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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Knight, Henry H., 1948-  
Eight life-enriching practices of United Methodists / Henry H. Knight.  
p. cm.  
ISBN 0-687-08734-1 (acid-free paper)  
1. Spiritual life--United Methodist Church (U.S.) I. Title.

BX8349.S68 K63 2001  
248.4'876--dc21

2001033653

06 07 08 09 10—10 9 8 7

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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## Introduction

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JOHN WESLEY FREQUENTLY linked our happiness with our being holy. By “holy” he did not mean the kind of holier-than-thou piety that turns off so many people. At its heart, holiness for Wesley was simply love—loving God and our neighbor as God has loved us. We were created for love, but we do not love as we know we should. We have a problem we cannot solve, a disease we cannot cure. But God has made a way for us in Jesus Christ and will transform our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. Only when we begin to live this new life of love do we find true happiness and genuine enrichment.

This book is about how we can open our lives to this transforming power. It describes eight practices through which we can enter into a life-changing relationship with God. Some of these are themselves collections of practices. Because there is no single “right way” to do them, I will often provide a number of ways we might begin. It is as we engage in these practices that we find our lives being renewed by the Holy Spirit and receive a deeper fulfillment than we may have dreamed possible.

Wesley called such practices “means of grace.” It was the genius of early Methodism to nurture Christian growth by placing the means of grace at the very center of their lives together. Wesley still has much to teach us about Christian

## Introduction

formation today, and I shall draw upon his wisdom in the pages that follow.

I hope this book will serve as a doorway to the many excellent contemporary resources on Christian spiritual practices. As you will see, I have enormous respect for writers like Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Steve Harper, Marjorie Thompson, Robert Mulholland, and Philip Yancey. If my citing these and many others in the notes leads you to sample the richness of their writings, I shall rejoice.

Moreover, I hope this book will be a doorway into the Christian life itself. These practices are life enriching because they nourish our lives with God, lives marked by joy, peace, faith, hope, and—above all—love. Wesley was right: Nothing less than this will give us true happiness. The good news is God offers it to us as a gift, if we will only receive it.

I am especially grateful to Sherry Habben and Brian Germano, themselves skilled teachers of Christian formation in the local church, for reading this material and offering sound advice. As always, I am grateful to my wife, Eloise, who not only helped get this manuscript in shape but also has been an encouragement throughout.

## Abbreviations

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Because John Wesley's writings are frequently referenced in the notes, the following abbreviations are used:

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| <i>Works</i>     | <i>The Works of John Wesley</i> (BiCentennial Edition), published initially by Oxford University Press and continued by Abingdon Press. This new and as yet unfinished edition was begun in 1975. Each volume is edited by a leading scholar in Wesleyan Studies. |
| <i>Works (J)</i> | <i>The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.</i> (Jackson Edition), published in 14 volumes by Thomas Jackson in 1829–31.   |
| <i>Notes</i>     | <i>Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament</i> , originally published by John Wesley in 1755.  |

## Chapter 1

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### A Hunger for God

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**I**F YOU COULD travel back to eighteenth-century England to see firsthand the beginnings of Methodism, what would you find? You might come across a preacher, most likely a lay person, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to a crowd in the open air. Or, if you arrived on the right day, you might find a large gathering of Methodists attending a quarterly society meeting and celebrating a love feast. You might even run across an annual conference where John and Charles Wesley discussed with other preachers what they would preach and how they would nurture the growing movement. But you would definitely find small groups of Methodists led by laity who were meeting together weekly to encourage one another in keeping a set of practices that assisted their growth as Christians. For the most part, these Methodists would not be persons of extraordinary gifts or talents, but ordinary people with all the struggles, hopes, sufferings, and joys that come with everyday life. What distinguished them from their contemporaries was their following a discipline of daily devotion, communal gathering, public worship, and outreach to their neighbors.



This was what made one a Methodist: a commitment to keep a set of regular practices (a “discipline”) and to attend a weekly meeting to share how keeping these practices was going. These early Methodists were convinced that through following this discipline they would grow in the knowledge and love of God and love for their neighbor as well. They had a deep hunger for God and saw these practices as a means to satisfy that hunger.

Early Methodists illustrated well this point made by Richard Foster concerning spiritual disciplines: “We need not be well advanced in matters of theology to practice the Disciplines. Recent converts—for that matter people who have not yet turned their lives over to Jesus Christ—should practice them. The primary requirement is a longing after God.”<sup>1</sup> Do you have a longing for God? Do you want to know and love God more fully, as you are known and loved by God? Then these life-enriching practices can be a means for you to develop a deeper relationship with God, just as they were for the first Methodists and for countless other Christians over the centuries.

## Knowing God

What does it mean to have a relationship with God? We can begin to answer this question by thinking about our relationships with one another. While there is much that could be said, there are at least two elements of any relationship that are essential.

First, you must in some way meet the other person and maintain contact over time. For short, I have called this *presence*<sup>2</sup>, although a human relationship does not always require physical presence—people maintain relationships through writing letters, telephoning, and now e-mail. But a relationship does require some means of conversation or at least contact. There is, of course, an advantage to actually

being together: Actions can be joined to words. Persons can then share common experiences such as a meal or a movie, a baseball game or a shopping trip.

Second, a relationship means you come to know another person as a distinct personality, what I have called his or her *identity*. While each of us may have more or less in common with others, no two of us are entirely the same. We are all unique. As we get to know someone, we become increasingly aware of what makes up that person. We learn about personality traits, background, and various likes and dislikes. Above all, we begin to know the person's character. One reason we are so often disappointed in the failings of public figures is because we thought we knew them, but what we really knew was their image. In a true relationship, we come increasingly to know another as he or she really is.

When we move from human relationships to God, we encounter an immediate problem: How do we experience God's presence and identity? As humans, we can see, hear, or touch one another. But God is spirit—how, then, do we know one whom we cannot literally see, hear, or touch?

John Wesley said we know God by *faith*, which is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). He understood faith to be a “spiritual” sense, a gift of the Holy Spirit analogous to our five senses. Just as our senses of touch, taste, speaking, hearing, and smell put us in contact with physical reality, faith is a capacity by which we “discerneth God and the things of God.”<sup>3</sup> It is faith that enables us to encounter God as a real and active presence in our lives and world. Faith, then, is more than believing that there is a God—it is knowing God, in some ways as you would know another person.

But who is this God? What of God's identity? We cannot know who God is simply through our own experience, for that is notoriously deceptive. By ourselves we then create a god to meet our perceived wants or needs, which may not at

all be the way God actually is. However, we can know who God is through what God has done, first in creation and the story of Israel, and finally in Jesus Christ.

Christians believe God actually entered human history through Jesus of Nazareth. When we are asked, "What is God like?" we point to Jesus. His teaching, healing, casting out demons, and reaching out to those in need or on the margins of society are seen not only as human actions but also as divine. His death on the cross is the ultimate expression of God's infinite love for us. Charles Wesley puts it this way:

O Love divine, what hast thou done!  
The immortal God hath died for me!  
The Father's coeternal Son bore all my  
sins upon the tree.  
Th' immortal God for me hath died:  
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!<sup>4</sup>

Because he is risen from the dead, Jesus is alive, not only revealing God's identity but also, through the Holy Spirit, manifesting God's presence. As Luke Timothy Johnson says, for Jesus to live means he "is not simply a figure of the past . . . but a person in the present; not merely a memory that we can analyze and manipulate, but an agent who can confront and instruct us." We can not only "learn *about* him" but can "continue to learn *from* him."<sup>5</sup> No wonder then that Christians have understood a "relationship with Jesus" to be a "relationship with God" or have seen their relationship with the triune God to be "through Christ" and "in the Spirit."

Relationships are not one-time encounters but are lived out over time. The primary way we remain in relationship with God is through participation in practices of worship, devotion, community, and outreach. As we do these things, we come to know and love God more deeply, and as a result

we grow in our faith. The most profound and life-changing aspect of this relationship is our experiencing again and again God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

## What Salvation Really Is

Some readers may be wondering why I have emphasized having a relationship with God. It is one thing, they might say, to trust in Christ for our salvation, but another to enter into an ongoing relationship with God that requires our active participation. Isn't salvation simply being forgiven for our sins, so that when we die we do not receive the punishment we deserve but instead live forever? The short answer is no, that is not what salvation is, at least at its heart.

Christians have long affirmed that humans are created in the image of God, though they have had varying ideas about what that exactly means. They have also agreed that because humanity has fallen into sin, the image of God in each of us has been seriously damaged. While they use different language and disagree over the extent of the damage, they all would agree with Cornelius Plantinga that because of sin life is "not the way it's supposed to be."<sup>6</sup>

Because "God is love" (1 John 4:8), Wesley believed that to be in the image of God would be to love as God loves—to love God and our neighbor as well as all of creation. Our problem is that we find this hard to do, and it is hard to do because of who we are. Wesley said the image of God in us is totally corrupted, afflicted by sin much as someone is ravaged by a disease that is both incurable and terminal. As a result, our thoughts and actions, understanding and dispositions are so caught in sin that we cannot extricate ourselves. It distorts our relationships, skews all our decisions, and harms friend and stranger alike. It even harms our own selves.

Is Wesley's diagnosis of this disease too severe? He is not saying that everything we do is "wrong," but that sin—a lack of love for God, neighbor, and creation, and a putting of self into the center of our lives instead of God—is at the root of and is inextricably woven in all we say and do. I invite you to consider the effects.

As you survey the "big picture" of life on our planet, are things the way they are supposed to be? Isn't it the case that in politics or business, entertainment or the environment, nations far away or communities close to home, something seems to have gone radically and tragically wrong? We could—though this is more troubling—look into our own hearts and lives, examining how we treat one another or what values direct our lives and influence our decisions. At the very least, perhaps we can agree that things are badly awry, and a vital part of what is missing is a consistent, caring love.

The early Methodists certainly thought so. Those new to the movement had become "awakened" to their condition. They saw themselves as sinners, separated from God, and longed to experience forgiveness and reconciliation. They had what Wesley called the "faith of a servant," seeking to obey God as best they could and in the process discovering just how strong sin was in their lives.

This is a disconcerting discovery for most of us. We like to think that we are in control of our own lives and that everything is well in hand. What being "awakened" does is show us that while we can struggle against sin, we cannot overcome it. We do not have the freedom we think we do. We need help that only God can provide.

Polls show that large numbers of Americans believe Christianity teaches that you must be good to go to heaven. There are many in the church who understand the Christian life as dutiful obedience or just trying to do the best you can. The early Methodists were under no such illusions. The

"faith of a servant" was part of the process of salvation but was not the goal. It was not the end of the journey but an important first step on the way.

It might seem that the goal would be knowing that God through Jesus Christ forgave their sins. Certainly the experience of forgiveness (or *justification*) was a powerful, life-changing event. They were given this forgiveness as a free gift of God that they neither deserved nor earned. It was, they would say, by grace alone, understood as God's unmerited favor. As a result, they were reconciled to this God who loved them so much even to die for them. They found a new faith (the faith of a child of God) that enabled them to trust in Christ. They received a new sense of their own worth and dignity, which could only come from knowing God's great love for them in Christ. And their motive for serving God began to change as well, from dutiful obedience to loving gratitude for all that God had done for them in Christ.

It would be understandable for something this profound to be seen as Christian salvation. Many have done so. Yet for early Methodists justification was a crucial element of salvation but could not be its goal. Forgiveness frees us from the guilt of sin but does not free us from its power. As long as the power of sin remains unbroken, then our lives are only marginally changed—we still find ourselves caught in the same unhealthy habits, the same destructive relationships, and living out of the same distorted values.

Dallas Willard has called this understanding of a Christian as forgiven but unchanged a "bar code faith." The scanners at the cash registers read only the bar codes on products. If you put the bar code for dog food on ice cream, the scanner will read "dog food" without regard to the actual content of the package.

A "bar code faith" works much the same way. Through some action on our part—having faith, joining a church, performing a ritual—we do what is necessary to receive

forgiveness. This gives us a new "bar code." God ignores the contents of the package and responds to the new "bar code" with forgiveness. Some of Christ's righteousness is shifted "to our account . . . and all our debts are paid." For some traditions, repeated acts are necessary to keep our "debts paid up"; for others all is paid for at once with "the initial scan. But the essential thing in either case is the forgiveness of sins," with the "payoff for having faith and being 'scanned'" coming "at death and after." Our present life "has no necessary connection with being a Christian as long as the 'bar code' does its job."<sup>7</sup>

Living over two hundred years before bar codes and scanners, the early Methodists were well aware of this understanding of salvation. They rejected it for selling salvation short. God has a much bigger and more wonderful plan for us than this. God is not content to leave us at the mercy of this disease of sin but instead seeks to do in our lives what we cannot do for ourselves. God wants to restore in each of us the image of God so that love will govern our hearts and lives and begin to heal our relationships with God, neighbor, and creation. Salvation not only includes justification (our forgiveness and acceptance by God) but *sanctification*, our inward renewal by the Holy Spirit. According to Wesley, this was the "end of Christ's coming," a "restoration not only to the favour, but likewise to the image of God; implying not barely deliverance from sin but the being filled with the fullness of God." For Wesley, "nothing short of this is Christian religion."<sup>8</sup>

## The Gift of New Life

When Jesus was asked which commandment in the law given by God to Israel was the greatest, he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest

and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39).

John Wesley was convinced that whatever God commands, through grace God would enable us to do. Thus, this command to whole-hearted love "is not only a direction what I shall do, but a promise of what God will do in me."<sup>9</sup> For Wesley, God's grace is more than unmerited favor; it is life-transforming power, not only what "God does *for us* in forgiving our sins," but also "the great work which God does *in us*, in renewing our fallen nature."<sup>10</sup>

This transformation of our lives does not occur all at once; it is a process of growth. It begins with *regeneration* (or the *new birth*) in which the Holy Spirit breaks the hold of sin on our lives and sets us free to begin loving God and our neighbor. Regeneration occurs simultaneously with justification and begins the process of sanctification, in which we grow in the knowledge and love of God.

The culmination of sanctification is what Wesley called *Christian perfection* or *entire sanctification*.<sup>11</sup> The term *perfection* is troubling to most of us because our normal definition implies a kind of absolute state that can be neither improved nor changed. The reason is that our English word *perfection* is drawn from a Latin predecessor. Wesley is using instead the Greek understanding found in the New Testament and rooted in centuries of early Christian tradition. He variously describes Christian perfection as "the humble, gentle, patient love of God and our neighbour, ruling our tempers, words, and actions,"<sup>12</sup> having "all the mind which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked," and the "renewal of the heart in the whole image of God."<sup>13</sup> It is, in short, not an absolute perfection but a perfection in love.

This perfection is meant for everyone. You do not have to do extraordinary things or possess special qualities to qualify, though you do need to be in a relationship with God, growing in sanctification. Robin Maas aptly describes Christian

perfection as “*loving to full capacity*—however small or great that capacity may be.” It is being “filled to the brim with a yearning for God.”<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to our usual way of thinking, this means that we can grow in perfection. We can enlarge our capacity to love by coming to recognize more fully occasions to love and by learning from experience as we put this love into practice. Filled with God’s love, we can continue to grow in our ability to see the world and our neighbor as God does. Wesley’s advice is appropriate: “When ye have attained a measure of perfect love, when God has . . . enabled you to love him with all your heart and with all your soul, think not of resting there. . . . Therefore the voice of God . . . to the children of God is, ‘Go forward.’”<sup>15</sup>

Go forward! This is what Wesley urges us to do wherever we find ourselves on our Christian journey. Continue to grow in love, he exhorts, and strengthen your relationship with God. This book is designed to help us do that. It will describe the practices that enrich our lives because they satisfy our hunger for God and open us to receive all the life that God seeks to give us. As we engage in these practices, the Holy Spirit will not only draw us closer to God but also remake us so that we increasingly mirror in our own lives the great and wonderful love of God, which comes to us in Jesus Christ.

### Discussion Questions

1. Richard Foster spoke of a “longing for God.” What kinds of “longings” do people have in our culture today? What difference would it make in our lives for us to have a longing for God?
2. How does “knowing” God differ from “knowing about” God? What are some ways we can know God?

3. Who is God? What does the story of what God has done in creation and for our salvation tell us about God’s character?
4. The New Testament proclaims that Jesus was crucified and is risen from the dead. What difference does this make for our lives and world?
5. If a friend asked you what is meant by “salvation,” how would you respond?
6. One of the questions asked of every Methodist preacher who has sought full conference membership from Wesley’s day to our own is, “Are you going on to perfection?” One bishop, after asking this question, would add, “If not, what are you going on to?” How would you describe the directions our lives frequently take, and in what direction do you believe God would have us go?

## Chapter 2

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### Growing in Grace

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MARTIN THORNTON, a contemporary priest in the Church of England, expressed a certain frustration with the writings of the major Protestant theologians of the first half of the twentieth century. Their books said insightful and admirable things about salvation by grace alone, our acceptance by God just as we are, and the resulting need for us to dwell in Christ, participate in the Christian community, and be faithful disciples. Yet again and again, as he encountered these comments about faithfulness, obedience, participation, and the like, Thornton wrote in the margins the initials "Y.B.H.?" standing for "Yes, but *how*?" If, as they all said, we must respond to this gracious, salvific love of God, then exactly "*how* do ordinary men and women, bankers, typists, farmers and nurses" become and live as disciples of Jesus Christ?<sup>1</sup>

It was the genius of Wesley's movement to provide a comprehensive answer to the "Yes, but *how*?" question. Early Methodists participated in a rich array of spiritual practices that enabled them to grow in their relationship with God. Their engagement in these practices was not an alternative to grace but rather because of it—not a way of making grace unnecessary but of receiving it and responding to it.

As he developed this approach to Christian growth, Wesley found himself in the middle of two opposing understandings of salvation, neither of which was satisfactory. On one side were those who insisted salvation was by grace alone, not by works; therefore, we need do nothing but have faith to be saved. Those on the extreme of this position even saw good works as irrelevant to being a Christian. If Christ has done everything necessary for our salvation, why should we even be concerned with our faithfulness or morality?

On the other side were those who emphasized morality. To be a Christian was to live a good life and do good works. Grace was important for our forgiveness, but they feared an overemphasis on grace would undercut biblical admonitions to moral obedience.

Wesley believed neither of these views because both misunderstood the grace of God. He saw grace as *relational*, in that it both *enables* us to enter a relationship with God and then *invites* us to do so. It enables us because without grace we could not be able on our own; the power of sin in our lives is too strong. It invites us because, thus enabled, we must respond to God's reaching out in love to us through Christ and the Spirit. Relationships by their very nature involve two-way participation.

Drawing on the experience of new birth, Wesley describes the enabling power of grace by reminding Christians how God worked in their lives. God "did not take away your understanding; but enlightened and strengthened it." Nor did God "destroy any of your affections; rather they were more vigorous than before." God, says Wesley, "did not *force* you; but being *assisted* by his grace you, like Mary, *chose* the better part."<sup>2</sup> Grace, in short, does not overcome us but enlivens us and enables us to enter into a relationship with God.

Grace invites us because God seeks our free response to God's love. To overpower us would prevent us from loving

freely, as God does; it would undermine the whole point of salvation, which is for us to be in God's image once again. God seeks partners, not puppets, whose worship and service are not compelled but joyfully given. This, says Philip Yancey, "is the miracle of God's condescension, his humble willingness to share power and offer us full partnership in the mission of transforming the world."<sup>3</sup>

## How We Become Drawn Away from God

To say God invites us into a relationship implies that we can decline God's invitation. We often envision the Christian life as a clear choice: God makes it possible, offers it to us, and then we freely make our decision. Yet Christian spiritual writers through the centuries have warned that things are not this simple—we can be drawn away from a relationship with God almost unawares. There are subtle but definite dangers to the Christian life.

Wesley emphasized a number of these dangers. Two examples are antinomianism ("against the law"), which argues that salvation by grace frees us from moral or ethical commands, and legalism, which sees salvation as largely through obeying the moral law. These had to do with how we understand grace and salvation.

Two other dangers are even more harmful because they lead us to think we are in a relationship with God when we are not. The first of these is *formalism*.<sup>4</sup> Formalists believe they will go to heaven if they fulfill their religious obligations, such as attending church or making a financial contribution to the church. Instead of a means to loving and serving God, these become ends in themselves. Wesley says that when you ask dishonest tradesmen if they are Christians or if they are going to heaven, nine out of ten will reply, "As good a Christian as yourself! Go to heaven? Yes, sure! *For I keep my church as*

well as any man."<sup>5</sup> Formalism replaces a transforming relationship with God with "keeping church."

While they may assent to church teachings, formalists lack the faith to seek God or trust in Christ; they may know *about* God, but they do not know God. It is possible they never had that faith, but it is also possible they once had it but lost it. The chief reason we never acquire faith or lose the faith we have is due to what Wesley called dissipation.

In its common usage, dissipation referred to an irresponsible lifestyle: The young aristocrat who spent his time partying, drinking, and the like was said to be living a dissipated life. Wesley expands the definition to encompass anyone who "is habitually inattentive to the presence and will of his Creator."<sup>6</sup> Dissipation is "the art of forgetting God."<sup>7</sup>

Note that Wesley does not see the problem as God's absence but rather our inattention to God's presence. This inattention is due to our being "encompassed on all sides with persons and things that tend to draw us from our centre."<sup>8</sup> It is not simply temptation to sin that dissipates us; just as often, it is those things we would call good. We are faced with deadlines and have many responsibilities; we juggle work and family; our minds are filled with a thousand things to remember to do as well as multiple worries and concerns. Pastors, who have so many demands on their time, are not immune, and constant church activity itself can draw us from God. Philip Yancey speaks of how "an accumulation of distractions—a malfunctioning computer, bills to pay, an upcoming trip, a friend's wedding, the general busyness of life—gradually edges God away from the center of my life."<sup>9</sup>

The result of prolonged dissipation is a "practical atheism"—we still believe there is a God but live our lives as if we did not. Our belief in God simply makes no difference, and so our religion becomes a kind of going through the motions.

The cure for dissipation and formalism is a faith that enables us to know and love God. As we have seen, this faith is itself a gracious work of the Holy Spirit; we have it not by trying harder but by receiving it as a gift. How, then, do we remain open to receiving faith? And, having received, how do we continue to retain and nurture this faith, given that we are continually threatened by dissipation?

This was precisely the reason early Methodists, as well as Christians before and since, have kept to a discipline. The purpose of spiritual discipline is to keep us focused on God and our neighbor when so much in life threatens to draw us away. Practicing a devotional life, corporate worship, community participation, and outreach to others are ways to maintain and grow in our relationship with God.

I shall say more about this discipline in a later chapter. Here we should note that it was not only having this discipline but also being held accountable to it that enabled the early Methodists to keep focused on God and neighbor. Attending a weekly meeting in which individuals give an account of how they have kept to the discipline is a strong incentive to do so, as well as an opportunity to help each other through sharing advice and experiences.

## How We Confuse God with Our Feelings

I mentioned there were two especially harmful dangers to the Christian life. The second is *enthusiasm*, a word that meant something different in Wesley's day than it does in ours. When students or laity assure me that their churches are in no danger of enthusiasm, it is clear the definition has changed!

To Wesley, enthusiasm was a kind of imaginary religion in which persons "imagine themselves to be so influenced by the Spirit of God as in fact they are not."<sup>10</sup> Enthusiasts



would include those who constantly seek after new experiences or new gifts, who believe God dictates the words they speak (and are therefore never wrong), or who see every impulse or feeling they have as a direction from God.

The enthusiast, in short, confuses having a relationship with God with having certain feelings or gifts. Wesley certainly does not deny that our relationship with God can produce distinct feelings. What he does deny is that the absence of these feelings means there is no relationship with God. Nor does their absence mean we haven't received the new birth: We do not have to *feel* loving in order to *be* a loving person.

Instead, he raises a crucial question: How do you know a particular feeling or impulse is from God? Enthusiasts simply assume that because they have a feeling or impulse, it must come from God. But Wesley could think of a couple of other plausible sources: It could come from Satan or be generated by our own sinful self. Wesley certainly believes God does generate new experiences, give us gifts, and lead us in particular directions. The issue is how to test the spirits.

To this he offers three pieces of helpful advice. First, we should consult Scripture, which provides "a general rule, applicable to all particular cases: 'The will of God is our sanctification' . . . that we should be inwardly and outwardly holy."<sup>11</sup> The Holy Spirit, often in subtle ways, will assist our reason as we examine what is God's will in a particular instance in light of this rule.

Second, he suggests we not use the expression "I want to know what is the will of God." It is too open-ended and encourages some to believe that almost anything could be God's will. It is not the tragic instances of people thinking God is telling them to commit murder or suicide that Wesley has in mind. Rather, it is more like the wealthy investor seeking God's will in order to attain the best return or the consumer seeking God's guidance on what to purchase next. Wesley proposes we ask the question in a more scriptural

manner: "I want to know what will be most for my improvement, and what will make me most useful."<sup>12</sup> That is, what aids in my growth in love and other fruit of the Spirit, and what enables me to serve God more fully?

Third, he warns us to beware "of imagining you shall obtain the end without using the means conducive to it." While God can act apart from the means of grace, we "have no reason to think" God will.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, we should use all the means of grace God has given us to enable our growth as Christians.

The reason means of grace such as searching the Scripture and participating in the Lord's Supper help us avoid enthusiasm is that they tell us who God is; that is, they enable us to know God's identity. Through practicing these means of grace we encounter again and again the story of what God has done in creation and redemption. We are continually reminded of the promises of God, which give us hope, and the character of God that is love. To know who God is gives us a way to determine which experiences or "leadings" are from God and which are not.

## What Are the Means of Grace?

Wesley defines means of grace as "outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the *ordinary* channels" of conveying "preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."<sup>14</sup> Means of grace, then, are practices we do—"outward signs, words, or actions"—that the Holy Spirit then uses to convey grace. They enable and invite our participation in a relationship with God that will transform our lives and lead to growth as Christians.

Because God establishes means of grace for this purpose, they are the normal and regular ("ordinary") ways we grow in our relationship with God and neighbor. This by no means rules out God's doing an extraordinary work in our

lives. Wesley in fact believes the Spirit works in unusual ways—on occasion he or those he preached to would fall to the ground under the Spirit's power. But even recognizing that as a work of the Holy Spirit (and not some other spirit) requires a regular, disciplined practice of the means of grace.

Since means of grace convey preventing (or prevenient) and justifying grace as well as sanctifying grace, one does not have to wait until one is a Christian to use them. Anyone with even the slightest degree of faith can begin to practice them, regardless of his or her current relationship with God. Likewise, we never reach a point where we no longer need means of grace—to say that would be equivalent to saying we no longer need a relationship with God. They mean more to us, not less, as we grow in our Christian lives.

Wesley divides the means of grace into two categories.<sup>15</sup> The *instituted* means are ordained by God to be used by all Christians in every period in history and all human cultures. These were all practiced by Jesus, who commanded his disciples to use them as well. There are five instituted means of grace:

1. Prayer: personal, family, public; extemporaneous and written.
2. Searching the Scriptures by reading, meditating, hearing; hearing the preached word.
3. The Lord's Supper.
4. Fasting, or abstinence.
5. Christian conference, which includes conversations that are edifying or otherwise minister grace to hearers.

Wesley does not consistently list all five. Clearly the first three—prayer, searching the Scriptures, and the Lord's Supper—are preeminent and the ones chosen for discussion in his sermon "The Means of Grace." But it is significant that

the discipline of the early Methodists committed them to practice fasting as well.

Conspicuous in its absence is baptism. Wesley believed baptism and the Lord's Supper to be sacraments, and therefore both were for him unquestionably means of grace. But because baptism is celebrated only once while the Lord's Supper is repeatedly offered, Wesley focused on the latter as the ongoing sacrament in the Christian life. Because today we may renew our Baptismal Covenant (a practice similar in intent to Wesley's Covenant Service), baptism—"and the reaffirmation of our baptismal vows"—will be included in this book as a life-enriching practice.

Wesley's second category was the *prudential* means of grace. This included the small groups and spiritual disciplines, covenant services and love feasts, and above all visiting the sick and all other ways of putting love for our neighbor into practice. Prudential means are simply those practices that God seems to be using in a particular time or place. We should be alert to the ways the Holy Spirit is working in our day and culture. This does not mean that practicing spiritual disciplines and loving our neighbor are themselves optional, but that the specific practices through which we do them may vary. Times change and cultures are diverse, so the Spirit continually reveals new needs to be addressed and leads us in creative ways to meet those needs.

Another set of categories used by Wesley focuses on the object of the means of grace. *Works of piety* are those practices directed to God and would include both public worship and personal devotions. *Works of mercy* are those means of grace directed to the neighbor. These two categories show how the means of grace enable us to put into practice the two great commandments to love God and our neighbor.

The means of grace as practiced by the early Methodists formed a pattern of renewal by enabling them to experience both God's presence and identity. Accountability to a discipline

at a weekly meeting counteracted dissipation, opening them to experience the presence of God. Other means of grace, such as searching the Scriptures and the Lord's Supper, disclosed the identity of God. Some, like prayer and covenant services, helped in both ways. Through practicing these means of grace, the early Methodists were able to grow in the knowledge and love of God as well as love for their neighbor.

As we practice these means of grace, the Holy Spirit renews our lives. They are life-enriching practices because through them we become the people we were created to be, increasingly mirroring in our lives the love that is at the heart of God.

### Discussion Questions

1. What does the word *grace* mean? How does grace work in our lives?
2. What are some ways we are drawn away from God? How can we avoid it?
3. How can we tell that an experience or sense of direction is from God?
4. What are some examples of "works of piety"? How do they help us grow as Christians?
5. What are some examples of "works of mercy"? How do they help us grow as Christians?

## PERSONAL DEVOTION

### Chapter 3

#### The First Practice: Prayer

**G**OD LONGS FOR relationship with us. As Richard Foster says, God "aches over our distance and preoccupation" and "mourns that we do not draw near to him." Weeping "over our obsession with muchness and many-ness," God "longs for our presence." Inviting us "to come home to that for which we were created," God's "arms are stretched wide to receive us," and God's "heart is enlarged to take us in."<sup>1</sup>

"The key to this home, this heart of God," says Foster, "is prayer."<sup>2</sup>

John Wesley would agree. He called prayer "the grand means of drawing near to God." Prayer is so indispensable to the Christian life that the other means of grace are themselves helpful only "as they are mixed with or prepare us for this."<sup>3</sup> Prayer, he says, is "the breath of our spiritual life."<sup>4</sup>

A longing of God for fellowship with us and our corresponding need to draw near to God may not be what comes to your mind when you hear the word *prayer*. This is completely understandable. If we look up *prayer* or *pray* in a standard English dictionary, we find definitions that revolve around making requests—entreaties, addressing God with a petition, and the like. That is, prayer is seen as something we do to bring about a desired result, sometimes through