



# John Wesley, Gracious Mentor

Kenneth J. Collins

In my many years of studying the writings of John Wesley, I have been most impressed by the wholesomeness and good judgment of much of his theology. Indeed, Wesley held more things in balance, especially when he explored the grace of God, than we often do. I would, therefore, like to consider three aspects of the Methodist leader's sophisticated understanding of grace, an understanding that can, no doubt, challenge us all to greater pastoral sensitivity and effectiveness.

## *Grace Is Normed And Contextual*

First of all, it was John Wesley, himself, who believed it was often the particular problem of Protestants, of "gospel preachers" as he termed them, to proclaim the grace of God largely in an unbalanced fashion; that is, apart from the illuminating and guiding power of the moral law as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount and the Ten Commandments. So conceived, grace would soon become empty, lacking the form of "the everlasting fitness of all things that are or ever created,"<sup>1</sup> and therefore it would be able to support almost any "enthusiastic" notion or practice. To counter this error Wesley held that grace is most often "normed" grace. In other words, it arises and flowers in a valuational, prescriptive context and is illuminated by the moral law of God, a standard that transcends, at least in some respects, both human will and desire. Without this other half of the *conjunction*,

so to speak, grace would perhaps quickly devolve into presumption, self-will, and the lawlessness that Wesley so rightly deplored. To prevent this malady among his own preachers Wesley issued a set of instructions in 1751 in which he made the moral law, both the initial and the chief vehicle for convincing sinners.<sup>2</sup>

## *Are our loves and values properly ordered in our ministries?*

Earlier, in 1744, at the first Methodist Conference held in London, Wesley had advised his helpers and assistants to preach Christ in all his offices and "to declare his law as well as his gospel, both to believers and unbelievers." In this counsel, then, the moral law holds great value not only in convicting sinners, but also in keeping believers in Christ. That is, Wesley highlighted both the *accusatory* role of the law, in a way similar to Luther, as well as the *prescriptive* role of this same law in a way similar to Calvin, the one to

*bring* sinners to Christ; the other to *keep* believers alive in the Lord.

In light of this, have we forgotten the moral law, the express will of God, in our counseling and preaching? Have we done this in the name of Protestantism or "gospel liberty?" If so, what now forms the normative standard of our proclamations: is it self-will, or the will of the favored groups in which we participate or perhaps even some form of Americana? Are we so afraid of legalism that we have spawned an incipient licentiousness? Are we in danger of proclaiming "cheap grace" as Bonhoeffer has rightly warned us?

## *Grace Is Both the Favor And the Power of God*

Second, it is equally clear that Wesley conceived of the grace of God not in a monolithic sense, but in two key ways, as both the *favor* of the Most High and as power or *enabling presence*. Working with this distinction, some contemporary theologians have suggested a division of labor with respect to these graces which, on the one hand, unduly privileges an "eastern" reading of Wesley's doctrine of salvation, while, on the other hand, it misses crucial Protestant emphases which were very much a part of Wesley's own theological formulations.<sup>3</sup> The usual form of this contemporary teaching is that grace as *favor* informs the juridical theme of justification while grace as *power* or *enabling presence* informs the participatory theme of sanctification, both initial and entire. However, this contemporary

construction lacks sufficient explanatory power for one of the crucial truths that was mediated to Wesley by Peter Böhler, and one that represents the emphasis of the continental Pietists, is that grace as divine *favor* informs not simply justification, but sanctification or holiness as well. That is, sanctification, both initial and entire, as with justification, is a sheer, utter gift of the bountiful good will of God—lavished upon hurting, even damaged, people who are weary of all *self*-reforming efforts.

Here, then, was Wesley's great insight; here marked his anguished breakthrough at Aldersgate, that the holiness that had so captivated his imagination since his reading of the great *western* sources of À Kempis, Taylor and Law, would be actualized in his life, neither by works, nor by resolve, nor by human will and effort, however well motivated or sincere, but simply and wonderfully as a result of divine graciousness and favor. Indeed, in a certain sense Wesley continued the Reformation's clarion call of *sola gratia* by later proclaiming: "Exactly as we are justified by faith, so are we sanctified by faith. Faith is the condition, and the only condition of sanctification, *exactly as* it is of justification."<sup>4</sup>

And yet how many people are sitting in our pews on Sunday mornings thinking that they are not "good enough," not yet "virtuous enough" to enjoy some of the most precious gifts of the Most High. Wesley's counsel to these poor suffering souls would be to the point: "And by this token may you surely know whether you seek it by faith or by works. If by works, you want something to be done *first, before* you are sanctified. You think, 'I must first *be* or *do* thus or this.' Then you are seeking it by works unto this day. If you seek it by faith, you may expect it as you are, and if *as you are*, then expect it *now*."<sup>5</sup>

Are we losing in contemporary Methodism an understanding of just what a gracious *gift* redemption actually is? Are we sinfully offended by the gratuity and bounty of divine saving grace? Do we have as great an appreciation as did John Wesley that God's grace is sufficient and God's love is over all?

### *Grace Is Both Personal and Social*

Third, the grace of God for Wesley is both personally efficacious and socially extensive. It encompasses, in a holistic fashion, both body and soul, the material needs of the poor *as well as* their spiritual

well being. For example, in his sermon, "On Visiting the Sick," produced in 1786, Wesley advises his visitors in the following fashion: "But it may not be amiss usually to begin with inquiring into their outward condition. You may ask whether they have the necessaries of life. Whether they have sufficient food and raiment. If the weather be cold, whether they have fuel."<sup>6</sup> But after this, Wesley asserts, the visitor is to proceed to things of *greater* value. "These little labours of love," he counsels, "will pave your way to things of greater importance. Having shown that you regard for their bodies you may proceed to inquire concerning their souls."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Wesley repeats this judgment, no doubt for emphasis, but this time he clearly displays what is the *telos* of all ministry:

While you are eyes to the blind and feet to the lame, a husband to the widow and a father to the fatherless, see that you still keep a *higher end in view*, even the saving of souls from death, and that you labour to make all you say and do subservient to *that great end*.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, though these value judgments have seldom surfaced in contemporary Methodist literature, they are by no means idiosyncratic but represent Wesley's own thinking throughout his career. For example, much earlier, in 1748, Wesley had written concerning those engaged in ministry that "He doth good, to the uttermost of his power, even to the bodies of men.... *How much more* does he rejoice if he can do any good to the soul of any man!"<sup>9</sup> And two years later Wesley continued this theme in his sermon "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Thirteenth" and wrote:

Over and above all this, are you zealous of good works? Do you, as you have time, do good to all men? Do you feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction? Do you visit those that are sick? Relieve them that are in prison? Is any a stranger and you take him in? Friend, *come up higher*.... Does he enable you to bring sinners from darkness to light, from the power of Satan unto God?<sup>10</sup>

For Wesley, then, a part of what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves always involves the exercise of *both* material gifts *and* spiritual talents; it entails the employment of all those gifts and graces

which will enhance the physical and social well being of the poor as well as their personal, spiritual character. Moreover, though the material needs of the neighbor have *chronological* priority, calling for vigorous social action on a number of levels; they clearly do not have *valuational* priority in Wesley's thought,<sup>11</sup> for their fulfillment prepares the way, to use Wesley's own terminology, for things of *greater importance*.

So then, are our loves and values properly ordered in our ministries? Are we aiming at a suitable *telos* or goal? Or do we give almost exclusive attention to what can only be deemed penultimate? Perhaps the good sense and balanced judgment of the seasoned Wesley can challenge us here as well as we chart our course for the twenty first century proclaiming nothing less than good news to the poor and freedom to the captives. And in the end we may just come to realize, if we are patient and humble enough, that the grace of God is far greater and more wonderful than we have imagined. □

1 Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vols. 1-4. The Sermons (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 2:10. (The Original, Nature, Properties and Use of the Law)

2 Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), 11:486.

3 I am by no means arguing for a "Protestant" Wesley, a reconstruction that would be as equally problematic as the often touted "Catholic" or "Eastern" Wesley. Instead it is the "Conjunctive" Wesley, in the midst of his many tensions (Protestant and Catholic ones among them), that I have attempted to articulate. See my work, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Abingdon, 2003).

4 Outler, *Sermons*, 2:163. (The Scripture Way of Salvation)

5 *Ibid.*, 2: 169.

6 *Ibid.*, 3:390.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 391.

8 *Ibid.*, 3:393. *Emphasis is mine.*

9 *Ibid.*, 1:519.

10 *Ibid.*, 1:695. *Emphasis is mine.*

11 *Ibid.*



**Kenneth J. Collins** is professor of Wesley Studies and Historical Theology at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.