

How do We Grow Spiritually?

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One of the primary goals of Christians is to grow spiritually. In order to grow spiritually Christians participate in a variety of rituals and practices. Many of these practices are learned informally while others are intentionally developed. Historically Christians have embraced a variety of practices in order to experience God, some of which continue to inform Christian life and practice today. However, many Christians struggle to know how to grow spiritually. They struggle with developing consistent practices because of a limited and narrow understanding of spiritual formation. Many Christians, especially Wesleyan Christians, are unaware of their rich heritage and its witness of transforming persons and society. This essay addresses the question of “How do Christians grow spiritually?”

Wesleyan theology is an experiential and practiced theology. John Wesley was a pastor who worked out his theology through his ministry. He did not separate what he believed about God with what he did in ministry. His theology informed his practice, and his practices shaped his theology. This praxis approach (theology and practice) is at the heart of the Wesleyan movement. It is a lived theology. The primary goal of the Wesleyan movement is the transformation of the human person into the likeness of Jesus Christ, which includes cooperation between human persons and God’s transforming grace. This goal of transformation is reflected in Galatians 4:19, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is *formed* in you.” Paul uses the word *morphoo* (form), closely related to *metamorphoo* (transform)—and it refers to a metamorphosis of the essential nature, not mere outward form. Paul is praying that the inward nature of the Galatian believers would become so like Christ that one could say that Christ has been *formed* in them. They would be more like Christ’s humanity, not divine, not a Savior themselves, but they would have real Christ-like character and behavior.¹ Spiritual growth then is the outworking of the grace of God in the changed hearts and actions of human beings.

I. Means of Grace

We cannot conform ourselves to the image of Christ, but God is the one that conforms and transforms us by the power of the Spirit. However, a Wesleyan theology of grace focuses on cooperation between God and humans. God and human persons act “synergistically” (dynamically together). God’s transforming grace freely flows to those who actively receive it, and to receive grace you must be an active participant. In other words, when you engage

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¹Wesley E. Tracy, *et al.*, *The Upward Call: Spiritual Formation and Holy Living* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1993), 9.

in spiritual formational practices you are being opened to receive grace from God. If you do not engage in spiritual formational practices you are limiting the opportunities for you to grow spiritually and to receive God’s grace. The old adage is true “practice makes us perfect.” The more we practice our faith the more we grow spiritually. These practices become habits that develop into virtues. For example, a compassionate person is compassionate because he or she has practiced compassion on a regular basis. In the same way as we engage in regular spiritual practices our lives are being conformed and transformed into the image and likeness of Christ.

John Wesley calls these practices the “means of grace.” In his sermon on “The Means of Grace” he states, “by means of grace I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained by God, and appointed for this end, to be ordinary channels whereby God might convey to men [prevenient], justifying and sanctifying grace.”² Wesley uses the word “means” with the word “ordinance” on occasion as an indicator that this participation was expected by God. While the means of grace themselves had no salvific worth, they were channels by which the Holy Spirit works in our hearts. Wesley divided the “means of grace” into three divisions: Instituted means of grace, the Prudential means of grace, and the General means of grace (Chart 1). The Instituted means of grace are practices that Christ asked his disciples to do and model. They include: prayer, searching the scriptures, participating in the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist), fasting, and Christian Conferencing (small groups). The Prudential means of grace are practices that are wise and beneficial to do. They include obeying Christ, special prayer meetings, visiting the sick, doing all the good we can to all the people we can, and reading from the devotional classics of the rich tradition of two-thousand years of Christianity. The prudential means of grace were designed to meet the person at his or her point of need, thus they are adaptable to a person’s particular historical situation or context. The General means of grace include: watching, denying ourselves, taking up our cross daily, and exercising the presence of God.

Instituted Means	Prudential Means	General Means
The means that Christ ask his disciples to do or model.	The means that are wise and beneficial to do.	The means that maintains and fosters our relationship with God.
<i>Spiritual Practices:</i> Prayer Searching the Scripture Lord’s Supper Fasting Christian Conferencing (small groups)	<i>Spiritual Practices:</i> Obedience to Christ Prayer Meetings Visiting the Sick Do good to all people Read Christian Classics	<i>Spiritual Practices:</i> Watching Denying ourselves Taking up the Cross daily Exercising the presence of God

Chart 1: “Means of Grace” Domains

²John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, eds. A. Outler et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975–1983), 1:381.

Wesley did not confine God's grace to just these practices. Because he understood grace to be God's loving uncreated presence he believed many other activities could be means of grace. Wesley believed that through participation in the instituted means of grace a person can be made aware of God's pardoning and empowering presence of Christ on a regular basis. Wesley's therapeutic focus is evident in his invitation for his people to meditate regularly on the affirmation that Christ "sealed His love with sacraments of grace, to breed and nourish up in us the life of love."³ Thus, all who need further empowering by God's grace should faithfully participate in the instituted means of grace.

II. Instituted Means of Grace (Works of Piety)

The instituted means of grace from a series of interdependent practices, and if followed faithfully, results in experienced grace. Wesley believed that people should use the practice "with a constant eye" toward the renewal of their souls in "righteousness and true holiness."⁴ He believed that these practices would expose and ultimately shape persons into the character of God.

Prayer

One of the bedrocks of spiritual formation is prayer and Scripture reading. Many Christians recognize that conversation with God in prayer and reading Scripture results in spiritual food and nourishment. Prayer is a practice that nurtures the heart and soul of the believer. Wesley encouraged Christians to pray on a regular basis. He encouraged Christians to follow his revised Book of Common Prayer (BCP) for prayer and worship called *The Sunday service of the Methodists in North America*.⁵ He published *Devotional for Every day in the Week* in order to guide and encourage daily prayer among his readers. He followed the daily offices developed by the Anglican Church that included prayer, Psalms, collects, and hymns. Wesley believed that at the heart of growing spiritually was engaging in the rhythm of praying without ceasing. For Christians today prayer can take a variety of forms such as meditation, silence, and active listening. There is a growing interest among Christians to engage in pray activities that nurture their souls and connect them with God. Prayer is transformative in both private and in corporate contexts.

Searching the Scriptures

Reading and interpreting the Bible or "searching the Scriptures" is another significant practice that helps Christians grow spiritually. Wesleyans read Scripture as formation instead of information. Scripture was given to the Church as a means of forming Christians into faithful disciples. Searching the Scripture implies a meditative reading where the Holy Spirit inspires our hearts. If prayer is our breath, Scripture is our food. We need food in order to survive and thrive. Wesley did not create a novel method of Bible study, but he seems to

³Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 200.

⁴Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1:545.

⁵John Wesley, *John Wesley's Prayer Book: The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, ed., James F. White (Cleveland, OH: OSL Publications, 1991).

have observed the ancient practice of *lectio divina* (sacred readings). This ancient practice was developed in the fifth century by Saint Benedict. The practice is a slow, contemplative praying of the Scriptures which enables Scripture to become a means of union with God. *Lectio divina* is a process of scriptural encounter that includes a series of prayer dynamics, which moves the reader to a deep level of engagement with the chosen text with the Spirit that enlivens the text. The movements include silence, readings, praying, contemplation, and compassion.⁶ While this practice can be pursued alone, when done in a small group setting, insights and inspiration offer an additional dimension to the practice. Today Christians and faith communities are regaining the significance of this ancient practice as a means to make Bible reading exciting and engaging once again.

Lord's Supper (Eucharist)

John Wesley placed a high value on the Eucharist in worship. He exhorted Methodists to practice "constant communion."⁷ Wesley generally took Communion every four or five days. He believed it was the highest point of Methodist worship and it was an opportunity to experience and commune with Christ. He believes that through communion persons experience the very presence of Christ. He did not hold to the Roman Catholic view of *transubstantiation* (the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ), but he did believe that Christ was present in the elements. Since Christ was present everyone was invited to participate, believers and non-believers. Christ was present spiritually, immediately, and independently, interacting with the recipient to convey grace. He believed that through participation in communion a person can receive forgiveness and reconciliation through an obedient response to God's grace. He views communion as a converting ordinance for those who confessed and believed during communion. Wesley desired to see Methodist take communion regularly as an essential means of grace so that it would result in holiness of heart and life.

Communion is soul food. It nourishes the soul. It is formative for those who are drawn toward holiness and those who have been sanctified. It is for those who desire to grow in God's grace and want to deepen their love for God and neighbor. Communion is a sacrament that serves not only to preserve and sustain but also to further progress and growth in faith and holiness. Communion as an act is a personal and communal reminder of Christ's suffering love, as well as a direct activity of the Holy Spirit that provides an immediate way of participating in the ongoing transforming grace of God.

Many Nazarene congregations are following Wesley's weekly practice of communion in worship. They are recognizing that communion signifies the very meal that sustains and heals the church. They also see communion as a practice that provides renewal and reunification of the church. It transforms the entire church not simply as an individual expression of personal piety. Christians are recognizing that as we "breathe in" through participation in Word and Table they are healed, empowered, and equipped to "breathe out" in God's mission in the world. Communion is one of the most powerful and transformative aspects of Christian worship that helps people grow spiritually.

⁶Doug Hardy, "Lectio Divina: A Practice for Reconnecting to God's Word," *Preacher's Magazine: A Preaching Resource in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Lent/Easter 2009), 38–41.

⁷See John Wesley, "The duty of constant Communion," *Works of John Wesley*, 3:427–39.

Fasting

Fasting is an ancient practice that focuses on denying yourself of food or other things in your life on which you are highly dependent. Wesley was very supportive of fasting. He was known for food fasting several days a week and he encouraged Methodists to fast on Fridays. The American Methodist church made Friday as a day of fasting. Wesley considered it “deplorable” that many Methodists neglected fasts and his journals are full of his own commitment to fasting. Many Christians today fast a meal on a regular basis and give the money to the needy. Others even provide a technology fast or Sabbath one day a week as part of their spiritual practices.

Christian Conferencing

The next instituted means of grace refers to Christian conferencing or small groups. As Christians speak about God together grace is poured out upon the participants. This is why it is important to have a small group of people that you meet with on a regular basis to tell your story, to talk about your spiritual life, and to learn together. Christian conversation is intentional and a diligent act. It is an act of love as we share our faith and live together in the very presence of the Holy Spirit. The community of believers is intended to be means of mutual support, encouragement, and strength.

One of the most significant avenues that foster spiritual growth is through small groups. John Wesley’s group formation provided a context for spiritual growth and development for Methodists. Some argue that his small group formation revolutionized early Methodism and Wesley was the “father” of the modern small-group concept.⁸ Wesley employed a methodical approach to spiritual formation that focused on assisting participants to grow in holiness of heart and life. D. Michael Henderson argues that Wesley’s interlocking groups include a hierarchy of instruction for each group, tailored to a specific function. Henderson distinguishes each group, society, class, and band with a specific educational mode.⁹

The societies focused primarily on cognitive development, teaching Methodist tenets and doctrine; classes focused on changing and transforming human behavior; and the bands focused on growing in holiness and purity of intention. Wesley’s group formation incorporated Scripture as central to the small group process. In societies Scripture was read, interpreted, and preached as a normal aspect of society meetings. In classes and bands Scripture was employed as a formative aspect in shaping behavior and holy living.

The class meetings were the most influential in providing spiritual growth and accountability. They were a small group of ten to twelve people who were required to “bare their souls” and confess sin. The meetings included the leader stating the condition of his or her spiritual life, sharing honestly about failures, sins, temptations, or inner battles. The participants were asked a series of questions and whether they had committed sin this week. Small groups like this are needed in our lives to provide personal and spiritual accountability as we seek to holiness of heart and life.

⁸David Hunsicker, “John Wesley: Father of Today’s Small Groups,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 210.

⁹David Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model of Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 1997), 83.

III. Prudential Means of Grace (Works of Mercy)

The instituted means of grace focuses on *personal piety* while the prudential means of grace focuses on *works of mercy*. The term prudential comes from the emerging belief by the church that inward holiness would lead to outward holiness. The prudential means of grace are the primary ways we express our love for God and neighbor.

In order to grow spiritually it means we are to obey God's commandments. When we obey God's commandments we open channels of grace in our lives. When we are disobedient we block those channels and do not receive grace. It is through repentance that these channels are reopened for us to receive grace. Wesley placed a strong emphasis on obedience to God's commandments as an important avenue for spiritual growth.

To grow spiritually means following the conviction to "do no harm," which means to never consciously do anything we know that would damage someone else. We make this commitment to respect and value others in our personal conduct and in our working contexts. We are to do all the good we can in all the places we can. It means we are to replace evil with good. This includes caring for others, the planet, and respecting all living things.

Wesley practiced visiting the sick on a regular basis. He is known for his works of mercy and compassion toward the poor and outcast. He recognized the importance of healing and liberating persons from oppression. Wesley understood that holiness of heart and life was an ongoing goal to be lived out each day. As Christians sought to live holy lives they were engaged in changing and transforming the world. They participated in the means of grace in order to be a means of grace to others. In other words, growing spiritually was not for them only but for the sake of others and the world. As Christians engage in acts of mercy, compassion, caring for the poor and the oppressed they are growing spiritually and are living out God's mission in the world.¹⁰

General Means of Grace

The general means of grace, unlike the instituted and the prudential, is always bearing fruit. A person can practice the instituted and prudential means of grace and just go "through the motions" and not grow spiritually. However, the general means of grace, which requires searching, and self-examination and daily reflection on one's attitude and motivations cause constant attention to God. Such practices as self-denial, watching, and cross-bearing is conformity to God's will.¹¹ It is the denial of sinful thoughts and actions, self-indulgence, that separate us from God. It is the removal of things in our lives that keeps us from doing the will of God. Also, self-denial is connected with cross-bearing which is the result of inward transformation. Wesley believed we can grow closer to God when distractions are willingly set aside. In a world that is focused on instant gratification and consumerism, self-denial becomes a challenge for many Christians. Self-denial can help us refocus our attention, devotion, and dependence on God.

¹⁰See Mark A. Maddix and Jay R. Akkerman, *Missional Discipleship: Partners in God Redemptive Mission* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2013) for a more complete understanding of the role that compassion plays in our spiritual formation.

¹¹Andrew C. Thompson, "The General Means of Grace," *Methodist History* 51, no. 4 (July 2013): 251–52.

We can grow spiritually as we “take up our cross” by enduring hardships and suffering, and by doing things that go against our natural inclinations. Such acts as feeding the poor, visiting the prisoner, taking care of the widows and orphans go against our natural inclinations.

Christians can grow spiritually by exercising the presence of God by communing with God in all we do. Brother Lawrence helped us understand that we can be aware of God’s presence in the midst of washing dishes or any daily activity. If we affirm that it is the very presence of God in our lives that defines spirituality and aids Christian growth, then practicing God is with us is just as important as trusting that God is with us.

Communal Practice: The Church

For Christians to grow spiritually it includes participation in the means of grace. The means of grace encompass both individual and communal practices. One of the most important aspects of Wesleyan spirituality is the Church. Spiritual growth takes place through the fellowship with other believers, through communal worship, and missionary service. Wesley believed that religion was a “social religion” and personal holiness includes “social holiness.” His focus on social holiness was about fellowship or *koinonia*. He recognized that our faith is shaped and formed best in community. This continues to be a challenge for many Christians in the West that view faith primarily as individualistic and personal, but being Christian means to live in community. If Christian want to grow spiritually they are to participate in a local church on a regular basis and gather around Word and Table as part of Worship.

Conclusion

How do we grow spiritually? What does Wesleyan spirituality look like? Our rich Wesleyan heritage provides a theological canvas for us to see how persons have grown spiritually in the past, and how participation in the means of grace can help present and future generations experience the transforming grace of God. As Christians participate in the means of grace, both individually and corporately, they will open up opportunities to receive grace and to become more like Christ. The means of grace is a gift from God, and as we participate in this gift of grace we receive grace and we grow spiritually.