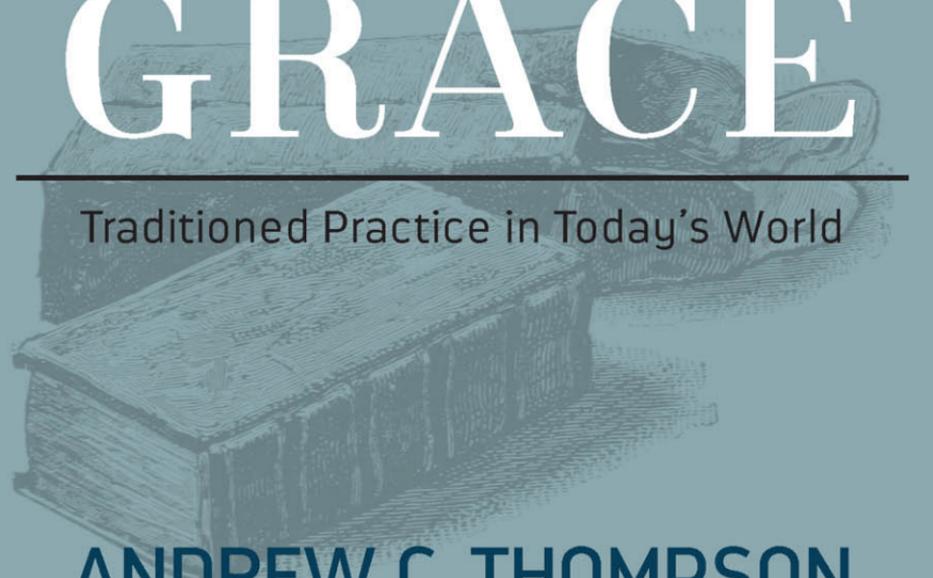




# The Means of GRACE

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Traditioned Practice in Today's World

A faint, sketch-like illustration of a stack of several books is visible in the background, partially obscured by the text.

**ANDREW C. THOMPSON**

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**GRACE**

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Traditioned Practice in Today's World

ANDREW C. THOMPSON



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Printed in the United States of America

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-62824-227-0

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-62824-228-7

ePub ISBN: 978-1-62824-229-4

uPDF ISBN: 978-1-62824-230-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015948988

*Cover design by Nikabrik Design*

*Page design by PerfectType*

SEEDBED PUBLISHING  
Franklin, Tennessee  
Seedbed.com  
SOW FOR A GREAT AWAKENING

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# Preface

I'M GRATEFUL FOR THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF OTHER pastors and teachers before me who have written in the area this book covers. They have taught me a great deal. These Wesleyan authors have contributed to a revived interest in spiritual practices and disciplines in our tradition—helping the church to understand how a distinctly patterned approach to discipleship lies at the heart of the Wesleyan understanding about how transformation occurs over time. Steve Harper and Hal Knight have written important popular-level works on Wesleyan spirituality and the means of grace. Their contributions have been important in retrieving the language of the means of grace for a broad Wesleyan audience. I've been particularly influenced by Knight's academic-level work on the means of grace as well. Other contributions by Dean Blevins, Ole Borgen, Kenneth Collins, Richard Heitzenrater, and Randy Maddox have also been deeply influential on both my thinking and practice of the means of grace.

My reason for writing this book is threefold. First, I want to show the deep connection between biblical spirituality and practical discipleship. John Wesley believed that the means of grace are important primarily because together they are the pattern of faithful discipleship we find given to us in the Bible. Wesley taught that the means of grace are given to us by Jesus Christ in the four gospels

of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They are also the way the early church patterned its life in the Acts of the Apostles. So in a way, the entire Wesleyan teaching around the means of grace is a way to try and explain the biblical model of discipleship for the Christian life. I find that part of Wesley's practical theology to be utterly compelling and I believe it should be shared far and wide.

Second, I wanted to write this book to share with a broad audience the actual structure and approach that Wesley used in applying the means of grace to practical life. We live in such a consumerist culture that we apply that mind-set to everything we do—including our practice of discipleship. I've met Christians who talk about how they love to study the Bible or find their primary connection to God in prayer. Others will say that they practice their discipleship through their participation in service projects or mission trips. Still others think of their practice of faith as focused primarily in Sunday morning worship. The reality about the Wesleyan approach to discipleship is that there is no buffet-style picking and choosing. Instead, there is a strong conviction that the means of grace should serve as the "pattern of the Christian life" (to use Knight's phrase). Only when we live into a form of discipleship that embraces all the means of grace do we discover ourselves growing into the kind of spiritual maturity that is spoken about in Ephesians 4:15: "we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."

Finally, I thought it was important to write this book as a way to offer Christians an accessible guide to practicing the means of grace in their own lives and in their own communities. We are creatures of habit, and we live our lives by routines. Sometimes we self-consciously choose

those routines, and sometimes we find them imposed on us by outside circumstances. It is easy to fall into bad routines unless we make a sustained effort to do otherwise. The means of grace offer us such a choice, whereby we can embrace a holy routine that aims at forming us into real disciples of Jesus Christ. In the Wesleyan tradition, we consider the life of discipleship to point us toward nothing less than salvation in this present life—and to offer us a foretaste of the salvation that is to come.

A project of this sort would not be possible without a wonderful group of people who have offered their support and encouragement along the way. J. D. Walt and Andrew Miller at Seedbed Publishing were encouraging of this book from the beginning; Andrew, in particular, has been a conversation partner throughout the writing process and has been gracious with both feedback and deadline extensions. The whole Seedbed team is a joy to work with.

Some of the content in this book served first as teaching topics in church and seminary settings. I'm grateful to the congregations of Mt. Carmel United Methodist Church (Henderson, NC), Duke's Chapel United Methodist Church (Durham, NC), and Marion United Methodist Church (Marion, AR), for their willingness to engage material on the means of grace through sermons and other teaching sessions. I am especially indebted to the students in my "Means of Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition" course at Memphis Theological Seminary, in both the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2015, for the lively conversations we had and the insights they provided.

My greatest thanks go to my wife, Emily, and our three children: Alice, Stuart, and Anna Charlotte. They are patient with me beyond anything I have a right to expect, and they

indulge my tendency to lose myself down one theological rabbit hole after another. Alice, at age four, shows promise of becoming the theologian I could never hope to be. To God alone be the glory, for them and for the opportunity to write this book while living with and loving them.

Finally, I want to offer my love and gratitude to my parents, Charlotte and Robert Thompson. In ways beyond counting they gave me the kind of upbringing that helped me to know the power of the means of grace before I ever learned the term itself. Both the life of our family and the life of the church to which our family belonged provided me with my earliest spiritual formation and encounter with the grace we find in Jesus Christ. Not long after my first daughter was born, my mom said to me in an almost offhand way, “Andrew, now you’ll know how I’ve felt about you for all these years.” Those were true words. Also true is the fact that we often fail to express our deepest sentiments toward those we love in an adequate way. I have no words to tell Mom and Dad fully how I feel about them, but I do have this book. And so I dedicate it to them.

## INTRODUCTION

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# Looking for Direction

### DISCIPLESHIP.

That's the word I've heard all my life to describe what the Christian faith is supposed to be about. What do you call people who follow Jesus Christ? *Disciples*. What is the word we use for the stuff Jesus' followers do in service to him? *Discipleship*. Disciple is a biblical term as well. Jesus' closest companions in the Gospels are called the twelve disciples. And in the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commands his followers to go into the world and "make disciples of all nations."

So the Bible tells us that Jesus' followers are called disciples. If we want to be counted among those followers, then doesn't it make sense that we figure out just what is a disciple?

### A Personal Story

My trouble for the longest time when I was a kid was that I didn't know what discipleship was supposed to look like. Was it just going to church regularly? Saying your prayers at night? Was it being involved in a certain kind of activity or service work? Being a nice person? One problem with

identifying what discipleship looked like in practical life was that nobody ever really told me. My family was always active in our church when I was growing up. I went to Sunday school and attended worship every week. I learned stories from the Bible and heard sermons about God's love. I also remember being taught about faith—which was believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior of the world.

But discipleship? I'm not sure we ever went in-depth on that.

I think I also did what a lot of other kids did, which was to think about church or faith as one thing in my life among many other things. Sure, church was important. But so were family, school, sports, playing with friends, and so on. I never really got around to *integrating* my faith into every other part of my life. Church had its place, but it was pretty neatly parceled out to certain days of the week and certain regular events. When I was there, I gave my mind and heart over to it. But when I was elsewhere, my mind and heart were occupied with other things.

When I left home at age eighteen, I left all the structure that life had provided me up to that point. All of a sudden, the strongest positive influences in my life (especially my parents) were hours away. Pretty soon I lost any sense of grounding as to what I was doing and why. My faith in Jesus Christ waned and my connection to his church soon fell by the wayside. I drifted with the wind—for years, actually. Like a lot of people at that age, I dove headlong into habits that were not healthy for my mind, body, or spirit.

Looking back, I think I was waiting for a monumental change from childhood to adulthood to happen, as if I would

change from a caterpillar to a butterfly. Instead all I found was that the same old longings and fears I had always had were still there. If anything, they had become deeper (and I became more and more unsatisfied). A hunger gnawed at me, and none of the ways I tried to satisfy it worked. Typically they only made things worse. I tried to fill my hunger with new experiences, new relationships, and new adventures. What I didn't understand was that my hunger was a spiritual hunger.

By the time I was in my early twenties, I was miserable. So finally I started to pray again, almost as a last resort. (Not because I had much confidence in my prayers, but because nothing else in my life had seemed to work.) My grandfather's death had a huge impact on me around that time. In fact, I felt the first hints of a kind of inward renewal when my prayers following his death seemed like they were answered. I even began to go to church again after years of staying away—hesitantly at first, but later with real energy for a recommitment to my faith. At some point I realized that Jesus had never left me; I had only left him. My heart began to open after a long time of being closed, and I felt as if a part of me that had died was being made to live again.

During this period of renewal in my life, I was digging into the Christian faith in ways I never had. I was reading books and having conversations and embracing devotional practices that were really meeting the spiritual hunger I had so long misunderstood. But surprisingly, this new direction in my life was increasing my inward hunger at the same time! I was still taking baby steps, but I was also starting to realize that there were some things I needed if I wanted to really gain traction and grow spiritually. The

main thing that I needed, I finally realized, was a pattern or framework for . . . well, *discipleship* of course. I needed to learn what the life of a real disciple of Jesus looked like.

## The Way of Discipleship vs. The Way of the World

In the years that followed, I sought to find out about discipleship through a combination of study and practice. I began reading the Bible seriously for the first time in my life. I also started reading a lot of John Wesley's writings—the founder of the Methodist movement in the eighteenth century who wrote a great deal on grace, salvation, and the Christian life. In many ways, Wesley became a spiritual mentor to me. His writings helped me understand the biblical witness much more clearly.

Together with my studies, I began to take the practice of my discipleship more seriously. I came to the realization that discipleship wasn't just about "doing the right thing" out of a sense of duty or obligation. Instead it was about loving the Lord my God and loving my neighbor. If I got those things right, then all the activity of day-to-day life would follow. I was fortunate at this time to have mentors and friends much wiser than I who showed me the right path again and again. They were God's instruments in my life.

Eventually I became convinced that three things were absolutely essential for real discipleship. They are discipleship's three necessary ingredients, you might say. Without all three of them, you will end up with something that might resemble discipleship in a surface way but in reality is something quite different. Those three components are:

1. Community
2. Discipline
3. Transformation

The right kind of *community* is essential for true discipleship because none of us can go it alone. There's a reason that Jesus called twelve disciples together instead of just one. There's also a reason that the church stuck together as a community after Jesus' resurrection rather than splitting up. Without a community around you to teach you, support you, and hold you accountable, you will never grow to be a mature disciple.

We also need *discipline* in order to become real disciples of Jesus. For the same reason that an athlete will never achieve excellence without dedication and practice, we will never become the kind of disciples God wants us to be without those same things. It took me a while to come around to this understanding. I knew it was true for sports, just as I knew it was true for academics and business. But I never applied the same standard to my faith. When I began to realize that my faith was the most important part of my life, then I also saw how much I had missed by approaching it in a lackadaisical and haphazard fashion.

“The soul and body  
make a man, and the  
spirit and discipline  
make a Christian.”

—John Wesley<sup>1</sup>

The last thing we must have for true discipleship is the experience of *transformation*. This one is a little tricky, because *we* can't make it happen. We don't transform ourselves. Rather, we experience transformation by God's

grace. Yet the very way that God's grace works means that we can expect to be transformed as we commit ourselves to the practice of discipleship within a community of faith. In other words, God promises us that we will be transformed when we live faithful lives over time.

I really think that these three elements—community, discipline, and transformation—are very countercultural today. They make up what I would call the “way of discipleship.” Our culture gives us a different pattern for how to live. We will call it the “way of the world.” Where God calls us to be a part of a community, the culture promotes individualism at every turn. Likewise, where true discipleship calls for true discipline, our culture encourages rabid consumerism (which means nothing more than saying “yes” to every felt desire we have). And where the gospel promises transformation, our culture promotes a kind of materialism that says we should not put our faith in God but rather in the things of this world.

I spent long enough embracing the way of the world that I came to realize how empty it is in the end. I am still very much a disciple-in-training. There is plenty that I don't do well, and there's plenty else that I still have to learn. I need all the help I can get! But I am convinced that the only life worth living is a life following Jesus Christ. It's in that kind of life that the only true happiness can be found.

## The Pattern of Christian Discipleship

John Wesley had a phrase for what it means to live faithfully as a disciple of Jesus: *walking in the ways of God*. I love that phrase because it makes me think of discipleship as an action verb. It means that discipleship is really about how

you live every day of your life. It's about taking seriously those things that are of greatest value, and making them your top priority.<sup>2</sup>

There is actually a Wesleyan pattern of discipleship for how to understand what these ways of God are. It's a pattern that shows us how to build up holy habits in our daily lives. One of the interesting things you'll find when you read the work of neuroscientists and psychologists who study human behavior is that we are all very much creatures of habit.<sup>3</sup> Even without meaning to do so, we will form habits that guide our day-to-day behavior. Once established, habits are very difficult to break. So that means that establishing the right kind of habits is really important.

When we talk about discipleship having a pattern, we mean that there are *faith habits* that work together to mold us into mature Christians. These faith habits are the subject of this book. They're called the "means of grace."

John Wesley and the early Methodist movement have had a profound impact on how I think about discipleship. The practices that we call the means of grace are all drawn from biblical examples, but it is through John Wesley's writings and the example of the early Methodists that we find the means of grace put together into a framework that offers us a real pattern of discipleship.<sup>4</sup> When I teach Wesleyan theology, I always tell my students that we should only ever read John Wesley (or any Christian theologian) insofar as he gives us a clear window into Scripture. I believe Wesley does give us such a window, and that's why I've taken his views on the means of grace seriously. It's also why I want to share this part of Wesley's approach to discipleship with you.

In the chapters that follow, you will read about what the means of grace are. You will also read about how they can work together to shape your very life. I'll warn you on the front end: the means of grace call for dedication both to a faith community and to a life of discipline. If you don't want those things as a part of your life, you might want to stop reading now. But if you have a sense that both a real community and real discipline do lie at the heart of a mature faith, then I can tell you that the means of grace *will* lead to transformation for you. I say that not because I promise it but because I believe that God promises it.

Nothing about discipleship is possible apart from God's grace. Because of that, the first chapter to follow this introduction will be about grace. *Grace* is a word that is used repeatedly throughout the New Testament, but it is not always well understood. Chapter 1 will present grace in a way that will help you to understand how important it is and how powerful it is. This chapter will also describe just what we mean by "the means of grace."

The chapters that follow after that (chapters 2–10) will be divided into three parts:

- instituted means of grace (chapters 2–7);
- prudential means of grace (chapters 8–9); and
- general means of grace (chapter 10).

These are categories that John Wesley used to help explain how the means of grace work in the Christian life. Don't get intimidated by the terms. They will make more sense as you read on.

You'll find that all the chapters on the instituted means of grace will follow the same approach. Because these are the means of grace most obviously identifiable from the life

of Jesus, the way we can talk about them is pretty standard. The first section of each of the chapters will explain the biblical witness on that particular area. The second section will discuss where we find each means of grace within the history of Wesleyan spirituality. The third section will look at how to think about the topics in practical life.

The remaining chapters on the prudential and general means of grace are arranged a little bit differently, mostly because how we identify them is based on a combination of the Bible and our own experiences. But with them, I also try to stay focused on both the way a Wesleyan view on them helps us to understand them better and how we can apply them in daily life. My hope throughout is that you'll see how each one of these wonderful practices of discipleship is grounded in the Bible, given shape through the Wesleyan witness, and applicable in daily life. They are the channels that have been given to us so that we can learn how to walk in the ways of God!

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The Means of  
**GRACE**

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## CHAPTER 1

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# What Does Grace Have to Do with Me?

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT GRACE? IT'S A WORD that shows up a lot in the Bible. You've probably come across the phrase, "For by grace you have been saved through faith." That comes from Ephesians 2:8, and many Christians see it as lying at the heart of their faith.

A favorite passage of mine comes from the Gospel of John: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:14, 16). Those two verses say something important about how much God loves us. He loves us so much that he came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ to save us. But notice also how that great act of God is described. The Son is full of *grace* and truth. He has given us something described as *grace upon grace*.

If you think about what these biblical passages from Ephesians and John are saying, then it becomes pretty obvious that grace is important. You might even say that our salvation depends on it! So what exactly *is* grace?

## Grace: Pardon and Power

I teach regularly about grace in churches and seminary classrooms. Regardless of the setting, I always begin by asking people what words come to mind when they think about the meaning of grace. The responses I get most often look like this: *forgiveness*, *pardon*, *mercy*, and *unmerited favor*. Those are all important terms that say something about what grace is. In the Bible, the meaning of grace might be best captured by the First Letter of John: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16 NIV).

If we want to know *why* Jesus Christ laying down his life for us is the one thing that shows us love in its purest form, then we’ll have to explore the Bible’s story of our relationship with God more deeply. But for a one-sentence statement about what God’s love is about, I’ll take that one from 1 John 3:16.

Wait—did you notice what I just did? I switched from talking about God’s grace to talking about God’s love. That happens quite a bit when we get into the biblical language about what grace is. Grace is really a word to describe how God is *for us* in every way. So it makes sense to talk about grace in terms of God’s love, because it is through God’s love that we find ourselves forgiven. We know grace when we receive pardon for our sin. Grace is pardon.

There’s another way to speak about grace as well. If forgiveness for sin is one part of what grace is, then the second way to understand grace is that it is God’s power for new life. In his second letter, Peter counsels us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus

Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). He’s talking about grace as a kind of power that allows us to grow spiritually so that we come to know Christ more fully.

The apostle Paul also talks about grace as a type of divine power. He says in Ephesians 4:7 that “to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (NIV). And the reason for giving this grace is to raise up mature leaders in the church, “to prepare God’s people for works of service”

(Eph. 4:12 NIV). Once again, we see grace being described as a kind of power for the life of discipleship.

You may have experienced grace in both of these ways. As a child, you knew when you did something wrong that things weren’t going to feel right again until your mom or dad forgave you. While the context might change as you grow older, the need to be reconciled when something goes awry doesn’t change. Whether it is a friend, your husband or wife, or a coworker, you know that you need to be forgiven when you’ve messed up in some way. Sometimes, of course, you are the one who needs to do the forgiving!

Christians who have received new birth in Christ can often speak profoundly about the sense of being forgiven by God. When grace is given and truly received in faith, then the sense of all the burden of past sin and broken relationships is lifted. Pardon for sin—the forgiveness that

“What is Grace? The Power of the Holy Ghost, enabling us to believe and love and serve God.”

—John Wesley<sup>1</sup>

can only be found in Christ Jesus—is experienced through grace in its purest form.

What about experiencing not just the pardon but also the power of grace? The way we encounter the power of God's grace is not likely to be as momentary and sudden as it is in that first wonderful experience of forgiveness. The power of grace is most likely to be experienced as the gentle but persistent force that nurtures our growth as disciples of Jesus. In fact, John Wesley often considered grace to be just that—the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us to help us grow spiritually.<sup>2</sup> It is true that the Holy Spirit can work dramatically at certain points in our lives. On a day-to-day basis, though, the Spirit's work is going to be subtler than that and nourishing to us in ways we might not always even realize. Like the effects of good sunlight, healthy soil, and ample water in a garden, the grace given through the Holy Spirit gives us what we need to grow just the right way so that we eventually bear wonderful fruit.

## What's the Big Deal about Grace?

So far I've talked a lot about how we can understand grace as it's shown to us in the Bible. But there are a couple of questions you might be asking at this point. Why do we need to be forgiven in the first place? And what kind of power does grace give me to grow that I don't have just by living in the world?

These are good questions to ask. For some people, the answers are obvious. For others, they aren't obvious at all. The need for both pardon and power from God are due to

what the Bible calls “sin.” But since a word like sin isn’t really self-explanatory, it is worth looking at how the Bible describes it. Let me do that here.

There are really two ways we can think about sin: it is both an act and a disease. The notion of sinful acts is the easier of the two for us to wrap our minds around. We’re all taught from a young age that there are things we aren’t supposed to do. *Don’t hit your sister. Stop grabbing toys away from the other children. Don’t take an extra cookie from the cookie jar.* Those are all household rules, which are established by moms and dads to teach kids right from wrong. When we grow older, we learn that there are laws that our towns and cities and states have put into place to make sure society is livable. *Obey the speed limit. Don’t steal other people’s things. Pay your taxes each year.* So young or old, we’re confronted with a world where there are certain rules or laws we’re expected to keep in obedience to the authority over us (our parents, the government). Those authorities are responsible for keeping the peace and providing a good environment in which to live. Rules are necessary for that.

The Bible teaches us that God is the creator of all things, including us. God also loves everything that he has made, which we see in a passage from Psalm 145:9 that was one of John Wesley’s favorites: “The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works” (KJV). So beyond being just the creator, God is the governor of creation as well. As governor, God has also seen the need to establish a law for his creation and especially for those special creatures that he has made in his own image—human beings. One place we see God’s law summarized is in the Ten Commandments:

## The Ten Commandments

(Loving God)

1. You shall have no other gods before God
2. You shall not cast idols
3. You shall not take the name of God in vain
4. You shall honor the Sabbath and keep it holy

(Loving Neighbor)

5. Honor your father and mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not bear false witness
10. You shall not covet

God's law does more than constrain wrongdoing (although it does do that). It also shows us how to embrace all that is good. As you can see in the previous diagram, the Ten Commandments give us guidance about how to love God and how to love our neighbor.

Sin comes into the picture when we break God's law. We can do this through outward acts and we can also commit acts of the heart when we sin through our thoughts and desires. "Create in me a clean heart, O God," Psalm 51:10 says, "and renew a right spirit within me." It is a statement that recognizes the way that outwardly sinful acts usually begin as sins of the heart.

Sin is like a disease inside us as well. This may not be quite as obvious, but it explains everything about why we end up committing sinful acts at all—especially when we know such acts are wrong. Sin is like a plague that everyone in the human race is born with. The apostle Paul spoke about this in his personal testimony when he said that sin "deceived me" and "killed me" and that he had been "sold under sin." For Paul, sin was like a presence

that was constantly pressing him to do evil rather than good: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15).

When we think about sin not just as things we do but as a presence within us, we begin to understand just what a problem it is. You can’t just decide that, starting right now, you’re not going to sin anymore. It just isn’t that simple! What’s worse, sin is something that affects the whole human race. Paul told us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). That means that there isn’t anyone who is free from the predicament of sin. We are alienated from God, living broken lives in a broken world. Whether it is in our actions or our hearts, we are constantly living lives of rebellion against the One who created us and will ultimately judge us.

## Grace at Work

That word—*judge*—can be a scary one. But it is another one of those terms we use to describe how God relates to us: Creator, Governor, and Judge. We do stand on the outside of God’s law because of our sin. As our judge, God should be expected to hold us accountable for our rebellion against the good and holy plan he has for our lives.

It’s here that we can come full circle to where we began, though. We started by talking about God’s grace. When we talk about grace as God’s love for us, the pardon and power of God in our lives, it all sounds great. But it’s only when we come to grips with the enormity of our sin that we truly realize why grace is necessary. Otherwise we might look at grace in a take-it-or-leave-it fashion. The truth, of course,

is that we stand in desperate need of God's grace in every possible way.

Once we understand our deep need for grace, how can we understand the way that grace actually works in our lives? After all, saying that grace is God's love for us is one thing. Understanding how we receive that love is another. I can open up my arms to receive a hug from my wife or my brother. But how do I open up my arms to receive God's grace?

Not long ago I heard Bishop Gary Mueller of the United Methodist Church present a teaching on the Wesleyan view of how grace works.<sup>3</sup> He describes God's grace interacting with us in these three ways:

- Grace is unconditional—God comes to each of us with the message that he loves us as we are, no matter our past, etc.
- Grace is transformational—God does not leave us as we are but rather transforms our hearts and lives.
- Grace is invitational—By grace, the Lord Jesus calls and empowers us to join him in the work of the gospel.

This is a wonderful way to capture the Wesleyan sense of how grace works in our lives. *Unconditional*, *transformational*, and *invitational*—these are terms that speak to the way the Bible shows how grace works, and they also help us to think about how the Wesleyan approach takes the biblical view seriously as it relates to daily discipleship.

### *Grace Is Unconditional*

I have a friend named Katherine who is a potter. We worked together for several summers in a program for high school youth. Katherine uses her skill in pottery to teach biblical

lessons. Sitting at her potter's wheel with her arms covered in clay, she shares stories of how God molds us like a master potter. She knows her source: the Bible speaks about God in this way. Jeremiah 18:6 says, "Just like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel" (NRSV). For my friend Katherine, the image of God as the potter and us as the clay speaks to the loving care that God has for the whole creation.

When we talk about God's grace as unconditional, we mean that God loves absolutely everything he has made. The potter does not take up the clay, mold it, and work it if he hates the clay to begin with. And that is true of God in relation to the world. God is the master potter, and we are the work of his hands. God loves us.

When we talk about grace as unconditional, what we also mean by that is that there's nothing we have to do in order to *earn* God's love. And considering how limited we are and how infinite God is, that's a very good thing! The unconditional nature of grace also means that there is no one that God excludes from his mercy. As it has often been said, this doesn't mean that all people *will* be saved but it does mean that all people *can* be saved. This universal, unconditional offer of grace is attested to throughout the Bible. The entire thrust of the New Testament message about Jesus Christ is based on this—that he came as "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2 NRSV).

### *Grace Is Transformational*

At its heart, grace is about growth. It is about taking us from where we are to where God wants us to be. This part

of how grace affects us is summed up for me in two simple sentences:

1. Jesus Christ loves you just the way you are.
2. Jesus Christ loves you so much that he refuses to leave you the way you are.

Saying that Jesus loves us just as we are is important—it's what allows us to speak about the unconditional nature of grace in the first place. But when we go on to say that Jesus' love for us is so great that he wants to change us in some way, we are getting at the heart of the move from sin to salvation. We're now speaking about the way that God's grace is deeply transformational as well.

In the Bible, the two great themes of justification and new birth are related to the transformational power of grace. *Justification* sounds like a difficult word, but its meaning is simple. It means for something that is out of alignment to be put back right again. In this case, what is out of alignment is us. We are broken creatures. Our thoughts and deeds are often marked by sin. We have a wound within us that we don't have the power to heal on our own. To be justified by God's grace means that God puts us back in alignment with him. It means to be forgiven. This comes through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross, when it is received by us personally. Jesus had no sin, but he suffered for our sin nevertheless. And he did this out of the depths of his love for us.

The new birth is the powerful experience of spiritual regeneration that comes in the wake of our justification. If justification is really about how we are viewed in God's eyes, then the new birth is about how we come to be viewed in our own eyes. Peter refers to this great change when he

speaks about the way that God the Father “has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3 NRSV). Our spiritual birth is the beginning of an ongoing growth in grace, which the Bible calls sanctification.

I know, I know. *Sanctification* sounds like another tricky term. But it’s really just another word for holiness. And in the New Testament, holiness is the word used to describe what happens to us when we are brought closer and closer to the heart of God by Jesus. We are made holy by that process.

Justification =  
Being made right

Sanctification =  
Being made holy

I grew up as a Methodist, but I never really heard words like *sanctification* or *holiness* during my childhood. So I was surprised to find out later that this idea was probably the most central spiritual concept for John Wesley (who, after all, was the leader of the Methodist revival). He believed that the best understanding of holiness is that it is all about love. And the book of the Bible that he thought captured holy love the best was the First Letter of John. “God’s love was revealed among us in this way,” John told us in 1 John 4:9, “God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (NRSV). Coming to faith in Jesus Christ holds profound spiritual meaning. It creates a change in us; it makes us holy. “God is love,” John explained, “and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16b NRSV).

When we say that grace is transformational, we mean that Christ does not leave us as he finds us. Just as Jesus

made the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the dead to be raised, so too does Jesus seek to heal us as well. Grace has the ability to forgive us for the wrongs we have committed. Grace also has the ability to heal us from the tendency to do wrong and be wrong. Think about it: if God only forgave us but didn't heal us, then we'd end up right where we started in terms of our sin. Yet because the nature of grace is about both pardon *and* power, we can be both forgiven and healed!

The apostle Paul teaches us that the transforming power of grace works in our lives every day so long as we are continuing to walk in faith. "All of us," Paul said, "with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18 NRSV). Walking in the ways of God is like gazing into God's own image. When we do that, we begin to be transformed into that same image. That means that life lived in the midst of God's grace is a different kind of life than we could ever live otherwise.

### *Grace Is Invitational*

Unconditional, transformational, and . . . invitational! What does it mean to say that grace is invitational? What is God inviting us to do by the working of his grace?

One of the great examples of invitational grace channeled through a person in my lifetime happened when I was in high school. It was the spring of 1993, and the famous college basketball coach Jim Valvano was dying of cancer. He was named as the recipient of the Arthur Ashe Courage and Humanitarian Award at the first annual ESPY Awards that year. Valvano was very sick by the time the

awards ceremony came around, but somehow he was able to make it there. His friend Dick Vitale had to help him up to the podium so he could receive his award.<sup>4</sup>

Jimmy V took the mic when it came time for him to speak and didn't give it back for eleven minutes. He spoke about his love for his family. He spoke about his enthusiasm for life. He brought just about everyone in the audience to tears. Toward the end of the speech Valvano said, "I just got one last thing, I urge all of you, all of you, to enjoy your life, the precious moments you have. To spend each day with some laughter and some thought, to get your emotions going. To be enthusiastic every day and . . . to keep your dreams alive in spite of problems, whatever you have."<sup>5</sup>

A powerful message. But he didn't stop there. He went on to urge the audience to join the fight against cancer and AIDS by getting involved and donating their time and energy and money. To make a difference somehow.

Then he ended by offering words of great assurance. He said that the cancer in his own body could only damage him so much. "It cannot touch my mind, it cannot touch my heart and it cannot touch my soul," Valvano said. "And those three things are going to carry on forever."

I've watched the video of Jimmy V's speech many times. I've read the text of it word-for-word. The man was talking about God and about salvation. I don't know how else to understand his closing words other than as words of great faith, spoken by someone sure of his salvation in Jesus Christ. When you couple those words with his encouragement to embrace life fully, to love boldly, and to do good works in the world, I think you have the perfect image of what the invitational work of grace is all about.

I have always found it interesting that Jesus even bothered calling fishermen and tax collectors to follow him. He was the Son of God. He surely didn't need help from people who were inevitably going to get in the way more than anything else! Yet call them he did. He spent a whole lot of time teaching them and preparing them to carry out ministries of their own. When you read the stories of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—you can't escape the sense that a big part of what it means to be Jesus' disciple is to take the good news Jesus has given you and carry it out into the world so that others might come to know Jesus too.

He offers us his love so that we might be transformed. Then he invites us to carry that love to others so that they will be transformed as well.

## The Purpose of the Means of Grace

Once we know this wonderful grace of God firsthand, we begin to want to encounter it in an ongoing way. God wants that as well. He has given us certain channels through which we can receive grace. They are the means of grace.

John Wesley called the means of grace “signs, words, or actions ordained of God” and “channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.”<sup>6</sup> What he really meant is that they are discipleship practices that we draw from the biblical witness. Wesley saw the life of the early church as the perfect model for how the means of grace should be located at the very heart of Christian discipleship. A key Scripture passage comes from the Acts of the Apostles, which tells us what the first Christians did following their baptism: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’

teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). From this fertile ground of practical faith, many spiritual fruits were borne. Acts tells us that “awe came upon every soul,” that they met together daily and cared for one another’s material needs, and that their hearts were made glad by the rich spiritual fellowship they shared (vv. 43–46). In fact, it was through their faithful use of these means of grace that God’s gift of salvation was received. The passage concludes, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (v. 47).<sup>7</sup>

So it’s no wonder that Wesley put great stock in the importance of practices like prayer, the Lord’s Supper, searching the Scriptures, and robust fellowship. When he claimed that such things were ordained by God to serve as channels of grace into the lives of believers, he could point to a pretty solid biblical precedent! Since the time of the Pentecost, these are the very ways that God has been mediating his saving grace to the church.

The way that the Acts of the Apostles speaks of the means of grace as the daily practices of the Christian community also tells us something important about how they are meant to be used in the present. As practices, they are not one-time acts that supply us with all that we need in a single moment. They are also not solitary activities that we do in isolation from others. The means of grace are, most fundamentally, practices of discipleship that we embrace in an ongoing way within the community of faith. Their power is not in the practices themselves, but rather in the grace that those practices mediate through the Holy Spirit. Yet the practices are important; when they are engaged in a disciplined way, they become holy habits that work to transform us in heart and life.

Since we are human beings who undertake meaningful activities in all areas of our lives, it only makes sense that the way God would choose to convey his grace would be through day-to-day practices. Some of these practices are *instituted* in the sense that they are clearly present in both the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. (Thus, Christ has instituted them, or put them in place, directly.) Other practices are *prudential* in character, meaning that we use the biblical witness in conjunction with our practical wisdom to figure out what they look like in our own context. Still other practices are more *general* in that they are made up of more inward, contemplative disciplines that help us to stay focused on God in our daily living. I like to think of these three main categories of the means of grace in this way:

- instituted means of grace: what we learn from Christ;
- prudential means of grace: what we learn from our context; and
- general means of grace: what we learn by contemplation.

The means of grace offer us a whole pattern for the life of discipleship. When we practice them regularly and with discipline, they also lead us to understand grace more and more. And that shows us ever more deeply how much God loves us.

This is all wonderful good news, and it leads us into the heart of what this book is about. It's in our nature to follow *something*—and grace gives us the ability to turn to Jesus Christ and follow him. Now it is time to look at the kind of life that is needed in order to truly grow toward spiritual maturity. There is a pattern to discipleship, and that pattern goes by a particular term: the means of grace.

PART I

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**What We Learn  
from Christ:**

*The Instituted Means of Grace*

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

—Acts 2:42, 47

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## CHAPTER 2

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# Baptism

WATER HAS GREAT POWER. IT CAN SHOW THAT power in some pretty amazing ways. Life can't exist without water. A drought in the summer makes crops wither in the fields. Take it away from us humans for just a few days and we die. Water makes our food grow. It renews the ground. We drink it, bathe in it, and play in it.

Too little water is deadly, but so is too much. Heavy rain can erode the ground and lead to mudslides. Hurricanes and monsoons devastate communities every year. And floodwaters can overflow the banks of rivers, causing property destruction and loss of life.

I've seen water work its power in two of the world's great rivers: the Nile River in Egypt and the Mississippi River in the United States.

A few years ago I traveled with a group of people to visit Christian sites in Egypt. One afternoon our guide took us up on a bluff where we could see the Nile from a high vantage point. The view was amazing. There it was—the longest river in the world—running as far as the eye could see both north and south. The Nile wasn't as wide as I thought it would be, but what it lacked in width it more than made up in its incredible length.

The view from that bluff also showed me what the real power of the Nile is all about for the Egyptian people. Starting on each side of the riverbank and extending a ways both to the east and the west there is a strip of irrigated, lush green land. Agriculture flourishes in those irrigated strips of land. Towns and villages thrive. Beyond the strips of irrigated land, there is only bleak desert. The Nile's water does for the people who live there today what it has always done. It gives them life.

Four years after my journey to Egypt, I saw power of a different kind wielded by the largest river in North America. The Mississippi River isn't quite as long as the Nile, but it carries a lot more water. When springtime rains are heavy in the American heartland, the tributaries of the Mississippi River can swell its size to massive proportions.

The Mississippi flooded in the spring of 2011, just when my family and I were preparing to move to Memphis, Tennessee. My wife and I went on a house-hunting trip in the area that May when the river was at its highest point. We drove from downtown Memphis across the Interstate 40 bridge into Arkansas, where the river is usually a half-mile wide. That day I measured it at a full three miles from the Tennessee side to where the water finally stopped at the edge of the levee in Arkansas. I found out later that the river crested at 47.8 feet deep—a level not seen since 1937. By that point the amount of water flowing past downtown Memphis would have filled up a football field 44 feet deep in a second!<sup>1</sup> The US Army Corps of Engineers later reported that the flood had cost \$2.8 billion in damage.<sup>2</sup> Water gives life, but it can also cause great destruction and death.

The power of water for life and death is everywhere in our world. It's present throughout the Scriptures as well. In

the beginning as God created the heavens and the earth, the Bible tells us, God's Spirit hovered over the waters and brought order to them (Gen. :1-2). Yet the waters of the Great Flood in Noah's day destroyed everything that didn't make it onto the ark (Gen. 6:17-22). When Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt through the parted waters of the Red Sea, Pharaoh's army was drowned when it tried to follow (Exod. 14:21-28). And yet, not long after that Moses drew water from the rock so God's people would not die of thirst in the wilderness (Exod. 17:1-7).

Water is life, and water is death. This is the story of the Bible. It is the story of our world. It is also the story of baptism.

Water is life, and water is death. This is story of the Bible. It is the story of our world. It is also the story of baptism.

## Baptism in the Biblical Witness

There's a story that every one of the four Gospels tells us about the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all emphasize one key moment to describe how Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing in Galilee and beyond were launched. That story is the story of Jesus' baptism by his cousin John in the River Jordan.

The Gospel of Luke tells it like this: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a

dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:21–22).

This is God’s way of showing us that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ—the Messiah who has come to save Israel. Christians have long seen in the story of Jesus’ baptism a sign of the Trinity. As the Son of God receives baptism, the voice of the Father offers his blessing while the Spirit descends in the form of a dove.

Jesus’ baptism shows us how baptism is important for all those who will follow him. While his own baptism is the first time we get that message in the New Testament, it won’t be the last. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus’ disciples baptized others as they traveled around with him (John 4:1–3). At the very end of Jesus’ ministry—after his resurrection and just before he ascends into heaven—his final instructions to his disciples are about how baptism factors into the spread of the church. Jesus tells his followers, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20). This passage is often called the Great Commission because in it Jesus commissions his disciples for the mission they have in front of them.

The spiritual meaning of baptism is what really shows us why it deserves a place at the head of any list of the means of grace. Baptism is the outward sign of God’s salvation. We can get a clue about how important an outward sign like that is by using a comparison from your own daily life. Think about how you show love to another person: a hug, a kiss, a bouquet of flowers, a birthday present, a

ring, and words like “I love you” and “I forgive you.” All of these are just regular outward actions or things. But when used in the right way, they’re all intended to convey a deep emotional message to another person. When a woman kisses her husband, she’s *both* signaling to him that she loves him *and* she’s actually conveying that love through the sign of the kiss itself.

Baptism is a sign of God’s love for us in much the same way. The person—whether an infant or child, youth or adult—comes forward to receive baptism in the midst of the church. By pouring water over that person’s head and saying the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” the minister carries out the first step in Jesus’ teaching to make new disciples through baptism. The minister is also offering baptism to the person being baptized on behalf of the whole church—and as God’s gift! There’s much more to come afterward, of course. True discipleship requires a lifetime of practice and growth. But baptism is the first step.

You might ask, “But why does *this* particular thing serve as a sign of God’s love?” There are really two primary reasons. The apostle Paul showed us the first one when he said in Romans 6:3–4, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Being underground and being underwater share this in common: you can’t breathe in either place. So the symbolism of baptism is that it unites us with Jesus in his death, and thus unites us with him as well in his resurrection.

The second reason that baptism shows us a sign of God's love is its connection with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist knew a lot about baptism, but he also knew that his own baptism was nothing compared with the baptism that Jesus

Have you ever considered what it means to be united with Jesus Christ through your baptism?

would inaugurate, saying, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11).

Jesus later explained the connection between baptism by water and baptism by the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John. It happened when a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to ask him about his teaching. Jesus first said to Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." When Nicodemus replied that he didn't understand, Jesus explained further. "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit," Jesus said, "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above'" (John 3:5-7 *NRSV*). We are born of water when we are born from our mother's womb. Yet the water of baptism symbolizes another birth, which is our new birth by the Holy Spirit.

Think about that connection: the water of baptism, and the grace of the Holy Spirit. A sign of God's love that conveys God's love at the same time! Baptism unites us with Christ and gives us a promise of the resurrection to come, but it

also shows us that God intends to save us in the present through the power of the Spirit. In his letter to Titus, the apostle Paul spoke of “the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5 NRSV).

Through baptism, we can be assured of the gift of the Holy Spirit—just as Jesus promised we would.

## Baptism in Wesleyan Spirituality

John Wesley called baptism, “the initiatory sacrament which enters us into covenant with God.”<sup>3</sup> That language can seem pretty technical, but all it means is that baptism is the initial act that brings us into communion with Jesus Christ. Wesley rightly called baptism a sacrament,

which it is. A *sacrament* is an act of worship that is special because it is specifically given by Christ to his followers as a way to receive him spiritually. The Wesleyan tradition has always recognized the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (or Holy Communion). These are the sacraments that Jesus commands his followers to practice in the Gospels—“Do this in remembrance of me” at the Last Supper and “Go into the world . . . baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” in the Great Commission.

“He saved us, not because of works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, . . . by the Holy Spirit . . . through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

—Titus 3:5–7 NRSV

Wesley once published an instructional essay on baptism that he developed from a longer work his father had written. We call it the *Treatise on Baptism*. It offers strong biblical interpretation about how Christians should understand and practice baptism in their own churches. Wesley begins it by emphasizing the importance of baptism in the Christian life, pointing to the fact that its authority comes directly from Jesus Christ, “who alone has power to institute a proper sacrament, a sign, seal, pledge, and means of grace, perpetually obligatory on all Christians.”<sup>4</sup>

Did you notice that key phrase—means of grace?

In most of his writings on the means of grace, Wesley leaves baptism off the list. The reason is that he’s mostly interested in teaching Christians how to practice their faith daily. The one thing that all the means of grace share—*except* baptism—is that they can be repeated over and over again. Actually, the whole point is to repeat them as often as possible! Baptism is the odd duck in that sense, because we only experience it once in a lifetime. So when Wesley is writing on the importance of practicing prayer or fasting (or any of the other means of grace), there’s no real reason for him to include baptism. In his context, practically everyone had been baptized as an infant or small child.

Baptism was important for Wesley, though, and it should be important for Wesleyans in any age. In fact, baptism is absolutely crucial for understanding why the rest of the means of grace are important at all. Here’s why: baptism is the entry point into an entire way of life. That way of life comes to be marked by all the rest of the means of grace. But it is begun—and in some sense defined—by baptism.

Wesley's *Treatise on Baptism* offers three benefits of baptism that give us a clue as to why baptism should be at the top of the list of the means of grace. His first benefit is that the waters of baptism are a sign of the washing away of original sin through Jesus Christ's atoning death on the cross. Wesley here has in mind a passage from Ephesians that speaks of how "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word" (5:25–26). It is God's grace alone that forgives, but the sacrament of baptism offers us the *assurance* of that forgiveness as a sign of God's mercy.

The second is that baptism is the way we enter into covenant with God through Jesus Christ. Baptism is like circumcision in the Jewish faith in that way, except that it is a spiritual circumcision. We are united to Christ through baptism, so that we are "no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Eph. 2:19 NIV). The outward expression of this unity is through our membership in the church—we're not individual Christians but rather Christians together within the body of Christ. There's an inward unity as well that is very powerful, though, and its meaning is glimpsed in Jesus' own baptism. When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, it was a moment of profound communion for God the Son together with his Father and the Holy Spirit. Even so, when we are baptized, we too are ushered into a deep spiritual communion with Jesus. We are baptized *into Christ* and thereafter we live as a part of his body—the church.

The third benefit of baptism is what Wesley calls "spiritual regeneration." Here Wesley is telling us that something really *happens* at baptism. Remember how the embrace

of husband and wife is an outward sign of their inward, shared love that simultaneously conveys that love between them. It's just in this way that baptism serves as an outward sign of an inward grace and a means by which that grace

“In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

—Colossians 2:11–12 NRSV

is received. When Paul wrote to Titus about the “water of rebirth” and connected that with the work of the Holy Spirit, it was clear that he was telling us that God is at work in the sacrament of baptism.

Wesley would admonish us to take care not to confuse baptism by water and baptism by the Holy Spirit. Like most people, he would certainly affirm that the two can happen simultaneously. That doesn't have to be the case, though, just as it is clearly not the case at all times in the Acts of the Apostles when the early church was beginning to grow. Wesley's counsel

about the need for spiritual rebirth is uncompromising: “The question is not what you were made in baptism,” he says, “but what you are now. I ask not whether you *were* born of water and the Spirit. But *are* you *now* the temple of the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in you?”<sup>5</sup> So baptism is certainly a means of grace that puts us in contact with the Holy Spirit, but the spiritual new birth that is so central to a living faith is something given when the Spirit wills.

Wesleyans have always affirmed that infants and small children are worthy of receiving Christian baptism. There are many biblical reasons for doing so, not the least of which is Jesus' command, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14). When Peter began to preach the gospel on the Day of Pentecost, he instructed the people there to repent and be baptized because the promise he had delivered was for them *and their children* (see Acts 2:38–39). Later in the book of Acts, we find that entire households receive baptism together: parents, children, and household servants (see Acts 16:15, 33). Baptism is meant for all people because God's grace is meant for all people.<sup>6</sup>

## Baptism in Our Daily Discipleship

Both the Bible and the Wesleyan witness show us the meaning of baptism and how important it is. We still have a problem with actually *practicing* baptism because we're only baptized once! We can read the Bible daily, pray at every opportunity, and receive the Lord's Supper every time we worship. Once we've been baptized, though, we never receive that sacrament again. Baptism is our initiation into the Christian faith. And once we've been adopted into God's family, we never get kicked out.

So how is baptism a part of our daily discipleship at all?

A friend of mine named Fred Edie has a wonderful image for what baptism should mean to our discipleship. He says that growing in our faith is akin to "learning to swim in our baptismal waters." Baptism is the outward sign of God's claim on your life. The water that covers us

at baptism is a sign of God's grace poured into us. Baptism, in other words, ushers us into a whole new life. If we think about the water of baptism as the image of God's grace, then learning to swim in those waters is nothing less than learning what it means for our lives to be lived completely immersed in the grace of God!<sup>7</sup>

One of the great celebrations in the life of a congregation happens when a new Christian is made through the sacrament of baptism. Whether that person is a baby, a youth, or an adult, the meaning is the same: Christ Jesus welcomes a new Christian into his fellowship, and the congregation there to bear witness makes a commitment to help that person grow into full discipleship. The moment is powerful, and it involves the whole congregation renewing its own baptismal vows. So just as we welcome the newly baptized person to begin swimming in his or her baptismal waters, we are reminded that we still swim in ours too.

The covenant that Christ makes with us at our baptism never goes away. We all live out that covenant through our worship, our discipleship, and our mission as Christian people to spread the good news. Through all of this, we can come to discover that our baptism is not truly a one-time event after all. It is a whole new way of life that we were ushered into. Baptism is truly when we begin walking in the ways of God.

The final image of God's salvation in the Bible comes in Revelation, when the New Jerusalem is described. It is the picture of the church as she will be when all things are brought to completion—the bride adorned for her husband. Running through the middle of that city will be a river, which is the River of Life. After describing this beautiful scene, Scripture tells us, “Whoever is thirsty, let him

come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life” (Rev. 22:17 NIV).

I read that passage as a baptismal bookend to the whole New Testament. The story of Jesus begins with a river which the Son of God enters to receive his own baptism. And that story ends with another river, which all men and women are called to seek out so that they can drink and never thirst again. The waters of that river are baptismal waters, and we are invited to dive in.