicate, both will ultimately leave the modern self untouched and in charge: the liberals glorifying in the power of the self and the conservatives sheltering the self in a religious escape. The challenge for theologians is to give an account of how both elements—works of mercy and works of piety—reconstruct themselves whenever they are brought into a dialogue. More specifically, both types of works need to be reconstructed in light of God's own praxis. Both the concern for right doctrine and the concern for right praxis are far too important to be left to each camp alone. Contrary to what much of contemporary theology still seems to tell us, the Christian faith is not primarily about orthopraxis or orthodoxy, taking one or the other (either doctrine and piety or the acting self) as a starting point.

Theology needs to discern God's presence in relation to the church's self-presence. Wesley seems to have sensed this in his call for a "religion that is spirit and life; the dwelling in God and God in thee."³² This mutual presence is the true importance of the means of grace. The key to understanding these means is not primarily the concern for right doctrine or right action. The means of grace are essential for the experience of God's gracious presence in specific locations with those who need help the most.

God's gracious presence, experienced through the various means of grace, is the context in which both orthodoxy and orthopraxis come together. In the experience of God's presence, Christian doctrine and Christian praxis are interrelated. This truth is at the very heart of Wesleyan theology and doctrine.³³ If theology is no longer viewed as either a catalog of doctrines subsequently applied to ethics or an undertaking preoccupied with questions of praxis or personal piety, the theological task can then be properly understood as reflection on praxis, especially God's praxis in relation to our own. In this way, theology and the church can be renewed and transformed creatively.

32. Sermon 33, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, XIII," III.9, *Works*, 1:697. See also the conclusion of Sermon 92, "On Zeal," III.12, *Works*, 3:321, "For 'God is love; and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God and God in him'" (1 John 4:16).

33. It has been argued that the notions of orthodoxy and orthopraxis are tied together by a third term, *orthopathy*. Cf. Theodore H. Runyon, "A New Look at 'Experience,'" *Drew Gallery* (Fall 1987), 44-55. Contrary to Runyon's intention, this emphasis might still end up focusing on the Christian self "feeling its religious pulse."

The Two Poles of Spirituality

For Wesley, as we have seen, love of God and love of neighbor are related. Wesley's interpretation of the Gospel dictum not to "lay up treasures upon the earth" is a good illustration, for it helps us focus on what really matters. The love of God is absolutely central. Yet when Wesley encourages "laying up treasures in heaven," he does not first talk about the utterly transcendent; rather, he immediately points to the neighbor in need.³⁴ If these words were simply good moral advice, the theological reader could move on. But Wesley's approach brings us back to where we started, at the connection between the human other and the divine Other. The concern for laying up treasures with the heavenly Other makes sense only if it is tied to the human other.

Doing works of mercy or laying up treasures in heaven, by whatever expressions Wesley uses, is aimed specifically at those most in need.³⁵ In his own way, Wesley arrives at a "preferential option for the poor," taking seriously Matthew 25 and other biblical passages.³⁶ Recent scholarship exhibits broad agreement that, for Wesley, "the poor are at the heart of the evangel and that life with the poor is constitutive of Christian discipleship."³⁷ We are now clearer about the theological connections: Any option for the poor must first of all be God's own option for the poor.

Wesleyan theology must deal with two poles: God and the poor. This point reminds us that God's presence in Christ is always tied to specific locations. The encounter with those in need sheds light on our understanding of God. If works of mercy are real means of grace, a neat separation of God's presence from God's identity is no longer possible. That is to say, works of mercy (the encounters with the needy) are channels of God's grace that help us better understand who God is. While works of mercy do not tell the whole story, they do in fact offer a glimpse of God's identity, as Jesus' own story shows.

We meet God and Christ when we respond to the hungry, care for the sick, and work with (not just for) the poor. We do not simply

34. See Sermon 28, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, VIII," 26, *Works*, 1:629.

35. The crucial issue of the concrete shape of Wesley's praxis together with his concern for the poor is neglected in Randy L. Maddox's article, "John Wesley—Practical Theologian?" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 101-11.

36. Sermon 28, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, VIII," §26, *Works*, 1:629.

37. M. Douglas Meeks, "Introduction: On Reading Wesley 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), 9. See also the contributions of the various authors in the volume.

encounter some abstract presence. On the contrary, God shows God's own face. No method of correlation needs to be implied that might assume some inherent quality of the oppressed that would point us to God. Rather, the point is to seek God where God has said God would be.³⁸ Our thinking about God is no longer adequate without this impulse. Neither the orthodoxy nor the orthopraxis camps have yet paid sufficient attention to this point, and in this light, the contribution of theologies from the margins can no longer be put aside, classified as "special interest theologies." God's own interest in Christ and the Holy Spirit is at stake. The church cannot bypass this fact.³⁹

Therefore, the judgment that "modern Methodism . . . must be considered Pelagian, with little spiritual power and very limited intercourse with God" is only true if the classic Wesleyan concern for works of mercy among the poor is misunderstood as a one-way street.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, this comment still serves as a warning to Methodist theologians and as a reminder that the relationship between works of mercy and the work of God has now to be seen in the more specific light of the encounter with those at the margins. The ultimate focus of Wesleyan spirituality is not primarily the praxis of the "people called Methodists" but the discernment of, and response to, the triune God's presence and praxis in the world.⁴¹

God's Praxis

Signs of an increasing awareness of the interdependence of orthodoxy and orthopraxis are evident. A number of recent resolutions of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church could serve as examples of an ongoing attempt to tie together belief and praxis more closely. "Toward a New Beginning Beyond 1992," for

38. This is the basic theme of my book *Remember the Poor*.

39. See my essay "Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Underside."

40. Borgen, *Wesley on Sacraments*, 281.

41. As Craig B. Galloway has pointed out, this is exactly the concern of the Wesley hymns:

The spirituality of these hymns is not political in the sense that it lays down a specific social ethic. But it is political in the sense that it challenges and transforms the way people see themselves in relation to God, and to each other. . . . At the center of this spirituality . . . is the recognition of Christ's continuing presence by the Spirit in history with the community of his people.

From "The Presence of Christ with the Worshipping Community: A Study in the Hymns of John and Charles Wesley" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1988), 226.

example, strives for the interrelation of Christian doctrine and praxis. Yet there are still gaps.⁴² The concern for "nurture," "outreach," and "witness" does not go much beyond the old concern for orthopraxis; a call to repentance and the question of what God teaches us in the marginalized other are missing. In this context, the invitation "to meet with local people from racial/ethnic-minority communities in their own setting"⁴³ might simply produce church people who feel good about themselves and their charities rather than yield genuine conversions.

More recently, the United Methodist bishops have taken an important step toward relating orthodoxy and orthopraxis by asserting that "the crisis among children and the impoverished and our theological and historical mandates demand more than additional programs or emphases. Nothing less than the reshaping of The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among 'the least of these' is required."⁴⁴

According to the bishops, theology and the church need to be reshaped by working with people on the underside of history. At the same time, the reality of this statement is hardly visible in current Methodist theological reflection. And most of the numerous projects that have sprung from the bishops' initiative revert straight back into programs that try to minister to poor children rather than *with* them and forget about reshaping the church altogether.

Various theological models are now available that have grown out of new ways of living the Christian life, beyond orthodoxy and orthopraxis. For Latin America, Gustavo Gutiérrez has created a new paradigm: theology as "critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the Word."⁴⁵ In the North American context, one of the primary models is Frederick Herzog's reconstruction of theology in terms of God-Walk, Theo-praxis, Christo-praxis, and Spirit-praxis inviting Christian discipleship.⁴⁶

42. "Toward a New Beginning Beyond 1992," in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*, 1992 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 388.

43. *Ibid.*, 390.

44. The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, *Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1996), 7.

45. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, 15th rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 11.

46. Frederick Herzog, *God-Walk: Liberation Shaping Dogmatics* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 1988). In an instructive article entitled "United Methodism in Agony," Herzog has argued for a constructive interrelation of three concerns that were not yet brought together in The United Methodist Church: the doctrinal mandate, the concern for liberation, and the challenge of the minorities; see *Perkins Journal* 28 (Fall 1974): 1-10. Both Gutiérrez's and Herzog's concerns are developed further in my book *Remember the Poor*.

In any case, Christian practice seems to be ahead of theology, as seen in the United Methodist Covenant Discipleship Groups. These groups, reclaiming the Methodist heritage of bands and classes, tie together four elements: acts of compassion, acts of justice, acts of worship, and acts of devotion.⁴⁷ Some theological schools and seminaries that are now beginning to take the field of urban ministry seriously must also be in a good position to provide a new theological consciousness.

In the light of these developments in theology and the church, both the concern for right doctrine and the concern for right praxis can be reconstructed. In order to go beyond frameworks that are caught up in self-referentiality, a basic openness for both the other person and the divine Other must be recovered. While the orthopraxis impasse sheds light on the limits of modernity and the power of the modern self, the orthodox impasse may shed light on the limits of a concern for both God's Otherness and the doctrines of the church, a concern that fails because it neglects the actual plight of the human other.

The encounter with both the needy other and the divine Other, therefore, must lead to a reconstruction of both the moral self (orthopraxis) and the doctrinal teachings of the church (orthodoxy). From this observation, a suggestion for the further development of theology in the twenty first century begins to crystallize. Perhaps the basic point of the theological search is neither our orthopraxis nor our orthodoxy but *God's own praxis* initiating and inviting both the love of God and the love of neighbor.

47. See David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 116.

APPENDIX ONE

Contemporary Issues and Models of Ministry with the Poor, the Underrepresented, and the Ignored: A Panel Discussion

Introductory Comments, Joerg Rieger

Before we look at contemporary issues and models of ministry, we need to give an account of where we are at this point in our exploration of the relation of the Wesleys and the poor. A common theme has emerged in many of the presentations and discussions: Love of the poor is inextricably connected to love of God. We are all well aware of the relation of this insight to Jesus' own concern for the love of God and the love of neighbor, which he saw as the sum of the commandments. A well-known passage, 1 John 4:20, puts a similar insight into the following words: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." Here is certainly one of the biggest challenges for the ministry of the church today. We need to remind ourselves that even well-meaning and orthodox claims to love God easily turn into lies unless they are tied to love for brothers and sisters.

Once this point is clear, however, we need to face yet another challenge. There is always a danger of idealizing and romanticizing the poor, and the call to love them does not necessarily overcome this problem. At a time when love is often seen as not much more than a nondescript feeling of sympathy, it is easy to convince ourselves that we love those who are less fortunate, at least as long as they do not impose on us. The same is true in our relationship with God. But what

if love is different—what if love implies respect as well? To learn how to respect poor people cuts through idealization and romanticization, and opens the way to learning about their real struggles and hopes and how these challenge us. A similar dynamic applies to our relation with God as well. Learning how to respect God (something that might well be trained in the context of learning how to respect others) helps us to become aware in new ways of where God is at work and how this challenges our lives.

At this point, new relationships can be built that end the work-righteousness that is at times a temptation of those who care about the poor. The question is not what we can do for those who are less well off—efforts which often end up turning other people and even God into our own image—but how we can experience God's grace together. Grace, we are beginning to realize, comes to us in unexpected ways in relationships where we begin to open up to those who are different from us—to brothers and sisters whom we see and, closely related, to God whom we do not see, to paraphrase 1 John. Only if we give up our attempts to assimilate both the poor and God to ourselves will we be able to move to the next step.

Already, John Wesley knew of the dangers of a church that forgot about the poor. At one point, he reminds us that "religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men" (Journal, May 21, 1764). But is that not the way we generally proceed in the mainline churches when we develop our models of ministry? Is that not the way we understand terms such as *charity* and *ministry*, as moving from the haves to the have-nots? If Christianity works the other way around, however, we need to develop new models. One example is the West Dallas Project at Perkins School of Theology, which I helped initiate a few years ago. Here, faculty and students interact with people in a neighborhood suffering from oppression, mainly along the lines of race and class. Our experiences show how theological reflection, Christian praxis, and even spiritual formation are transformed in this context. We have found that meeting God in West Dallas can indeed change one's life. In the following contributions the panelists will introduce other models that transform lives.

An important question that has been raised throughout this conference is, Who are the poor? One of the epigraphs in my recent book, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), states

that "the poor do not exist." There is a danger in universalizing the term and thus forgetting that poor people have actual faces, names, and stories. We can only form true bonds of solidarity if we develop actual relationships to people at the margins of our world. Like Wesley, we must not begin with generalizations but with close encounters with real people who are suffering. It is in these relationships that we become aware of what the contemporary issues are and of the pressing need to analyze the cruel realities of poverty today. The church needs to realize that at a time when the global economy is booming and some people are doing very well, the poor still become poorer, even in the United States. There are between 5,000 and 10,000 homeless people on the streets of Dallas alone, and child poverty—one of the most atrocious forms of poverty—is still on the rise even in our own country. On a global level, more than 30,000 children die every day from preventable causes such as hunger and disease.

To remember the poor, therefore, is not a matter of special interest for those who feel especially called to this sort of thing. Let me close the circle with another reference to Jesus' summary of the commandments, particularly to his reminder that we need to love our neighbors as ourselves. We need to understand that our neighbors are not just recipients of charity but that they are part of who we are and that loving them "as ourselves" implies loving them "as being part of ourselves." We can neither be fully human nor fully Christian (and certainly not fully Methodist) without the "least of these" who are a part of who we are—a notion that will radically reshape how we think about ministry now and in the future.

The following panel draws together people from various walks of life. Paul Escamilla is currently a pastor at Walnut Hill United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, after having served Munger Place United Methodist Church, an inner-city congregation in Dallas, for several years. Minerva Carcaño is director of the Hispanic American Program at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, and an ordained United Methodist pastor. Dr. Stuart Jordan, an ordained pastor of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, is Secretary of the London Committee of the Methodist Church. His office supports the ministry and mission of Methodist churches in London with a focus on the situation in inner London.