



John Wesley's Prayer Room in London

OUR Spiritual Disciplines

James T. Reuteler, Ph.D
Covenant Bible Studies
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Dedicated to my wife Barbara,
with whom I practice these Spiritual Exercises.

The painting on the cover is Praying Hands
by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)

PREFACE

My purpose in the work that follows is to clarify what the Spiritual Disciplines are and how they might be exercised. John Wesley, in his classic work called *The General Rules*, names six Ordinances of God, which I am calling Spiritual Disciplines. Below I have listed Wesley's Ordinances and my Spiritual Disciplines.

Wesley's Ordinances	My Spiritual Disciplines
1. Public Worship of God	1. Public Worship
2. Ministry of the Word	2. Bible Study
3. Supper of the Lord	3. Secret Prayer
4. Family and Private Prayer	4. Holy Communion
5. Searching the Scriptures	5. Secret Giving
6. Fasting or Abstinence	6. Secret Fasting

I certainly don't disagree with Wesley's six Ordinances of God, but I prefer to call them Spiritual Disciplines. Most of Wesley's ordinances will be included in my list, but I have decided to add one which Wesley left out and that is the one on *Secret Giving*. It isn't that Wesley ignores giving. He deals with it more than most of us. Paul Chilcote has put Wesley's thoughts on giving into a prayer, with which I'd like to begin:

Three rules are essential to the proper use of my resources. Enable me to **gain all I can**. But as you bless my labors, guard me from harming my health, my mind, or my neighbor in the process. May honest work and common sense be my guide.

Encourage me to **save all I can**. Guard me from wasting your precious resources to gratify unhealthy and prideful

desires. May the most important legacy I leave behind be that of justice, integrity, and generosity.

And so empower me to **give all I can**. In my efforts to be a good steward of your many blessings, give me what I need to provide caringly for those I love, open my heart to the needs of those who are close at hand, and create a generous spirit within me to do good to all.

You have blessed my life in so many ways. As I have received from your hand, may I keep these questions in my mind:

Am I acting according to my character as a steward?

Am I obedient to your Word and your calling upon my life?

Can I offer up this act of kindness or generosity as a sacrifice to you through Jesus Christ?

Is my spirit loving and consistent with your eternal concerns?

Teach me, O generous God, what it means to be a steward of your treasures. Amen.¹

¹ Paul Chilcote, *Praying in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2001). pp. 152-153.

INTRODUCTION

*Train yourself in godliness,
for,
while physical training is of some value,
godliness is valuable in every way,
holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*

1 Timothy 4:7b-8 (NRSV)

In 1739 John Wesley began meeting with eight or ten persons who came to him deeply convicted of sin in their lives and earnestly groaning for redemption. Wesley responded by meeting with them on Thursday evenings, and he eventually drew up the General Rules for The United Societies.² The General Rules were drawn up to give guidance to members of The United Societies, who met in small groups, called Classes, once a week. Their purpose was to watch over one another in love, that they might help one another to work out their salvation. There were about twelve persons in a Class, one of whom was the leader. It was the leader's task to meet with each person once a week. The General Rules were a kind of checklist to see how they were doing.

There were, and still are, three General Rules; they are protected by a Restrictive Rule, in The United Methodist Church. This means that the General Rules will always be part of The United Methodist Church, and its clergy will be asked, "Do you know the General Rules and will you keep them?" Their answer must be, "Yes," or they cannot be ordained in The United Methodist Church.

The General Rules, however, did go through many revisions prior to John Wesley's death; and after his death, they were amended by constitutional actions in 1848 and 1868. After a brief introduction to the General Rules, we read:

It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their salvation,

² See a complete copy of The General Rules in the Appendix.

First: **By doing no harm**, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced, such as: (A list of evils follows this first General Rule).

Secondly: **By doing good**; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men: (A list of good deeds follows this second General Rule).

It is expected of all who desire to continue in these societies that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation.

Thirdly: **By attending upon all the Ordinances of God**; such are:

- The public worship of God
- The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded
- The Supper of the Lord
- Family and private prayer
- Searching the Scriptures
- Fasting or abstinence

These six ordinances of God are our Spiritual Disciplines. Not only are the clergy to be aware of them and exercise them, but the laity are also to be aware of them and practice them. Wesley concludes the General Rules with the following paragraph:

These are the General Rules of our societies; all of which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written Word, which is the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these we know his Spirit writes on truly awakened hearts. If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be known unto them who watch over that soul as they who must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But then, if he repent not, he hath no more place among us.

There have been attempts to update or make relevant these three General Rules. The latest attempt was made by Bishop Rueben P. Job in his excellent book entitled: *Three Simple Rules*,

published by Abingdon Press. In this book, Bishop Job lists the three simple rules as follows:

1. Do No Harm
2. Do Good
3. Stay in Love With God³

Bishop Job does not list all the things that do harm, nor does he list all the good things that a disciple of Jesus Christ should do. He makes them principles rather than rules; although, by calling them General Rules, I think that Wesley would approve. Wesley did get a bit more specific in naming the things that cause harm and the good things we should be doing. Job does begin his third simple rule by renaming it, “Stay in Love with God.” He then acknowledges the Spiritual Disciplines, which Wesley called “the Ordinances of God.” Here’s what he says as he begins the chapter on the third General Rule:

Ordinance is a strange word to our ears. But to John Wesley, it was a word that described the practices that kept the relationship between God and humans vital, alive, and growing. He names Public Worship of God, the Lord’s Supper, private and family prayer, searching the Scriptures, Bible study, and fasting as essential to a faithful life. While we may have different names for our essential spiritual disciplines, these practices can become a life-giving source of strength and guidance for us. Wesley saw these disciplines as central to any life of faithfulness to God in Christ. He saw that the consistent practice of these spiritual disciplines kept those who sought to follow Christ in touch with the presence and power of Christ so they could fulfill their desire to live as faithful disciples.⁴

An earlier attempt to update the General Rules was done by David Watson, who gave them the name, the “General Rule of

³ Rueben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), p. 10.

⁴ Rueben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules*, pp. 53-54.

Discipleship.”⁵ Watson studied Wesley’s General Rules and concluded that they contained two important principles: mutual accountability and support. Steven Manskar summarized Watson’s work in the following paragraph:

The rules, which were based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, gave those who sought membership in the Methodist society a picture of what Christian discipleship looks like. The rules were like a compass heading for living that pointed people toward their destination. For the Methodists, the destination was holiness of heart and life.⁶

The General Rules were never intended to be legalistic. They are not a means for works righteousness, that is, to earn God’s favor through doing good works. These rules were intended to function as a rule for living, which is why they were called General Rules. Wesley intended them to be an encouragement for the Methodists, a goal set before them, the goal of holiness of heart and life.⁷ Watson modified the General Rules for our time. He did this by formulating a New General Rule for Discipleship that was consistent with Wesley’s three General Rules. The goal of the Christian disciple and the Church is:

To witness to Jesus Christ in the world,
and to follow his teachings through
acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion,
under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁸

To make this General Rule easier to understand, Watson developed a graphic, which describes the various components of the General Rule of Discipleship.⁹

⁵ David Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998), pp. 77-95.

⁶ Steven Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God’s Household* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2000), p. 24.

⁷ Steven Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God’s Household*, p. 25.

⁸ David Watson, *Covenant Discipleship*, p. 78.

⁹ David Watson, *Covenant Discipleship*, p. 78.

didn't complain, but some of those who took the class did and the practice was soon stopped. They didn't want our visitors to think that we were giving them rules to live by. I understand their fear of legalism, but the General Rules, the Three Simple Rules, and the General Rule of Discipleship are anything but legalistic. They are principles or methods that lead to personal and social transformation.

About twenty years ago I asked David Watson to provide me with a list of Covenant Discipleship Groups that were meeting in the Midwest. Having received a list of congregations practicing the General Rule of Discipleship in Covenant Discipleship Groups, I visited about fifteen congregations in three Midwestern States: Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Indiana. I witnessed transformation, taking place before my very eyes. Following those visits, I formed three Covenant Discipleship Groups and have been involved with Covenant Discipleship Groups ever since. I discovered that they work, but that the average person in the pew is scared to death of them.

The General Rules, the Three Simple Rules, and the General Rule of Discipleship are indeed rules to live by. They point the way to holiness of heart and life. Dallas Willard opens his book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, by warning: "Christianity can only succeed as a guide for current humanity if it does two things. First, it must take the need for human transformation as seriously as do modern revolutionary movements. ... Second, it needs to clarify and exemplify realistic methods of human transformation."¹¹

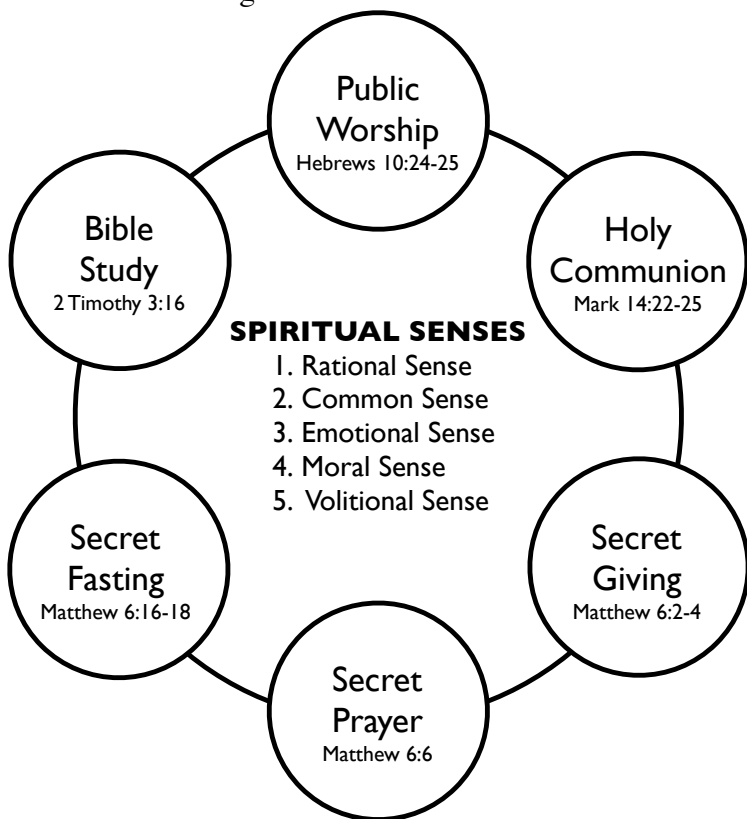
Willard then goes on to state his reason for writing *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. "This book," he says, "is a plea for the Christian community to place the disciplines for the spiritual life at the heart of the gospel. ... I want to inspire Christianity to remove the disciplines from the category of historical curiosities and place them at the center of the new life in Christ."¹² I share Willard's reason for writing his book on the Spiritual Disciplines. "Holiness and devotion," says Willard, "must now come forth from the closet

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 1988), p. ix.

¹² Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. xi.

and the chapel to possess the street and the factory, the schoolroom and boardroom, the scientific laboratory and the government office.”¹³

My intention in this book is to focus on the Spiritual Disciplines which Wesley called the Ordinances of God. Bishop Job and David Watson have updated Wesley’s General Rules, and so I see no need to redo what they have already done. At this point I’m not interested in the first two rules, do no harm and do good. I plan to deal with those rules in another book, which will focus on ethics and morality. My purpose here is to focus on those Spiritual Disciplines which will awaken our Spiritual Senses so that we can enter into a relationship with God, and that relationship will keep us from doing harm and enable us to do good. I plan on dealing with six Spiritual Disciplines. I’ve placed them in a specific context in the following chart.



¹³ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, p. xii.

While I am not using the same list as Wesley, I do plan on dealing with Bishop Job's third General Rule, "staying in love with God." I also plan on dealing with David Watson's "Acts of Devotion and Acts of Worship." His "Acts of Compassion and Acts of Justice" fit into Wesley's "Works of Mercy." I am not doing this because I think that the third General Rule is more important than the first two. As a matter of fact, I believe just the opposite. Wesley himself advised that "Works of Mercy" should always take precedence over "Works of Piety." That's why "Works of Mercy" appears first, and "Works of Piety" appears last. That's also why Wesley's third General Rule is about Piety, as is Bishop Job's rewriting of it to "staying in love with God." The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37 is a good example of giving priority to *mercy* over *piety*. In this book, however, I will be concerned with the *Spiritual Disciplines* which awaken us to the *Spiritual Senses*, which enable us to grow *the Spiritual Fruit*, which in turn helps us to accept *the Spiritual Gifts*, to which God calls us through the Holy Spirit. To ignore the Spiritual Disciplines is to render ourselves blind to everything that should follow. The Spiritual Disciplines help to move us towards holiness of heart and life.

Since I would like to see us practicing the Spiritual Disciplines as frequently as some of us exercise our physical bodies, I will now attempt to define the Spiritual Disciplines. As I attempt to do this, I will of course, base some of my conclusions on Wesley's original list, but at the same time, I will name them and describe them out of my own experience and my understanding of Scripture. Not everyone will agree with my list, or even the order in which I place the Spiritual Disciplines. That's okay. I encourage everyone to come up with a list. What is most important is that our Spiritual Disciplines move us toward Holiness of Heart and Life.

The sequence in which I have placed my list of the Spiritual Disciplines has little to do with their importance. I think they are all of equal importance. The sequence in which I have placed them has more to do with how one leads to the next one. Here's where I know I will not get a consensus. This is just how it has worked out for me. Here's my list of the Spiritual Disciplines:

1. **Public Worship.** It was in a community of believers where I first recognized the importance of having a relationship with God.
2. **Bible Study.** Public Worship made me aware of my need to read the Scriptures for myself. This led me to reading and studying the whole of Scripture, including the Apocrypha.
3. **Secret Prayer.** I struggled more with prayer than with the study of the Scriptures, and my conclusions on prayer may well be the most controversial chapter in this book.
4. **Holy Communion.** As I read the Scriptures and Church History I became aware of the significance of the Lord's Supper. My favorite theologians of the past were Martin Luther and John Wesley, both of whom called for frequent Communion. Wesley actually called for constant Communion and considered the Lord's Supper to be a converting ordinance. This means that Communion must be open to everyone.
5. **Secret Giving.** Wesley did not include Stewardship in the Ordinances of the Church, and C. Peter Wagner defines giving as a Spiritual Gift. It took me awhile to exercise Stewardship as a Spiritual Discipline, but I finally did it, and believe it should be accepted as one of the Spiritual Disciplines.
6. **Secret Fasting.** In one sense Fasting seems to be part of the discipline of prayer, but my reading of the Scriptures convinces me that Fasting should be dealt with on its own. Wesley always mentioned Abstinence along with Fasting and so I'll include abstinence in the discipline of fasting.

These are the six Spiritual Disciplines that I plan on dealing with in detail. I will base my conclusions mostly on Scripture and my own experiences, but I will also include the insights that have been given to me by those who have gone before me. Church History and the Traditions of the Church have been very interesting to me, and they have given me a great many insights, which have helped

to shape my life. Wesley's emphasis on Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience makes sense to me, and I will attempt to use all four of these as I attempt to deal with the six Spiritual Disciplines I have named. I will always begin with Scripture and end with my own personal experiences. Now, let us move to the Spiritual Discipline of Public Worship.

1. PUBLIC WORSHIP

*And let us consider one another
in order to stir up love and good works,
not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together,
as is the manner of some,
but exhorting one another, and so much the more
as you see the day approaching.*

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NKJV)

THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Jesus and His Disciples

Let us start from the beginning. No one can be a disciple of Jesus Christ alone. Jesus participated in the worship of the synagogue and he called disciples to join him. In New Testament times, the Church was modeled after the Synagogue. The origin of the Synagogue occurred when the Jews were exiled to Babylon and could no longer worship at the Temple. The word *Synagogue* means “assembly” or “place of meeting.” Jesus read the Scriptures in the Synagogue and he taught in Synagogues throughout Galilee.¹⁴ The Synagogue was the place where people gathered for Prayer and the reading of Scripture. The Book of Psalms was their Hymn Book. Jesus defined the meaning of Public Worship when he said to his disciples, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”¹⁵

Following Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into Heaven, Jesus’ disciples, 120 in all, gathered together in the Upper Room to wait for God’s power and instructions for bearing witness to the Good News. On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit ignited them for the mission Jesus had given to them, and according to Scripture...

¹⁴ Luke 4:16

¹⁵ Matthew 18:20

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ... Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.¹⁶

When the persecutions began, the early Christians found it more difficult to meet together because others were suspicious of what they were doing in their meetings. A man named Pliny reported on their activities to the Roman Emperor, Trajan, in 96 C.E. This is what he said:

On an appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as to a god, and to bind themselves by an oath, not for the commission of any crime but to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery and breach of faith.... After the conclusion of this ceremony it was their custom to depart and meet again to take food; but it was ordinary and harmless food,¹⁷

My point is this. Public Worship is a Spiritual Discipline. It is the one indispensable function of the Church. It is so important that for many people it defines the very image of the Church. Worship is not simply human activity. It's a living encounter with God. Those who stay away from worship do not understand the significance of Public Worship as a Spiritual Discipline. I ran into an example of this kind of thinking, when I was visiting some of the members of our congregation in the hospital. I noticed one name that I didn't recognize, who claimed to be a member of our congregation. So I visited her. Her first words were, "I haven't been to worship, but I've been a Methodist for twenty-five years." Now, I'd been the pastor of that congregation for more than five years, and I had never seen her in worship. I would say that she was not exercising the Spiritual Discipline of Public Worship, nor

¹⁶ Acts 2:42 and 46-47

¹⁷ Henry Bettenson, Ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 4-5.

did she see the value of Public Worship as a way of encountering God in Jesus Christ. I agree with Jacques Ellul, who said, “Obviously the Christian does not understand the holy day if on it he (or she) prefers to head for the beach or the ski slopes.”¹⁸

Paul and the Temple of the Holy Spirit and the Body of Christ

Where do people get the idea that they can be Christians without participating in Public Worship? Perhaps they get it from Paul, who wrote the following to the Christians in Corinth:

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.¹⁹

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.²⁰

At first, these passages from Paul seem to indicate that the individual is God’s temple and that the Holy Spirit dwells within the individual. If that is the case, then, who needs Public Worship? The individual can worship God anywhere, even at the beach or on the ski slopes.

If that was all Paul had to say about one’s relationship to Christ and with God, then I could understand how one can move towards this kind of individualism. Paul, however, has much more to say. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul compares the Church to the Human Body and its many parts and concludes that: “...if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually, members of it.”²¹ An individual cannot be separated from the Body and still be part of the Body. One may worship individually, but

¹⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 130.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

²¹ 1 Corinthians 12:26-27

one must also worship publicly. Public Worship is a very important Spiritual Discipline.

Peter and the Living Stones and the Spiritual House

In 1 Peter 2 we are invited to grow into salvation like newborn infants longing for spiritual milk. An invitation is given to us as living stones to join the living cornerstone, Jesus Christ.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall."²²

No stone can be a spiritual house by itself. All the living stones are to join themselves to the living cornerstone in order to create a spiritual house.

But there's more. These living stones have a mission: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."²³ We are those living stones and we are called to be lights to the world. The commission to be lights to the world can be found in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament we find this commission in Isaiah and in the New Testament Jesus commissions us to be light.

I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.²⁴

²² 1 Peter 2:4-8

²³ 1 Peter 2:9

²⁴ Isaiah 42:6

I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.²⁵

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.²⁶

No one can fulfill this mission by him or herself. This requires a public effort. This requires the Spiritual Discipline of Public Worship. All of us need to be connected to the source of light. I remember E. Stanley Jones illustrating this in terms of a coal fire. Take one of those coals out of the fire for very long and it will cool down and eventually go out. All of the coals need one another to burn brightly.

John and the Congregations of Asia Minor

When we come to the Book of Revelation, we find John warning seven congregations in Asia Minor. Two of them, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are doing fine. They are fulfilling their mission. Two of them, Sardis and Laodicea, are doing everything wrong. Sardis is dead²⁷ and Laodicea is lukewarm.²⁸ “A lukewarm Christian,” wrote William Barclay the famous Biblical scholar, “is no Christian at all.”²⁹ The other three congregations, Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira have some faith, but they do not present a clear light to the world. John warns all of these churches to get their act together and start fulfilling the mission they have been given. That will require exercising all of the Spiritual Disciplines.

²⁵ Isaiah 49:6

²⁶ Matthew 5:14-16

²⁷ Revelation 3:1

²⁸ Revelation 3:16

²⁹ Bruce Metzger quotes Barclay in his excellent study on the Book of Revelation, which he called, *Breaking the Code* (Nashville: Abingdon Video Series), 1993. He said this in his commentary on the church of Laodicea.

John and the Throne Room in Heaven

In chapter four of the Book of Revelation, John takes us into the throne room, where we catch a glimpse of God as Creator with the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures³⁰ who worship Him day and night, ever singing, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.”³¹ They fall before the one seated on the throne and worship forever and ever, singing: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”³² This vision of the throne room sounds strangely familiar and very close to what Isaiah saw in the Temple.³³

Public Worship then moves to the Lamb of God, the Risen Christ, who alone is worthy and able to open the scroll and break open the seven seals, which reveal the future. The twenty-four elders fall before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints, who sing a new song:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.³⁴

Then the four living creatures and myriads and myriads and thousands and thousands of angels joined the twenty-four elders singing with full voice:

³⁰ The description of the four living creatures sounds like the angelic beings we know as the Cherubim and the Seraphim.

³¹ Revelation 4:8

³² Revelation 4:11

³³ See Isaiah 6

³⁴ Revelation 5:9-10

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.³⁵

Finally it all comes to a conclusion as every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, sing together:

To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever.³⁶

And they all fell down, worshiped and cried “Amen!” Here we have Public Worship at its finest.

John and the New Jerusalem without a Temple

But more is to come. When the Kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem, is finally established in all of its fullness, we are told: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”³⁷ One would expect to see a Temple or a Cathedral in the center of the city, but John surprises us when he says:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations.³⁸

Public Worship will be everyone’s discipline. “Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the New Jerusalem, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their

³⁵ Revelation 5:12

³⁶ Revelation 5:13

³⁷ Revelation 21:3

³⁸ Revelation 21:22-26

foreheads.”³⁹ This is Public Worship at its best, and it will permeate every corner of the New Jerusalem.

THE PRACTICAL FOCUS

The Goal of Public Worship

According to the *Russian Chronicle*, in around 987 and 988 C.E., Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, sent envoys to investigate Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Vladimir wanted to find the true Religion. Judaism and Islam failed for two reasons. Vladimir did not like Judaism because he would have to give up pork, and he did not like Islam because he would have to renounce alcohol.⁴⁰ He chose Orthodox Christianity. Let us look at his reasons. The envoy attended worship in the Orthodox Cathedral, the Hagia Sophia, in Constantinople, and concluded:

We knew not whether we were in heaven or earth...
we only know that God dwells there among men,
and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations.⁴¹

The dazzling beauty of this Cathedral impresses everyone. One could build a seventeen-story building over the high altar under its magnificent dome. If the visible beauty of the Church is so dazzling, the unseen beauty and glory of its worship are even more compelling. One reason for this is the way in which Orthodox Christianity has viewed the Church. Orthodoxy views the Church as the Bride of Christ, and within her shelter we find God’s presence and in Christ we find salvation. The forms of Orthodox worship have always been more important than its theology or ethics. The primary appeal of Orthodoxy was aesthetic rather than

³⁹ Revelation 22:3-4

⁴⁰ Roland Bainton, *Christendom*, Volume 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p, 117.

⁴¹ Dr. Tim Dowley, Ed. *Eerdman’s Handbook to The History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdman’s Publishing Company, 1977), p. 311.

intellectual or moral.⁴² The primary purpose of Public Worship is to make us aware of the presence of God, who reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ.

The Elements of Worship

I mentioned earlier that worship in the Synagogue influenced the worship of early Christianity. Worship in the Synagogue included most of the following elements.

1. Antiphonal Recitation of the Decalogue (The Ten Commandments: Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:1-21)
2. Antiphonal Recitation of the Creed of Israel (The Shema: Deuteronomy 6:4-9)
3. A Series of Blessings of God (From six to nineteen blessings)
4. The Lesson from the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy on a three year cycle)
5. The Psalms (The cantor sings the verses and the congregation replies with a refrain)
6. The Sermon or Interpretation of the Law
7. The Amen (The congregation recited the Amen vigorously to express God's fixed and constant nature believing that he would respond to their petitions.)

Most of the above elements were retained in Christian worship, but the demand of the Christian message altered them considerably. Two significant elements were added: (1) worship on Sunday instead of Friday evening, and (2) the Lord's Supper. Both of these elements are important for obtaining the goal of Public Worship, which is to make us aware of the presence of God, so that when we leave a worship service, we will not know whether we were on earth or in heaven. To accomplish this, we need to introduce people to the throne room, where they can connect with the presence of God.

⁴² Dr. Tim Dowley, Ed. *Eerdman's Handbook to The History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1977), p. 311.

The Music

I'm going to set aside Prayer, Bible Study and the Lord's Supper for now. I consider these three elements to be Spiritual Disciplines of their own. The most important elements of Public Worship, aside from the three elements I have set aside, would be the singing of hymns and preaching. Let's begin with hymn singing. The Book of Psalms was the Hymn Book for the Synagogue and early Christianity. It was not viewed as Scripture until the end of the first century C.E., but it was used in worship.

Hymns are only mentioned seventeen times in the entire Bible, including the Apocrypha, and in the New Testament we only find the term used three times. In the first passage, Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns in jail until midnight as the other prisoners listened to them.⁴³ In two other passages we find the reason for singing hymns in worship.⁴⁴

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery;
but be filled with the Spirit,
as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among
yourselves,
singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;
teach and admonish one another in all wisdom;
and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms,
hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

Not everyone enjoys the singing of hymns, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be a part of the liturgy of worship. One of the most influential Christians of the twentieth century, who didn't care for hymns or preaching, was C.S. Lewis. He attended the same small church for over thirty years. For most of those years he didn't care much for the sermons and even sat behind a pillar so the priest could not see the expression on his face. Lewis also disliked the hymns and attended a service without music.

⁴³ Acts 16:15

⁴⁴ Ephesians 5:18-19 and Colossians 3:16

Lewis was once asked, “Is attendance at a place of worship or membership with a Christian community necessary to a Christian way of life?” His answer was as follows:

My own experience is that when I first became a Christian, about fourteen years ago, I thought that I could do it on my own, by retiring to my rooms and reading theology, and I wouldn’t go to the churches and Gospel Halls; and then later I found that it was the only way of flying your flag.... If there is anything in the teaching of the New Testament, which is in the nature of a command, it is that you are obliged to take the Sacrament, and you can’t do it without going to Church.

When Lewis was asked to comment on his view of hymns, he replied, “I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it.” Although Lewis never got over his distaste for hymns, what did he mean by his seeing merit in hymn singing? He describes the experience as follows:

I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren’t fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.⁴⁵

C. S. Lewis was not the only one who had difficulty with hymns. One of the greatest hymn writers of all time, Isaac Watts, had difficulty with the hymns that were being sung in worship. On the way to worship with his father, he complained about the roughness and general poverty of the psalmody, which characterized every part of Christian worship in his time. “Try then,” said his father, “whether you can yourself produce something better.” Animated by the suggestion, Watts began

⁴⁵ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (The Trustees of the Estate of C. S. Lewis, 1970), pp. 61-62.

writing hymns and would do so for the rest of his life. The first hymn he composed was:

Behold the glories of the Lamb,
Amidst His Father's throne;
Prepare new honours for His name,
And songs before unknown.⁴⁶

Isaac Watts did not depart from the singing of Psalms without difficulty, even though he based many of his hymns on the Psalms. At the time most people believed that the Psalms should be sung just as they were written. One can see Watt's defensive position in some of his hymns, such as in the second verse of, "We're Marching to Zion," where he writes:

Let those refuse to sing
who never knew our God;
but children of the heavenly King,
may speak their joys abroad.

We're marching to Zion,
beautiful, beautiful Zion;
we're marching upward to Zion,
the beautiful city of God.

The hymns of Isaac Watts are among the greatest ever written. At Christmas time, one of the most moving hymns is "Joy to the World," and Matthew Arnold suggested that the greatest hymn ever written is:

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my riches gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Charles Wesley wrote some great hymns as well, but Isaac Watts paved the way for Wesley. Both Charles and John Wesley understood what Isaac Watts was doing, and their instructions for singing are still in the current United Methodist Hymnal. Let me share just a few of their instructions for singing:

⁴⁶ David Fountain, *Isaac Watts Remembered* (Southampton: Mayflower Christian Bookshop, 1974), p. 34.

See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find a blessing.

Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature.⁴⁷

Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley were contemporary hymn writers. Perhaps we should ask the question, “Should we forget about the old hymns, and sing only contemporary hymns? The Psalms are still with us, and one of the most popular Psalms is Psalm 23, “The Lord is My Shepherd.” The best hymns are not the old ones or the new ones, but the ones, which focus on our hearts and minds and take us into the presence of God. That’s the purpose of Public Worship, and great hymns can lead us into that presence.

Perhaps the best advice that can be given on hymns is the same advice C. S Lewis gives in regard to new and old books.

I do not wish the ordinary reader to read no modern books. But if he must read only the new or only the old, I would advise him to read the old.... It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones.⁴⁸

I personally have difficulty with most of the contemporary Christian music. Many of them do not seem like hymns. They are

⁴⁷ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. vii.

⁴⁸ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (The Trustees of the Estate of C. S. Lewis, 1970), p. 69-70.

repetitive choruses without much substance. They may have their place in Public Worship, but they should never take the place of genuine hymns. The place of hymns is clearly defined in the Preface of The United Methodist Hymnal:

Hymn singing has been a vital and a distinctive component of our worship of God. From our beginning we have been “a singing people.” Our hymnals serve as instruments by which the spiritual heritage received from the past is celebrated in the present and transmitted to future generations. Next to the Bible, our hymnals have been our most formative resource.⁴⁹

To date, I have memorized twenty-eight hymns, and I sing all twenty-eight of them every morning as I take a one-hour devotional walk. I enjoy doing this immensely, but I must say at the same time, what joy it is to sing in Public Worship without having to look at the hymnal or the screen where the words are projected. While I don’t expect to memorize the entire Hymn Book, I will continue to add to this number as long as I can.

Before moving on to preaching, I would like to say a few things about Public Worship. I have difficulty with the concept of a choir, unless the choir exists to enable the congregation to fulfill Wesley’s rules for singing. All too often the choir sings an anthem and the congregation claps, as if the choir is entertaining us and we are the audience. We don’t attend Public Worship to be entertained, but to enter into the presence of God and offer our praise in song. I have come to the conclusion that we should not clap, no matter how well the choir may have sung. Exercising the discipline of Public Worship has to do with lifting our voices in praise, not in listening to the choir sing, no matter how well they perform.

There should also be a movement in worship that takes us from praise to commitment, and music plays a big role in this movement. Worship begins with praise, and the opening hymn should be a hymn of praise that is easy for everyone to sing. The second hymn in Public Worship should be tied in with the morning message. Most hymns relate to Scripture, and I think that it should

⁴⁹ *The United Methodist Hymn Book* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. v.

not be too difficult to match the message with an appropriate hymn. The final hymn should be a hymn of invitation to commit or recommit one's life to God through Jesus Christ. The hymn should so inspire us that when we leave we won't know whether we are on earth or in heaven.

The Message

Protestant worship focuses on the Message or Sermon. How can we use the message to experience heaven on earth? Let us look first at what the Scriptures say about the kind of message that needs to be preached.

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."⁵⁰

When Paul struggles with the kind of message that needs to be preached to both Jews and Gentiles, he quotes Isaiah and concludes:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"⁵¹

Let's begin by saying that great preaching consists of giving people Good News, not good advice. That takes hard work. In John Wesley's time the church was plagued with semi-literate wandering preachers. Wesley remarked:

Let but a pert, self-sufficient animal that has neither sense nor grace, bawl something about Christ and His blood, or Justification by Faith, and his silly hearers cry out: "What a fine Gospel sermon."⁵²

⁵⁰ Isaiah 52:7

⁵¹ Romans 10:14-15

⁵² J. H. Whitely, *Wesley's England* (Epworth), p. 302.

It takes hard work to preach the Good News. When Bishop Sheen was asked how long it took him to prepare his latest sermon, he answered, “Forty-five years.”⁵³ When I first started preaching, I was told that I should spend one hour in study for every minute I preached. As I have grown older, I have concluded that Bishop Sheen is correct. One hour of study per minute of preaching is not enough.

Successful preachers from the past can give us some helpful insights into the purpose of preaching the Good News.

Augustine: The three purposes of preaching are to teach, delight, and move.⁵⁴

Martin Luther: When I preach I regard neither doctors nor magistrates, of whom I have about forty in my congregation; I have all my eyes on the servant maids and on children. And if the learned men are not well pleased with what they hear, well, the door is open.⁵⁵

Karl Barth: Through the activity of preaching, God himself speaks. Preaching is an attempt to give God’s answers to the questions people raise.⁵⁶

There’s another insight on preaching, which is very well known, but it does not focus on preaching so much as on one’s lifestyle, which of course, is very important in preaching. Frances of Assisi is reported to have said, “Preach the Gospel all the time; if necessary use words.”

The Purpose of Preaching

But words can be damning or inspirational. Robert Fulghum illustrates this point with a story about Hans Ludwig Babbling,

⁵³ Willard F. Jabusch, *The Person in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), p. 94.

⁵⁴ *Time*, “American Preaching, a Dying Art, December 31, 1979, p. 64.

⁵⁵ Martin Luther, “The Early Years,” *Christian History*, Number 34.

⁵⁶ *Time*, “American Preaching: A Dying Art?” December 31, 1979, pp. 64-67.

who lived in the sixteenth century in the shadow of the Great Cathedral in Ulm, Germany. Babblinger made artificial limbs for a living and in his spare time he tried to fulfill his dream of flying. He crafted some wings and tried them out in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps, where upcurrents abounded. One wonderful day, in the presence of several witnesses, Hans jumped off of a high hill and soared safely down.

In the spring of 1594, King Ludwig and his court visited Ulm, and the city leaders wanted to impress him. “Get Hans Ludwig Babblinger,” they said, “to fly for the King!” Trying to please the townspeople, Babblinger chose the convenient nearby bluffs of the Danube for his demonstration. Unfortunately the winds there were down-currents. In front of thousands of people, Babblinger stood on a high platform, waved, threw himself into the air, and went down into the river like a cannonball.

The next Sunday the Bishop of Ulm referred to Babblinger by name in his sermon accusing Hans of the sin of pride. “Man,” cried the bishop, “was not meant to fly.” Cringing under the accusing wrath of the bishop, Babblinger walked out of the church, never to appear in public again. His wings and dreams and heart were broken.

Most of the people who go to the Cathedral at Ulm today are tourists. The few worshipers who sit beneath that ancient pulpit during Sunday services, are outnumbered by the hang-gliders flying in flocks off the foothills. Today you can see people taking rides in hot-air balloons and 747s flying at 38,000 feet. Wouldn't it be nice to say to Hans Babblinger, “Look and be not ashamed, Man was meant to fly.” All too frequently the pulpit has been used to point a damning finger, accusing men and women of sin, failure, and pride. Fulghum concludes this illustration of the misuse of the pulpit as follows:

I say the pulpit should stand for wings. Not angel wings or eagle wings or any other wings you've ever seen. Wings of the holy human spirit—wings that lift heart and mind to high places. Wings for all the Babblingers in our midst who

will see them and leave inspired to try again and again to stretch human possibility.⁵⁷

While I agree with Robert Fulghum's proper use of the pulpit, I admit that I have frequently misused it myself. If I could begin my ministry again, I would never resort to moralizing from the pulpit again. The purpose of preaching is to inspire and encourage people to try out their wings. It is to make them aware of the presence of God in such a way that when they leave they will not know whether they have been on earth or in heaven.

What about Ethics and Morality?

If preaching is only to inspire, how do we distinguish between right and wrong? Wasn't Jesus a great moral teacher? Didn't he precede his Good News with a call to repent? The answer to all of the above is, "Yes." Morality must be taken seriously, but the pulpit is not the place for it. Neither is the pulpit the place for partisan politics, as important as politics is to our lives on earth. The reason why the pulpit is not the place for morality and politics is because preaching in most worship services is a monologue. No one has any opportunity to ask questions or even to question what is being said. Most worship services are too large for such interaction. Morality and politics belong in small group discussions where everyone has an opportunity to question and speak.

Some preachers like to think of themselves as prophets. As far as I know, and I have studied every one of the Old Testament prophets in depth, none of them spoke from anything like a pulpit in a Public Worship service.⁵⁸ They did speak in public on the streets and to kings, but their audience could respond and often did. Sometimes these prophets faced imprisonment and even death. I'm not saying that Christians should not speak prophetically; only, that there's a time and place for it. When we do speak, we must remember that we will always preach a better sermon with out

⁵⁷ Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It* (New York: Ivy Books, 1991), pp. 183-186.

⁵⁸ I realize that Jesus preached in the Synagogue in Nazareth, after which they tried to kill him. See Luke 4:14-30.

lives than with our lips. “Preaching,” said Philips Brooks, “is bringing truth through personality.”⁵⁹

EXERCISING THE DISCIPLINE OF PUBLIC WORSHIP

Music and preaching are important elements of Public Worship. The other elements of significance are Scripture, Prayer, and Communion. Exercising Public Worship means choosing a congregation where you will worship regularly. I used to be against church shopping, but I now support the concept, provided it's not based on choosing a church simply because one likes the people. The church is not a social club, but the body of Christ, a Spiritual House, the Bride of Christ. A congregation should be chosen because it helps you exercise the discipline of Public Worship. Since worship includes music, preaching, scripture, prayer, and communion, you need to take all five of these elements into account in choosing a congregation where you will exercise your Public Worship.

Unlike C. S. Lewis I don't care to attend a worship service without music, nor do I wish to sit behind a pillar so I don't have to look at the preacher or the preacher can't see me. I don't simply want to listen to the choir. I want someone up front to help me to sing. I don't worship to be entertained. I don't want to be told that my morals and politics are wrong. I want a message that will make me aware of the presence God so that when I leave the sanctuary, I won't know if I've been on earth or in heaven. Such an experience will transform my morals and it may even change my political alliances.

I want to be in a small group where we can discuss morality and politics, where everyone's opinions are respected, even when we are not in agreement. Being in a small group may well be more important than attending worship, particularly if attending worship means you are only a spectator or part of the audience. Public Worship is the first Spiritual Discipline, but it's deeply tied in with small group involvement. I would go so far as to say that regular attendance in worship and in a small group should be required of anyone becoming part of the Body of Christ. I would even drop the idea of or becoming a member of a congregation. If a congregation

⁵⁹ *Time*, October 15, 1979, p. 15.

can enable me to sing hymns and the preacher can move me into the presence of God, that's the congregation to which I want to belong.

It has been said that George Whitefield was one of the truly great preachers in early Methodism. People were moved simply by the way he said, "Mesopotamia." Benjamin Franklin left his wallet at home every time he went to hear Whitefield preach, for fear that he would put the whole thing in the offering plate. When Whitefield was asked why some congregations appeared to be dead, he replied, "The reason why congregations have been so dead is because dead men preach to them."⁶⁰ If I found myself in such a congregation, I would leave immediately and find a congregation where I can sing praises to God and be inspired to give my life to God. Public Worship is an exciting and important discipline. Let us now turn to the Spiritual Discipline of Bible Study.

⁶⁰ Quoted in *Eerdmans' History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), p. 441.

2. BIBLE STUDY

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

2 Timothy 3:16 (NRSV)

THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The Law

Bible Study, which is the study of Scripture, is the second Spiritual Discipline. When Scripture is mentioned in the New Testament; the reference is to the Old Testament. The New Testament didn't exist. It was in the process of being written, and those who wrote it, didn't know they were writing Scripture.⁶¹ The Old Testament should be studied just as much as the New Testament. They are tied together.

The heart of the Old Testament, which I prefer to call either the Old Covenant or the Hebrew Scriptures, is the Mosaic Covenant, which focuses on the Ten Commandments. The rest of the Old Testament is commentary or story telling. The stories are about the origin of Israel as a nation, Israel's faithfulness or disobedience, and Israel's demise and final restoration.

Theology	Ethics
1. One God	5. Respect Parents
2. No Images	6. No Murder
3. No Blasphemy	7. No Adultery
4. Observe the Sabbath	8. No Stealing
	9. No False Swearing
	10. No Coveting

⁶¹ The New Testament in its present form came into being through an Easter Letter sent out by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria in 367 C.E.

In the Ten Commandments we find both theology and ethics. The first four commandments deal with one's relationship to God and the last six deals with personal and social morality.

The first five books are called the Torah, which means "instruction or law." The longest chapter in the Bible expresses Israel's love for the Law. The Psalmist cries, "The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces."⁶² Again, he cries, "O how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long."⁶³ The Psalmist constantly exercises the Spiritual Discipline of studying the Scriptures.

The second major portion of the Old Testament consists of the Prophets. In Judaism, many of the books, which Christianity calls the Historical Books, are included in the Prophetic Books. The prophets don't have to study Scripture; they have a direct connection with God and they are writing Scripture. One of their favorite expressions is, "Thus says the Lord." This little phrase finds its way into the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible 426 times.

It is necessary to study the prophets in order to understand the teachings of Jesus on the Law. The prophet who best summarizes the coming New Covenant is Jeremiah, who says:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,

⁶² Psalm 119:72

⁶³ Psalm 119:97,

says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.⁶⁴

Fulfilling the Law

Jesus does not reject the Law; rather, he fulfills it. In Matthew 5:17-18, Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

If the Ten Commandments made up the heart of the Old Testament, the Great Commandment makes up the heart of the New Testament. When Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment of all, he quoted from Deuteronomy 6:4-6 “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.”⁶⁵ Jesus then adds a second commandment to the Great Commandment and again quotes from the Old Testament, saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.⁶⁶

Jesus’ teachings on the commandments can be compared to the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament. Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, but I say unto you:

Theology of Moses	Theology of Jesus
1. One God	1. Our Father (Matthew 6:9)
2. No Images	2. No forms needed at all (Matthew 6:7)
3. No Blasphemy	3. Hallowed be Thy Name (Matthew 6:9)
4. Man made for the Sabbath	4. Sabbath made for Man (Mark 2:27)

⁶⁴ Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)

⁶⁵ This quote is from Deuteronomy. You can read Jesus’ quote in Mark 12:29-30.

⁶⁶ Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18. See Jesus’ quote in Mark 12:31.

Ethics of Moses	Ethics of Jesus
5. Respect Your Parents	5. Also all good People (Matthew 12:50)
6. No Murder	6. No Anger (Matthew 5:22)
7. No Adultery	7. No Lust (Matthew 5:28)
8. No Stealing	8. Give Freely (Matthew 5:42)
9. No False Swearing	9. No Swearing (Matthew 5:34)
10. No Coveting	10. Covet Righteousness (Matthew 5:6)

The two best examples are found in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.⁶⁷

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.⁶⁸

What can we conclude from this? The Old Testament Law is much easier to obey than Jesus’ interpretation of the Law. I would much rather be judged by Moses’ Ten Commandments than by Jesus’ interpretation of them, or even by his Great Commandment, which includes not only love for the neighbor, but love for the enemy as well. Jesus ends this discussion by saying, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. ... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” I see no such commandment in the Old Testament. Jesus indicates that the Old

⁶⁷ Matthew 5:21-22

⁶⁸ Matthew 5:27-28

Testament Law permits hating one's enemy, although such a commandment is impossible to find.⁶⁹

Fulfilling the Scriptures

Those who were writing the New Testament had many reasons for studying the Old Testament Scriptures, but most of them did not know that they were writing Scripture. They believed that they were interpreting Scripture that was being fulfilled in their own lifetime. This was particularly important in regard to what they found in Scripture about Jesus. Below are some examples of how they connected Scripture to the birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. In John 7:42, John quotes Micah 5:2 naming Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. "Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" It was important for the Messiah to be born in the same village as Israel's greatest King, who was David.

The Virgin Birth of Jesus. Both Matthew 1:23 and Luke 1:34 see the fulfillment of the virgin birth of Isaiah 7:14, even though Isaiah only said that a new King would be born of a "young woman." That King would bear the name "Immanuel" which means "God [is] with us."

The Triumphal Entry. According to John 12:14-15, "Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 'Do not be afraid daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!'" Matthew makes a similar statement in Matthew 21:4-5. The Triumphal entry, they claim, fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, which portrays the King riding into Jerusalem seated on a donkey.

The Betrayal of Judas. The most difficult fulfillment of Scripture is the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, which is described in John 13:18; 17:12 and Acts 1:16. Both John and Peter affirm that Judas' betrayal was the fulfillment of Scripture. "Friends," said Peter in his first sermon

⁶⁹ See Matthew 5:43-44 and 48.

following the resurrection of Jesus, “the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus....”

The Crucifixion of Jesus. Although Jesus did not say that his crucifixion would be the fulfillment of Scripture, he predicted it three times. In Mark 8:31, right after his disciples recognized him as the Messiah, he said, “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” He predicts his own death again in Mark 9:31 and 10:33. Many would point to Isaiah 53 as the Scripture that foretells Jesus’ fate. Details of his crucifixion, however, are viewed as fulfillments of Scripture. They cast lots for his clothes (John 19:24), when he said that he was thirsty, they gave him sour wine to drink (John 19:28), and they didn’t break any of his bones (John 19:36).

The Resurrection of Jesus. Although the disciples did not anticipate the resurrection of Jesus, after it happened, they realized that it was the fulfillment of Scripture. “After he was raised from the dead,” says John 2:22, “his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.” See also John 20:9.

What were they trying to say when they tied these important events into Scripture? Some of the references do not seem very clear. In writing to the congregation in Corinth, Paul says, “I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.”⁷⁰ The only Scriptures that come close to Paul’s reference to the resurrection are Hosea 6:2 and Jonah 1:17. These verses only talk about being revived on the third day, not being resurrected from the dead.

⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

The writers of the New Testament were only doing what Jesus was doing. In Jesus' first sermon in the Nazareth Synagogue, he stood up and quoted the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."⁷¹

Jesus then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."⁷²

At the end of Jesus ministry, following his resurrection, he joins two disciples, Cleopas and an unnamed disciple, who were walking to Emmaus. They didn't recognize him until he revealed himself to them. Then when their eyes were opened and they recognized him, they said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"⁷³

This happens again when Philip interprets Isaiah 53:7-8 to the Ethiopian Eunuch. Then Philip began to speak: "and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed the good news about Jesus." The good news is that Jesus rose from the dead and reigns as the Messiah, and Philip believed *that* Scripture confirmed this good news.⁷⁴ Many more examples can be found in the New Testament, but these examples should be enough to illustrate the point. We may not always agree with their conclusions, such as in the case of Judas, but the writers of the New Testament knew their Scriptures. They wrote the New Testament on the basis of what they found in the Old Testament.

⁷¹ Isaiah 61:1-2 and Luke 4:18-19

⁷² Luke 4:21

⁷³ Luke 4:32

⁷⁴ Acts 8:35

THE PRACTICAL FOCUS

Recognize the Primacy of the Bible!

Scripture is the authority, fundamental and decisive; and yet, more people read their horoscopes than read the Bible. Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby found that “Eighty-eight percent know their astrological signs with half of the entire population reading their horoscopes at least once a month—outnumbering scriptural readers by two to one.”⁷⁵ Hal Brady tells the story of a pastor, who asked a little girl if she attended Sunday School. When she said, “Yes,” he followed up with the question, “Do you know what’s in your Bible?” Without hesitating, she replied, “Sure. My sister’s boyfriend’s picture, my mother’s recipe, and a lock of my baby hair.”⁷⁶

John Wesley stressed the primacy of Scripture. “O give me that book! At any price give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book.”⁷⁷ This didn’t make Wesley very popular. In defense of the Biblical development of his Theology, Wesley responded by saying, “If I am a heretic, I became such by reading the Bible.”⁷⁸ Wesley didn’t come to the conclusion of the primacy of the Bible by himself. He describes how in the company of others they all decided to become Bible-Christians.

From the very beginning, from the time that four young men united together, each of them was *homo unius libri*—a man of one book. God taught them all to make his “Word a lantern unto their feet, and a light in all their paths.” They had one, and only one rule of judgment with regard to all their tempers, words, and actions, namely, the oracles of God. They were one and all determined to be *Bible-Christians*. They were continually reproached for this very

⁷⁵ Martin E. Mary, *Homiletics*, October-December, 1994, p. 21.

⁷⁶ Hal Brady, *Homiletics*, January-March, 1994, p. 22.

⁷⁷ Edward H. Sugden, ed. *Fifty-Three Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), p. 13.

⁷⁸ Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transitions in American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 76.

thing; some terming them in derision *Bible-bigots*; others, *Bible-moths*—feeding, they sat, upon the Bible as moths do upon cloth. And indeed unto this day it is their constant endeavour to think and speak as the oracles of God.⁷⁹

In modern Methodism we talk about the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which guides us into religious knowledge through four steps. The first step is *Scripture*, which we consider to be primary or normative. The second step is *Tradition*, which includes the collective wisdom of the church in interpreting Scripture. Tradition, however, cannot act as the authority. That place belongs to Scripture. The third step is *Reason*, which is the critical discipline used to judge the credibility of all interpretation. The final step is *Experience*, which is to the person what tradition is to the whole Christian community. Tradition, reason, and experience are ways of understanding and interpreting Scripture, but Scripture is central and normative.⁸⁰ There have been attempts to make all four steps in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral equal, but we need to resist all such attempts to weaken the primacy of Scripture.

Study the Bible in Its Context!

What really impresses me is this. The Old Testament in Jesus' time had no chapter and verse divisions. Those who quoted from the Old Testament knew the Scriptures so well that they could quote from it without the help of chapters and verses. They also knew that “no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation,” and that “no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”⁸¹

How can we get that familiar with the Bible? Let me give you an example of how not to do it and then suggest what needs to be done. There is one verse in the New Testament that everyone knows. It is frequently thought of as “the Heart of the Gospel.” It is

⁷⁹ Scott J. Jones, “John Wesley on the Use of Scripture,” *The Circuit Rider*, January-February, 1999, p. 15.

⁸⁰ Richard B. Wilke, *And Are We Yet Alive?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), p. 88. (Wilke draws these conclusions from Albert Outler's work.)

⁸¹ 2 Peter 1:20

the heart of the entire New Testament, and almost everyone knows it by heart. It is found in John 3:16:

For God so loved the world
that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
may not perish but may have eternal life.

The difficulty with this quote is that it is ripped out of its context. One needs to read the whole passage to understand what John is trying to say.

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.⁸²

The point should be clear. We are not exercising the discipline of Bible Study if we only pick out those verses that we like and ignore those verses we don't like. We need to study the whole of Scripture in its context, even when we find passages with which we disagree.

This leads me to suggest that we should study the Bible book by book and that we study each book in its context. All of these books were written to a particular audience and we need to understand what was being said to that audience and how they received and interpreted it before we can discover what value it might be for us. We have to be careful with the Bible. Even though it is our primary source of religious knowledge and experience, there are dangers in studying it. "There is dynamite enough in the New Testament," said James Russell Lowell, "if illegitimately

⁸² John 3:17-21

applied, to blow all our existing institutions to atoms.”⁸³ A solid book-by-book study will help people not to be taken in by cultic teachings. Studies on topics are helpful only after a group has done a number of Bible-book studies.

A church that is not struggling with the Bible is choking itself to death. It has to come to grips with this primary source, which guides its faith and morals. Thomas Jefferson compared Bible Study to “picking diamonds out of a dunghill.”⁸⁴ I like Martin Luther’s imagery much better. “The Bible is the manger in which we find Christ, the swaddling clothes in which he is wrapped.” It’s quite natural to find some straw in a manger, and there is plenty of straw in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. The question we constantly confront is this: How do we separate the straw from the diamonds?

How can this be? Isn’t every word inspired? If every word were inspired, the revelation of God would be printer’s ink or a computer file. One of my favorite modern English Bibles was the J.B. Philipps Version of the Bible. It was one of the first Bibles to come out in a language everyone could understand. In talking about his experience of translating the Pauline Letters, Philipps said,

As I began translating these epistles, my conviction grew that the New Testament was in a quite special sense inspired. It is not magical; nor is it faultless. Human beings wrote it. But by something which I would not hesitate to describe as a miracle there is a concentration upon that area of inner truth which is fundamental and ageless. That, I believe, is the reason why millions of people have heard the voice of God speaking to them through these seemingly artless pages.

⁸³ Quoted in Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), p. 89.

⁸⁴ Quoted by Edward Bauman in a Cassette series, *The Heart of the Bible, the Teachings of Jesus*.

I would say the same about the Old Testament. The authors of both Testaments never intended to provide literalistic guidelines for the 21st century, but they did intend to communicate something of God's power and love.

Study the Bible Backwards!

Although I cannot name the source, I once read a quote from Martin Luther suggesting that Christians should read the Bible backwards. Knowing that Luther didn't think much of the Book of Revelation, I doubt if he meant for us to start there, but that's where I would start. Luther's purpose in reading the Bible backwards was to acquaint us with Jesus, the living Word of God; then, as we read further, we subject everything to his life, teachings, death, and resurrection. In doing it this way we will not make the mistake of confusing straw with the Word of God. Let me quote Luther's twelve guidelines to reading the Bible:

(1) Your Interpretations Don't Matter, (2) Only One True Interpreter, (3) Pray First, (4) The Bible Cannot Err, (5) Making Meaning Secondary, (6) Life Long Students, (7) The Word of God is the Bible, (8) Reading the Bible Backward, (9) Studying the Right Context, (10) Foreign Languages Count, (11) The Bible is Basically Clear, and (12) Law and Gospel Throughout.⁸⁵

While I don't agree with every one of Luther's guidelines, I agree with most of them, and I particularly agree with reading the Bible backwards. It gives us the opportunity to judge everything in the Bible by the standard of Jesus the Christ, the Living Word of God. The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is only the manger in which we find him. Therein lies the true inspiration of Scripture.

Luther didn't like the books of James and Revelation. He considered them to be straw and was quite ready to do without them. In my opinion, our Bible would be incomplete without these two books. The book of James keeps us from cheapening faith by separating faith from good works. I know that Luther never intended to separate faith and works, but the book of James refuses

⁸⁵ These twelve guidelines can be found easily by searching the Internet. Number 8 is "reading the Bible backwards."

to separate them. The book of Revelation provides a fitting conclusion to the Bible. Without it we don't know for sure that God will triumph over evil. It is very easy to misunderstand the book of Revelation and no one should attempt to study and interpret it alone. These books call for a group study and a leader who will examine its historical context before attempting to share its insights with the 21st century.

I would start with the book of Revelation and proceed backwards through the Bible and end with Genesis. This way you won't forget what the Bible is all about. On Karl Barth's last visit to the United States, he was asked by a reporter to sum up his theology. Without any hesitation, Barth replied, "You put it very well in your hymn, 'Jesus loves, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"⁸⁶ Knowing this helps us to recognize the Living Word of God in the midst of all that straw around the manger, but it is also helpful to look deeply at all that straw. Why? I think Cecil Dichard gave the answer when he said, "Give me a Bible and a candle and shut me up in a dungeon and I will tell you what the world is doing." On the positive side, in the Scriptures we discover the steppingstones of history, which enable us to walk on the waters of faith.

EXERCISING THE DISCIPLINE OF BIBLE STUDY

Join a Bible Study Group. I can't overemphasize this enough. Studying the Bible on your own is difficult. You need to meet with a group on a regular basis to keep you accountable and honest. When the church began at Pentecost, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."⁸⁷ All of these are important in exercising the Spiritual Discipline of Bible Study.

The Methodist movement was born in a small group of students at Oxford University in 1729, when a group of earnest students pledged themselves to frequent attendance at Holy Communion, serious study of the Bible, and regular visitation of

⁸⁶ John H. Snow and Victor P. Furnish, *Proclamation: Easter* (Series A), p. 13.

⁸⁷ Acts 2:42

the filthy Oxford prisons. Charles Wesley was the first leader, but soon his older brother John took over. Other students referred to them as the Holy Club, and eventually called them Methodists. It was said of them:

By rule they eat, by rule they drink,
Do all things else by rule, but think—
Accuse their priests of loose behavior,
To get more in the laymen's favor;
Method alone must guide 'em all,
Whence Methodists themselves they call.

We know they didn't want to call themselves Methodists, but they eventually accepted the name and redefined it in a document called, "The Character of a Methodist," which simply was an attempt to define the character of a Christian.

On May 24, 1738, in the company of a small group which met on Aldersgate Street in London, John Wesley experienced a strange warming of his heart and came to the conclusion that he had been touched by the Holy Spirit and an assurance was given to him that he had been touched by the grace of God. Since this occurred in a Moravian Religious Society, Wesley decided to visit a Moravian Community in Germany, where small groups of classes and bands met on a regular basis. Wesley began organizing Societies similar to Religious Societies in the Anglican and Moravian Churches. They were called United Societies. Those who joined the United Societies were required to join a Class, which included both men and women. Joining a Band, which separated the genders was optional. While none of the above groups were strictly Bible Study Groups, they engaged in a serious study of the Bible. Like Wesley, they were people of one book. They were Bible Christians. That certainly does not mean that they only read one book. The new movement published all kinds of tracts and books, but their primary source was the Bible. The end of Bible Study is not knowledge, but reverence for God and discipleship.

I'd like to close this section with a question. How long do we need to exercise the Spiritual Discipline of Bible Study? I would agree with Augustine, who said:

Such is the depth of the Christian scriptures that even if I were to attempt a study of them, and nothing else, from boyhood to a very old age, with talents greater than I have, I would still be making progress in discovering their treasures daily.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ This quote comes from a devotional, “Be Still and Know,” written by Ed Maalo.

3. SECRET PRAYER

*Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door
and pray to your Father who is in secret;
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Matthew 6:6 (NRSV)

THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Jesus and Secret Prayer

Jesus believed in Secret Prayer. On many occasions he dismissed the crowds and went up into a mountain by himself to pray.⁸⁹ This doesn't mean that we must only pray in secret by ourselves. There were occasions when Jesus prayed with his disciples. The prime example took place when Jesus took Peter, James, and John and went up on a mountain to pray. "And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white."⁹⁰

We don't know how frequently Jesus prayed in secret, whether alone or with his disciples. Jesus did begin his ministry by praying in secret and he ended his ministry praying in secret.

Following Jesus' baptism, while he was praying, a voice spoke from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am pleased."⁹¹ The prayer at his baptism may not have been in secret, but in what follows, he was certainly alone. He went up a mountain near Jericho, where he faced three temptations, which would affect his upcoming ministry. By prayer Jesus resisted the temptations to turn stones into bread, jump off the pinnacle of the Temple, and bow down to the devil (the force of evil) in order to win over the kingdoms of this world.⁹²

⁸⁹ See Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; and Luke 5:16; 6:12

⁹⁰ Luke 9:28

⁹¹ Luke 3:22

⁹² See Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 13:12-13; and Luke 4:1-13

At the end of his ministry, he prayed alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. His disciples, mainly Peter, James, and John were with him, but he left them to pray by himself. He asked them to support him in prayer, but they all fell asleep. Three times Jesus went back to see how they were doing with their prayers and three times he found them fast asleep.⁹³ Jesus was certainly praying alone.

The Disciples and Secret Prayer

Even with the example of Jesus, the disciples had difficulty with prayer. Their difficulty went way beyond keeping awake. They didn't know how to pray and they were willing to admit it. While Jesus was praying in a certain place and when he had finished praying, the disciples asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."⁹⁴ Jesus replied, when you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.⁹⁵

We call this the Lord's Prayer, but we should call it the Disciples' Prayer, for Jesus was teaching his disciples how to pray and this was his model for them.

This prayer can also be found in the Gospel of Matthew. In that Gospel, the prayer is a little longer:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

⁹³ See Matthew 26:36-44; Mark 14:32-41; and Luke 22:39-46

⁹⁴ See Luke 11:1

⁹⁵ Luke 11:2-4

For if you forgive others their trespasses,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you;
but if you do not forgive others,
neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.⁹⁶

Jesus never intended for his disciples to memorize this prayer. It was intended to be a sample prayer, which would give direction to the disciples when they prayed. Those directions are relatively simple. While Luke's version is closer to Jesus' original teachings on prayer, the structure of the two prayers is very similar.

A. The Opening Invocation: Father or Our Father (Abba)

B. The Three Petitions to God

1. Hallowed be Your Name
2. Your Kingdom Come
3. Your Will be Done (Luke leaves this out)

C. The Four Petitions for Human Need

4. Give us Our Daily Bread
5. Forgive us our Sins or debts
6. Do not bring us to the Time of Trial
7. Rescue us from the Evil One (Luke leaves this out)

D. The Doxology: Neither Matthew or Luke include the Doxology, which is taken from 1 Chronicles 29:11-13 and 1 Esdras 4:40. A briefer formula can be found in 2 Timothy 4:18.

I'm not saying that it's wrong to memorize this prayer. I've memorized it in more than one language and it helps to guide all my prayers. We just have to be careful with this prayer. It is not a magic formula to get what we want, nor is it a ritual that will protect us from harm. In the same passage where Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray, he also warns them:

And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to pray in the synagogues and at the street

⁹⁶ Matthew 6:9-15

corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.⁹⁷

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.⁹⁸

The main point here is that the followers of Jesus should not show off in public and they don't need to pray long prayers. God already knows what they need before they even pray.

Teachings of Jesus on Prayer

Forgive as You Pray for Forgiveness. Although forgiveness and the will of God have already been mentioned in the Disciples' Prayer, more needs to be said. Let us look first at prayer and forgiveness. Jesus says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."⁹⁹ An unforgiving spirit can block one's connection to God. Another example of this is given by Jesus when he says, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."¹⁰⁰ Forgiveness and reconciliation are essential to effective prayer.

Pray within the Will of God. Praying within the will of God is also essential to effective prayer. Praying this way does not always get us what we want, but it's part of Jesus instruction on how to pray. He himself prayed this kind of prayer in Gethsemane and the answer was not what he wanted to hear. Three times Jesus prayed, and this is what he prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."¹⁰¹ Jesus

⁹⁷ Matthew 6:5

⁹⁸ Matthew 6:7

⁹⁹ Matthew 6:14-15

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 5:23

¹⁰¹ Matthew 26:39

received an answer, even though it was not the answer he sought. Jesus then warned the disciples what they could expect in the future. They too would have to face persecution and death. Peter got the gravest warning. Jesus said to him, “when you grow old, you will stretch out your hand, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”¹⁰² Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After he gave him the warning, he said, “Follow me.” Peter was to become a man of prayer, but he would also die upside down, by his own request, on a Roman cross.

Be Persistent in Prayer. Jesus taught a great deal about prayer in his parables. In his Parable of the Unrighteous Judge, Jesus taught about the need to pray persistently.¹⁰³ We have to be careful with this parable because it is filled with irony. God is not being portrayed as an Unrighteous Judge. The point is this. If a person, like this widow, persistently seeks justice before an Unjust Judge, think of how easy it would be to approach a Just and Loving God. The Unjust Judge finally gave in to her persistence. The question is not whether God will answer our prayer, but do we have enough faith to continue to pray until we understand what his answer is for us? He answers our prayers much more quickly than we think.

Pray in Humility. In his Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Jesus taught that we must approach God in humility.¹⁰⁴ This was not the way this particular Pharisee prayed. He stood where everyone could see him and offered his prayer of gratitude, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” He certainly wasn’t praying in secret. He wanted everyone to know how religious he was and how beautifully he could pray. In contrast to this Pharisee, the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” “I tell you,” said Jesus, “this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled,

¹⁰² John 21:18.

¹⁰³ Luke 18:1-9

¹⁰⁴ Luke 18:9-14

but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Those who pray must approach God in humility. Dietrich Bonhoeffer summed up the message of this parable very well when he said, “The poorest mumbling utterance can be better than the best formulated prayer.”¹⁰⁵

Pray with Faith and in Jesus’ Name. Jesus makes some tremendous promises to those who pray with faith.

Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, “Be taken up and thrown into the sea,” and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.¹⁰⁶

This promise sounds too good to be true, but wait a minute. What does this really mean? Those who pray in faith also pray in Jesus name, and what does that mean? Jesus puts it in context:

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ... Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.¹⁰⁷

Praying in faith and praying in Jesus’ name is one and the same thing. Neither one can be used as a magic formula for selfishness. Those who pray in faith and in Jesus name also seek in their prayers to be consistent with God’s will. They will indeed do great things and move mountains. At the same time God always gives us what we need, and his answer to our prayers is not always what we expect. Jesus compared the way in which God answers our prayers to a father answering his child’s request.

Is there any among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil,

¹⁰⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Living Together*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ Mark 11:21-24 and also Matthew 21:21-22

¹⁰⁷ John 15:16 and also 16:23-24

know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!¹⁰⁸

God may not always give us what we ask for, but he always gives us what we need. What we need most of all is the Holy Spirit, who can guide us in our prayers.

Paul and Prayer

Paul's thoughts on prayer are scattered. Let us examine briefly the main ones. Unlike Jesus, he doesn't emphasize Secret Prayer, but his examples are consistent with Jesus' teachings. He agrees that one must approach the throne of God in humility. To the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."¹⁰⁹ This was how the Tax Collector approached God in prayer. The Pharisee approached God in what he thought was his strength,.

The second example has to do with the controversy in Corinth over speaking in tongues. Paul didn't object to speaking in tongues, but he didn't want those speaking in tongues to become hypocritical. Therefore, he advised them to pray both in the spirit and with the mind. "For if I pray in a tongue," he says to them, "my spirit prays, but my mind is unproductive. What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also."¹¹⁰ Praying with the spirit and the mind is an expression of faith that can move mountains.

Paul had some kind of troublesome ailment, which he called his thorn in the flesh. No one knows exactly what that ailment was, but like Jesus, he prayed three times and then ceased praying. "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this," he writes, "that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may

¹⁰⁸ Luke 11:11-13 and Matthew 7:9-11

¹⁰⁹ Romans 8:26

¹¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:14-15

dwell in me.”¹¹¹ Paul didn’t get what he wanted, but he did get what he needed, to show God’s power through human weakness, and should I say, humility. All of this is consistent with Jesus’ teaching on prayer.

Paul leaves us with one more thought on prayer that I think is important and that is to pray without ceasing. That can only be possible when we are at one with the Spirit of God. Paul expresses this thought to Christians in Thessalonica when he says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”¹¹² One might well ask, “Is this possible.” While it’s not something to boast about, I believe that one can be in a conscious attitude of prayer all his or her waking hours, no matter what they may be doing. It was the goal of Francis Asbury, who said, “My practice is, to keep close to God in prayer and spend a part of ever hour when awake, in that exercise.”¹¹³ This simply means that they are experiencing God’s presence and listening for God’s voice at all times. When the Spirit is truly present, this is not difficult to do. The Spirit intercedes and speaks in our weakness. There is nothing to boast about.

James’ Advice on Prayer

Thus far I have not included anything on intercessory prayer. Jesus healed quite a number people, and so did Peter, John, and Paul; but James is the one who gives us some advice on intercessory prayer. The advice has many facets to it, but here it is:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you

¹¹¹ 2 Corinthians 12:8-9

¹¹² 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

¹¹³ Robert G. Tuttle, *On Giant Shoulders* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984), pp. 37-38.

may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.¹¹⁴

Anointing someone with oil does not guarantee healing of the body or the spirit, but it does have a powerful effect on some people. I have had a number of people with various kinds of illnesses request that they be anointed with oil.¹¹⁵ The only advice I would give is not to make a show of this ritual. I have not hesitated to do this in Public Worship when the person was well known and the congregation wanted to take part. If confession accompanies the laying on of hands, then I would insist on praying for the person in private.

THE PRACTICAL FOCUS

Prayer is a Lifelong Pursuit

Jesus prayed all his life and so should we. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin confessed, “I entered the seminary when I was only seventeen years old, and ever since then I have been trying to learn how to pray.”¹¹⁶ I was twenty-three years old when I felt a call into the ministry. It just seemed to be the right thing to do, and so I went to college, seminary, and graduate school. I did my best to set aside time to pray. In college the campus church had a chapel where one could spend time in prayer in private. My roommate majored in music, in voice. I needed a place where I could pray in peace and quiet. I must confess that I didn’t know how to pray, but I prayed as best I could. At the time I thought I had to fill my prayers with words. When I tried to listen, I didn’t hear anything. Like Bernardin, I have been trying to learn how to pray ever since.

My wife and I attended a reunion of what was once a young couples group. During the retreat we prayed for one of the women in the group who was experiencing some problems with her health. After we prayed as a group, her husband called me aside and confessed, “I don’t know how to pray.” I wasn’t sure how to respond. After all, we had just prayed for his wife. Instead of

¹¹⁴ James 5:13-16

¹¹⁵ I have always used Olive Oil.

¹¹⁶ Joseph Cardinal Gernardin, *The Gift of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 4.

listening, I began to share with him my theology of prayer and what we can expect when we pray. This was not what he wanted or needed. I must confess that I didn't know how to deal with his concern about prayer. Perhaps its because I myself didn't know how to pray. I had studied about prayer. I had taken a seminary course on prayer. I have even taught several courses on prayer. But teaching about prayer and praying are two different things.

Prayer is Listening

Bernardin goes on to define prayer first as listening, for in the silence of the heart, God speaks. He didn't find listening easy, nor do I, but it's important to learn how to listen and this we must learn how to do. Bernardin shares with us his struggle to learn how to listen in one of his prayers.

Lord, I know that I spend a certain amount of that morning hour of prayer daydreaming, problem-solving, and I'm not sure that I can cut that out. I'll try, but the important thing is, I'm not going to give that time to anybody else. So even though it may not unite me as much with you as it should, nobody else is going to get that time.¹¹⁷

I don't know what kind of setting Bernardin had for his private time with God. When I visited John Wesley's residence in London, I was impressed with the little prayer room where he spent each morning. It was a small simple room with a chair and a desk. The guide called that little room the powerhouse of Methodism.

I discovered that I didn't listen very well in a chair and a desk, so I had to find another way to find a private and secret place where I could listen without falling asleep. I stumbled onto my secret closet by accident. I started taking a morning walk at 6:00 a.m. At first my purpose was to get some exercise, but I quickly learned how to listen. Soon I was singing hymns and listening to God between the hymns. I found myself listening to and praising God at the same time. It was amazing how frequently my questions and my prayers were answered as I walked along, sometimes in the darkness. I could also view every sunrise, and only occasionally would someone pass through my secret space.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

I learned how to walk with God and what a joy it is. “Without prayer,” concludes Bernardin, “you cannot be connected or you cannot remain united with the Lord. It’s absolutely essential.”¹¹⁸ I also discovered the joy of praying through hymns, and if you’ll examine the hymns closely, you’ll find that many of them are prayers set to music. “Next after theology,” said Luther, “I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor.” I couldn’t agree more, and I might even give music first place. In writing about the Hymn Book, John Wesley concluded, “This book is, in effect, a little body of experimental and practical divinity.” Theology and music and prayer are connected.

Prayer is Cooperation with God

When I first became a Christian, I had a saying on my desk, which said: “Prayer Changes Things.” I was thinking at the time that prayer changes God, but I’ve now come to the conclusion that prayer changes us. God always answers our prayers, but the answer may not be what we want. At some point we need to stop talking and start listening for God’s answer. Søren Kierkegaard put this in perspective.

The immediate person thinks and imagines that when he prays, the important thing, the thing he must concentrate upon, is that God should hear what he is praying for. And yet in the true, eternal sense it is just the reverse: the true relation in prayer is achieved not when God hears what is prayed for, but when the person praying continues to pray until he is the one who hears, who hears what God wills. The immediate person, therefore, uses many words and therefore makes demands in his prayer; the true man of prayer only attends.¹¹⁹

The essence of prayer is not informing God of our concern. He already knows. We pray in order to hear God’s answer, and we

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, Translated by Alexander Dru (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 97.

should never pray for anything in which we are not willing to be part of God's answer. To do so cheapens prayer.

If God knows everything and answers every prayer, why do we have prayer chains and send emails recruiting as many people as we can to pray for someone or something? Do we think that getting more people to pray will change God's mind so that he will answer our prayer according to our will? I'm not suggesting that we cease to pray for one another. I agree with James that we should pray for one another, but we should not use prayer as if it is some kind of magic ritual, which will change God's mind if we can only recruit enough people to pray for our desired result. The Biblical pattern used by Jesus and Paul was to pray three times, accept the answer and get on with life, even if it leads to a cross. God's power is expressed in our weakness.

In prayer we are not to seek God to do our will; rather, we are to struggle in prayer to align ourselves with God's will. E. Stanley Jones describes prayer as co-operation with God.

In prayer you align your desires, your will, your life to God. You and God become agreed on life desires, life purposes, life plans, and you work them out together. That is prayer. Prayer, then, is not trying to get God to do our will. It is the getting of our will into line with God's will. But the will is not a separate portion of us—the will is the self in action. So prayer aligns the whole self to the whole Self of God.¹²⁰

The best way to illustrate prayer as cooperation with God is with prayers that are consistent with Jesus' model prayer, in which he says, "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."¹²¹ When God's will is done on earth all our prayers will be answered. Frances Havergal expanded on this petition by showing us what cooperation with God would be like. She did it with her famous hymn, "Take My Life, and Let It Be."

¹²⁰ E. Stanley Jones, *The Way* (New York: Festival Books, 1984), p. 215.

¹²¹ Matthew 6:10.

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.
 Take my moments and my days;
 let them flow in ceaseless praise.
 Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of thy love.
 Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.

 Take my voice, and let me sing always only for my King.
 Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from thee.
 Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.
 Take my intellect, and use every power as thou shalt choose.

 Take my will, and make it thine, it shall be no longer mine.
 Take my heart, it is thine own, it shall be thy royal throne.
 Take my love, my Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure store.
 Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee.¹²²

Another prayer that expresses this same spirit of cooperation with God is one written by Reinhold Niebuhr, part of which is known by every alcoholic, if not by every Christian; but the whole prayer is seldom quoted. Here it is in its entirety.

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
 the things that cannot be changed,
 Courage to change the things
 which should be changed,
 and the wisdom to distinguish
 the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,
 Enjoying one moment at a time,
 Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
 Taking, as Jesus did,
 This sinful world as it is,
 Not as I would have it,
 Trusting that You will make all things right,
 If I surrender to Your will,

¹²² Frances R. Havergal, "Take My Life, and Let It Be," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), Hymn Number 399.

So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.¹²³

I have a third favorite prayer, which illustrates prayer as cooperation with God. It was written by John Wesley, to be used either at the end or the beginning of each year. It is called the Covenant Prayer and was intended for use in Wesley's Covenant Service.

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant, which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.¹²⁴

The three prayers quoted above are my favorites. One I can sing; the others I can pray. They illustrate for me my willingness to cooperate with God in prayer and when I do that, every prayer is answered. These prayers also put on us the responsibility of participating with God in answering the prayers of others. God will always answer our prayers; but He will answer them in His way. His way will be the way of perfect wisdom and perfect love. Our

¹²³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Selected Essays and Addresses*, p. 251.

There have been claims that Reinhold Niebuhr did not write the prayer and that it goes back to 500 C.E., but most scholars believe that Niebuhr is the author. In addition, Niebuhr's daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, exploring the circumstances around which her father wrote the prayer, wrote a book about her father's prayer. The title of her book is, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*.

¹²⁴ *The Book of Worship* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1964), p. 387.

task is to learn how to pray. “Childishness in prayer,” said Harry Emerson Fosdick, “is chiefly evidenced in an overweening desire to beg things from God, and a corresponding failure to desire above all else the friendship of God.”¹²⁵ So, how should we go about praying and seeking friendship with God? E. Stanley Jones suggests five steps towards a real prayer life. I’d like to offer a sixth step.

1. Breathe a prayer for help as you begin life’s most important exercise. You are beginning something, which will make the difference between weakness and strength, between defeat and victory.
2. Remind yourself that God is more anxious than you to set up this relationship of two-way prayer. You do not have to overcome God’s reluctance. You have to lay hold on His highest willingness. All His barriers are down. All you have to do is to take down your barriers. Prayer lets God’s love in.
3. Determine that a vital prayer life is worthwhile—the most worthwhile thing, then you must determine to be patient with your failures here. But remember they will be your failures, not God’s.
4. Decide how much time you can give to this prayer exercise. Begin in a small way and then increase the time. I find I cannot get along with less than an hour and a half a day as a minimum. You may begin with ten minutes.
5. Organize the rest of the day around this prayer time. Don’t let the rest of the day decide this prayer time. Let this prayer time decide the rest of the day. Fix that time and let it stay fixed so that each day you do not have to debate the question.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer and the Secret of Victorious Living* (New York: Association Press, 1919), p. 23.

¹²⁶ E. Stanley Jones, *The Way* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1946), p. 233.

6. Find a quiet place where you can communicate with God in secret. Let your first act of prayer be listening and your second act of prayer submission. Cooperate with God in these special moments, and let him take control of the rest of your life.

EXERCISING THE DISCIPLINE OF SECRET PRAYER

Some years ago, I heard an Old Testament professor lecturing about teaching the Old Testament to children. I have never forgotten his opening story. He said that he had purchased a dog and named him Lucifer. One day some of his students were over at the house and so he demonstrated to them that he had taught Lucifer how to pray. As the students watched the dog sit up and put his paws together, one of them shouted, “He’s not praying, he’s begging.” The professor, whose name I can’t recall, remarked, “They could tell the difference when it was Lucifer.”

Most of us have been driven to what we thought was prayer when it was only begging or bargaining. This shouldn’t discourage us. We all have to start somewhere and I agree with Bonhoeffer’s statement that the poorest mumbling utterance can be better than the best-formulated prayer. I also agree with him when he suggests, “The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.”¹²⁷ That will of course mean that we will have to be exercising the discipline of Bible Study at the same time that we are developing our prayer life.

The elements of worship are also important in the discipline of Secret Prayer. I’ve already mentioned the importance of prayer in hymns. I find the essence of prayer in the hymns; and of course, hymns are part of the discipline of Public Worship. I sometimes wonder what it would be like if we all had our hymnbook memorized. My use of hymns in Secret Prayer prepares me to sing in worship, even though I’m not musically inclined. If we all would come to worship motivated to sing and pray, whether we’re good or not, what a difference it would make to Public Worship. John Vianney compares it to little flames growing into a mighty fire.

¹²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), p. 15.

Private prayer is like straw scattered here and there; if you set it on fire it makes a lot of little flames. But gather these straws into a bundle and light them, and you get a mighty fire.¹²⁸

In the Lord's Prayer we pray for the Kingdom of God to come on earth just as it is in heaven. Martin Luther warned, "His kingdom comes, indeed without our prayers. We pray this petition, however, that it may come among us also."¹²⁹ If we're going to let the Disciples Prayer guide us, we will really pray for God's Kingdom on earth, and what we pray for we might get. Whoever practices the discipline of Secret Prayer will be putting his or her whole life at stake. At the same time, those who learn how to pray will have learned the greatest secret of a holy and happy life.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Elliott Wright, *Holy Company: Christian Heroes and Heroines* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980), p. 66.

¹²⁹ The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Lutheran Church, The Small Catechism.

¹³⁰ William Law, *A Practical Treatise Upon Christian Perfection*, Chapter XXII.

4. HOLY COMMUNION

*While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread,
and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them,
and said, "Take; this is my body."*

*Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks
he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it.
He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant,
which is poured out for many.
Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit
of the vine until that day
when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."*

Mark 14:22-25 (NRSV)

THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The Primary Sacrament

In Protestant congregations there are two sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion. Other words for Holy Communion are the Lord's Supper and the Eucharist. All three of these words have evolved out of Jesus' Last Supper with his twelve disciples. Baptism is the Sacrament that marks entry into the Body of Christ and Holy Communion is the Sacrament of continued involvement in the Body of Christ. Baptism is never to be repeated, while Holy Communion is to be constantly repeated. Participation in Holy Communion is one of the Spiritual Disciplines that should be exercised as frequently as possible.

We call Baptism and Holy Communion Sacraments because Jesus commanded us to be baptized and to be nurtured with bread and wine. It's like being grafted into the Body of Christ (Baptism), where his body and blood will give us life. In the Last Supper Jesus shares bread and wine with his disciples, and says, "this is my body," and "this is my blood."¹³¹ Jesus then says, "this is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the

¹³¹ Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22 and 24; and Luke 22:19-20

forgiveness of sins,” and “do this in remembrance of me”¹³² In the Sacrament of Holy Communion we experience forgiveness and the presence of Christ himself. Holy Communion, then, is one of the means by which we experience divine grace, the undeserved love of God. Our sins are forgiven, and Christ is present with us. We are truly joined to and nurtured in the Body of Christ.

Our memory is to go back further than the Last Supper with Jesus and his disciples. Paul takes us back to our ancestors who were baptized in Moses, who ate the spiritual food (heavenly bread or manna) in the wilderness and drank the spiritual water from the rock, which Moses struck. That rock, says Paul, was Christ.¹³³ Without a doubt, Matthew, Mark, and Luke treat the Last Supper as a Passover meal, which recalls God’s deliverance of his people out of slavery into the wilderness and finally into the Promised Land.

In the Last Supper, Jesus also points his disciples towards the future when he says, “Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”¹³⁴ Meanwhile, the disciples are to exercise the discipline of Holy Communion, remembering the past and anticipating the future Kingdom of God.

Although the Gospel of John says nothing about the institution of the Lord’s Supper, John does portray Jesus claiming to be the bread of life. Jesus invites his listeners in the Synagogue at Capernaum to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because

¹³² Matthew 26:28; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25

¹³³ 1 Corinthians 10:2-4 and 16. The relevant Old Testament passages are Exodus 16:1-36, particularly 16:33.

¹³⁴ Mark 14:25; Matthew 26:29; and Luke 22:18; 1 Corinthians 11:26

of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.¹³⁵

This was a hard teaching for Jewish ears, for they had been taught never to drink blood. Many of Jesus potential disciples turned away and no longer followed him. So, Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”¹³⁶

After the flood, when God renewed his covenant with Noah, he said, “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.”¹³⁷ This taboo against drinking blood was confirmed at the end of the first Christian Conference that took place in Jerusalem. James concludes the Conference with the following statement:

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.”¹³⁸

One of the primary benefits of participating in Holy Communion is the experience of forgiveness, which Jesus promises when he says, “this is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”¹³⁹ The difference of course is that the blood being talked about is the sacrifice of Jesus. Here we run into a major difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. Roman Catholics believe the sacrifice is repeated every time the Sacrament is observed, while, Protestants believe that the sacrifice was made once and for all

¹³⁵ John 6:48-58. The above quote begins with John 6:53 and continues through 6:57.

¹³⁶ John 6:66-68

¹³⁷ Genesis 9:3-4

¹³⁸ Acts 6:19-20

¹³⁹ Matthew 26:28

time in the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross. The sacrifice is not repeated in the observance of Holy Communion, although, grace is imparted to those who participate in the Sacrament.

How is Grace Imparted?

This brings up another important issue. How is grace imparted? In Roman Catholic theology, grace is imparted through the bread and wine, which are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The *substance* of these elements may taste like bread and wine, but in the prayer of consecration they are transformed into flesh and blood. Their *appearance* or *accidents* remain as bread and wine, and they taste like bread and wine. The technical term for this transformation is Transubstantiation.

Although Protestants reject the doctrine of Transubstantiation, Protestants are divided over the alternatives. Lutherans suggest what they call Consubstantiation, which means that the substance of bread and wine coexist with the body and blood of Christ. This means that the substance of bread and wine are not transformed into the body and blood of Christ. On the other extreme would be the Quakers who view the whole universe as Sacramental and see no need for special Sacraments like Baptism and Communion. Close to the Quakers are those Protestants who view the bread and wine as symbols, which communicate divine grace to those who receive them by faith.

Somewhere in the middle of this debate on the Real Presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine is the Anglican or Episcopal Church. Methodism is similar to the Anglican Church, since it grew out of that Church. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism was also an Anglican priest. To Wesley nothing could be more real than the presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine, but it is not to be located in the elements alone. “We freely own,” said Wesley, “that Christ Himself is to be adored in the Lord’s Supper, but that the elements are to be adored, we deny.”¹⁴⁰ Wesley concluded that the Lord’s Supper is a real means of grace, ordained by the Lord himself, bestowing grace and

¹⁴⁰ John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Press, 1951), p. 170.

spiritual sustenance upon those who, in faith, receive it.¹⁴¹ Wesley was merely stating the Anglican theology on the Lord's Supper. Wesley also viewed the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as true communion; and although Wesley had little liking for mysticism, he couldn't evade the mystical element in the Lord's Supper.

Saviour, Thou didst this Mystery give,
That I Thy nature might partake;
Thou biddest me outward signs receive,
One with Thyself my soul to make;
My body, soul, and spirit join
Inseparably one with Thine.¹⁴²

The Practice of Holy Communion

When we come to the practice of Holy Communion in the New Testament, we don't have very much material with which to work. We know that the Last Supper was part of the Jewish Passover Meal, but the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion moved in a different direction. The first place where Holy Communion may have been served is described in Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." We don't know for sure if "the breaking of bread" was an early form of Holy Communion, or if it is simply a reference to a common meal. We do know that Holy Communion did eventually become part of a common meal. We know this from Paul's writings to the congregation in Corinth.

Although Paul doesn't say much about the Lord's Supper, what he does say is important because it is the earliest account that we have of this Sacrament. Paul insists that "the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" ¹⁴³ After sharing the bread and wine with his disciples, Jesus reminded

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 175

¹⁴³ 1 Corinthians 11:23-25

them, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”¹⁴⁴

Paul suggests that this Sacrament has three meanings. First, it is a remembrance of Jesus’ suffering and death on a cross. Secondly, it is a reference to the new covenant being established in and through Jesus’ blood. Thirdly, it is a proclamation of Jesus’ coming again. These three meanings have to do with the past, the present, and the future. Although the past and future are important, more important is the present and what it means. The assumption is that Christ is *present* as we observe the Sacrament. As we partake of the bread and wine, Christ’s body and blood mysteriously flow in us, and we are part of the living Body of Christ. Whether that Real Presence enters into us because the elements of bread and wine have been transformed into the *substance* of Christ’s flesh and blood, or his Real Presence is Spiritual, the idea is the same. The New Covenant is a spiritual Covenant in which God promised to write his Law into our hearts. The prophet Jeremiah saw this coming, and wrote, “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest...for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more.”¹⁴⁵

Although we remember the past and anticipate the future, it is more important to be aware of the Real Presence of Christ, who promises to forgive us of all our sins and incorporate us into his own Body through eating the bread and drinking the wine. Whether his Real Presence is in the elements themselves, co-exist with the elements, or are symbolized by the elements, it is important to recognize that Real Presence of Christ and be transformed by it. This means we have to approach Holy Communion seriously and with reverence.

Approaching Holy Communion with reverence is precisely what Paul found the Christians in Corinth not doing; hence, he writes:

¹⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:26

¹⁴⁵ Jeremiah 31:34

When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat; each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?¹⁴⁶

Like the Last Supper, the Lord's Supper in Corinth seems to be a common meal, in which they also shared the elements of bread and wine. While we don't know precisely when the transition to a liturgy, separated from the common meal, took place, the seeds for that transition existed very early and Paul comes very close to calling for the separation of the Lord's Supper from the common meal. He makes two recommendations to the Corinthian congregation. First, he says, "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves."¹⁴⁷ After examining their motives and behavior, he calls upon them to partake of the elements of bread and wine as a community and as the Body of Christ. "So then," he says, "my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation." It's a sad commentary on the Church that the common meal and the sacramental meal could not be held together.

THE PRACTICAL FOCUS

The Lord's Supper is Indispensable

Martin Luther stated that God chose to declare himself to humanity in three loci of revelation. The first is Christ, in whom the Word was made flesh. The second is Scripture, where the Word uttered is recorded. The third is the Sacrament, in which the Word is manifest in food and drink. In Luther's time *only* the clergy were allowed to drink the wine at the mass. This restriction arose out of the fear that the laity in their clumsiness might spill some of God's blood on the floor. While Luther felt no less reverence for the

¹⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:20-22

¹⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:28-29

Sacrament, he would not safeguard it at the expense of a caste system within the Church. Despite the risk, the cup should be given to all believers. After all, Christ said, “Drink ye all of it.” Catholic interpreters explained these words as addressed only to the Apostles (Priests). Luther agreed, but replied that all believers are priests.¹⁴⁸

As important as the elements of bread and wine were to Luther, he did not believe them to be the actual flesh and blood of Christ. They were not chunks of God fallen like a meteorite from heaven. Luther’s view of the Lord’s Supper required the gathered church of convinced believers, because the Sacrament depends for its efficacy upon the faith of the recipient.¹⁴⁹ Luther believed in frequent Communion, but at the same time, the Sacrament is only for believers.

John Wesley lived in a time of infrequent Communion. Anyone who has read the history of Methodism knows that Wesley believed that the Lord’s Supper was indispensable to the Christian life.¹⁵⁰ One of the derogatory terms aimed at the members of the Holy Club at Oxford University, besides *Methodists* and *Bible Moths*, was *Sacramentalists*. Wesley refused to use the term *frequent* Communion; he called for *constant* Communion.¹⁵¹ The Christian should observe the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as frequently as possible. Why wouldn’t we want to observe this Sacrament frequently? Why not aim at constant Communion? Philip Doddridge answers this question in his hymn, “The King of Heaven His Table Spreads.” The first verse answers the question and the last verse presents us with a challenging invitation:

The King of heaven his table spreads,
And blessings crown the board;

¹⁴⁸ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, MCML), p. 140.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

¹⁵⁰ I would refer the reader to Albert Outler’s book on *John Wesley* and Steve Harper’s book, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition*, p. 36.

¹⁵¹ In Wesley’s time frequent Communion meant once a month.

Not paradise, with all its joys,
 Could such delight afford.
All things are ready, come away,
 Nor weak excuses frame.
Come to your places at the feast,
And bless the founder's name.¹⁵²

The reason for constant Communion has to do with what happens as one partakes of the elements of bread and wine. One encounters the Real Presence of Christ, and is transformed by that presence.

Wesley had a broader understanding of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper than did Luther. If Christ is really present, then why not invite sinners to the table to experience that presence? Wesley called the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper a Converting Ordinance. When he called sinners to the Lord's Table, he did so on the same terms as he called them to the Lord. This does not mean that he allowed all to come, without any attempt at discrimination. While he called everyone to the Lord and to his Feast, he ruthlessly pruned the Societies of unworthy members who, without a class ticket were excluded from Methodist Communion services.¹⁵³

What about children? Were they allowed in Methodist Communion services? The answer to this is, "sometimes." For Wesley it was not the age that counted, but the faith of the would-be communicant. Some children are ready to participate in the Sacrament at nine, and some adults are not ready at seventy.¹⁵⁴ As for Luther, Wesley agreed that the Sacrament depends for its efficacy upon the faith of the recipient. This Sacrament is not for unbelievers, but it is for those who are sincerely seeking to believe. The Lord's Supper is a converting ordinance, where seekers and believers can experience the Real Presence of Christ. Charles Wesley put this beautifully in one of his hymns:

¹⁵² *The Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1964), Number 325.

¹⁵³ John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Press, 1951), p. 56.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122

We need not now go up to heaven,
to bring the long-sought saviour down;
Thou art to all already given,
Thou dost even now Thy banquet crown:
To every faithful soul appear
And show Thy Real Presence here.¹⁵⁵

There is one other issue with which I must deal, and that is the use of wine in the Lord's Supper. Is wine indispensable? The Roman Catholic Church thinks that it is, because not using wine impedes the transubstantiation of the wine into the blood of Christ. A number of Protestant Churches use grape juice instead of wine. This came about in The Methodist Church in 1869, when Thomas Bramwell Welch successfully produced a non-alcoholic wine to be used in the Lord's Supper at the First Methodist Church of Vineland, New Jersey. Dr. Welch, who was a dentist, but also a Communion Steward in his church, became concerned one Sunday when a visitor with a weakness for alcohol took communion, which set him off on a drinking binge. Dr. Welch was upset by this incident and felt that it was wrong to use wine as a Sacrament in the church. He set out to find a substitute, a non-alcoholic wine for Holy Communion. He succeeded, but many of his fellow parishioners preferred wine. As the temperance movement grew, so did the use of Welch's non-alcoholic wine, better known today as Welch's Grape Juice.¹⁵⁶

Some Protestant Churches use both wine and grape juice in Holy Communion, giving parishioners a choice. I don't think wine is indispensable in the Lord's Supper and prefer grape juice or non-alcoholic wine. While there is nothing wrong with using wine, there are people who misuse alcoholic beverages. Since I don't believe in transubstantiation, I don't believe that the use of wine in Holy Communion is indispensable. Besides, Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee.

¹⁵⁵ John Lawson, *The Christian Year With Charles Wesley*
(London: Epworth Press), p. 44.

¹⁵⁶ See the article on Thomas Bramwell Welch in Wikipedia on the Internet.

The Benefit of the Real Presence

The Last Supper consists of three parts. It is a *memorial* of Christ's Sacrifice, an *experience* of Christ's Presence, and an *anticipation* of Christ's Kingdom. Each one of these three parts could be studied and defined for a better understanding of what happens when we participate in the Lord's Supper, but I would rather experience it than understand it.¹⁵⁷ How do we go about experiencing the Real Presence of Christ? The experience begins with faith in what Christ has done on our behalf in the past. Thomas Cotterill put this first part into a hymn, which welcomes those guests, who approach the sacred feast with humble and contrite hearts:

In memory of the Saviour's love,
We keep the sacred feast,
Where every humble, contrite heart
Is made a welcome guest.¹⁵⁸

There is something sacramental about breaking bread with one another. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to have dinner with someone who is angry with you, or with whom you are angry? You either leave the table or reconcile; otherwise, the dinner does not go well. This is what Paul is talking about to the Corinthians, who are in a bitter dispute over leadership in the congregation. They will be unable to experience the Real Presence of Christ until they approach the Lord's Super with humble and contrite hearts. When they can do this, then they will experience the Real Presence of Christ and Divine Forgiveness at the same time. Reginald Heber illustrates this in his hymn for Holy Communion:

¹⁵⁷ I believe it was John Calvin who first made this point, with which I agree.

¹⁵⁸ *The Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1964), Number 319.

Bread of the world in mercy broken
wine of the soul in mercy shed,
by whom the words of life were spoken,
and in whose death our sins are dead.¹⁵⁹

The greatest benefit of the Real Presence of Christ is the experience of forgiveness, but that experience depends on our willingness to forgive. Jesus stated this clearly in the Disciples' Prayer, where he said, "And forgive us our *debts* (sins), as we also have forgiven *our debtors* (those who have sinned against us)." ¹⁶⁰ While Jesus may not be talking specifically about the Lord's Supper, the same principle applies. Just replace the word "altar" with "the Lord's Supper" and the invitation to the Lord's Supper becomes clear.

So when you are offering your gift at the *altar* (or the Lord's Supper), if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the *altar* (table) and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and *offer your gift* (observe the Lord's Supper).¹⁶¹

The Invitation to the Lord's Supper in The United Methodist Church makes the same requirement for participation:

You that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins,
and are in love and charity with your neighbors,
and intend to lead a new life,
following the commandments of God,
and walking from henceforth in his holy ways:
Draw near with faith,
and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort,
and make your humble confession to almighty God.

In every congregation I've served, there have been individuals who have had great difficulty with Holy Communion. Some of them felt unworthy of participating, and others were horrified at

¹⁵⁹ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), Number 624.

¹⁶⁰ Matthew 6:12

¹⁶¹ Matthew 5:23-24

the thought of drinking blood and eating flesh. None of them were guilty of the behavior Paul found in the Corinthian congregation. This doesn't mean that we don't have people responding to the invitation of Holy Communion who are indeed unworthy, We probably do have people partaking of Holy Communion who should ask themselves whether they are ready to repent of their sins and ready to seek peace with one another. If they are not willing to fulfill these basic requirements for Holy Communion, then they are not ready and should wait until they can respond appropriately to the invitation. Taking Holy Communion is serious business. We receive the Body of Christ in the elements of bread and wine to become the Body of Christ in the world. This Sacrament is for believers and those seekers who are moving towards faith.

EXERCISING THE DISCIPLINE OF HOLY COMMUNION

C. S. Lewis is right. You can't exercise Holy Communion without going to Public Worship.¹⁶² Is he right? I agree that it is inappropriate to celebrate Holy Communion alone. This is not a Spiritual Discipline for private devotion, even though every Christian is a priest. Luther believed in the priesthood of all believers and insisted that every Christian had the right to receive both the bread and the wine. Wesley believed in constant Communion, but how can constant Communion be offered? If everyone is a priest, why should this be difficult? Many congregations today send laity out with the elements of the Lord's Supper to shut-ins. Couldn't laity, who are also priests, serve Holy Communion in small groups so that everyone could exercise this Spiritual Discipline weekly if not more frequently?

While some congregations offer Holy Communion every week, the congregation, which I attend offers it during the Sunday school hour. One has to choose between taking Holy Communion and attending Sunday school. If we are all priests, every small group should have the right to observe the Lord's Supper without requiring a clergy person to administer it. It wouldn't be all that complicated to train persons to administer Holy Communion in

¹⁶² C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (The Trustees of the Estate of C. S. Lewis, 1970), pp. 61-62.

small groups, and it would make weekly communion possible for everyone.

What about Sunday morning? Isn't this the best place to make Holy Communion available for most people? Yes and No. Sunday morning makes Holy Communion available for those who aren't in small groups, but it is also a place and time where a subtle pressure is placed on everyone to go forward to participate, even those who are not ready. I personally prefer the intimacy of celebrating Holy Communion in a small group. The temptation of celebrating Holy Communion in a small group is that it will not be taken seriously and elements of the service will be omitted. The indispensable parts of the Holy Communion Service are simple and as follows:

1. The Invitation
2. The Confession of Sin
3. The Prayer for Pardon
4. The Words of Assurance
5. The Great Thanksgiving
6. Giving the Bread and Cup
7. The Blessing

While a service in a small group will be shorter than a full service in the sanctuary, it can be just as meaningful, if not more meaningful. Participants in small groups know one another.

I don't mean to leave the impression that Holy Communion is only for believers. It is also for those who are seeking faith. I pointed out earlier that Wesley invited sinners to the Lord's Table on the same terms as he invited them to the Lord. Like Paul, he just didn't want to see the Sacrament abused. Wesley believed that one single instance of conversion at the Lord's Supper was enough to overthrow the assumption that it is only for good Christians. Two events convinced him. The first was the way in which Jesus offered the bread and wine to his disciples, one of which was about to betray him. Wesley's comment on this was: "Our Lord commanded those very men who were then unconverted, who had not yet received the Holy Ghost, who (in the full sense of the word) were not believers, to do this 'in remembrance' of him." The second example was Susannah Wesley, his mother, who came to Christ as a result of her experience at Holy Communion. She had an experience very similar to her son's experience at Aldersgate when

his heart was strangely warmed.¹⁶³ These two events, along with some others, caused Wesley to define this Spiritual Discipline as a “converting ordinance.”

I am not advocating the misuse of the Lord’s Supper, only the opening of it to those who do not yet believe and are ready to seek faith. Wesley’s advice was, “Ought every unbeliever to pray or communicate? Yes, ‘Ask and it (faith) shall be given you.’ And if you believe Christ died for the guilty, helpless sinners, then eat that bread and drink of the cup.”¹⁶⁴ The invitation is open to all who seek faith through this Spiritual Discipline, no matter how little they have.

Come to the Supper, come;
Sinners, there still is room;
Jesus gives the general word:
Share the monumental Feast,
Eat the Supper of your Lord.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Nehemiah Curnock, Ed. *The Journal of John Wesley* (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), II. P. 361.

¹⁶⁴ John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Press, 1951), p. 106.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106

5. SECRET GIVING

*So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you,
as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets,
so that they may be praised by others.*

Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

*But when you give alms,
do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
so that your alms may be done in secret,
and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Matthew 6:2-4 (NRSV)

THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The Tithe

To my knowledge Wesley doesn't name stewardship as one of the Ordinances of God or as a Spiritual Discipline, but he certainly has something to say about it. I'm going to deal with Wesley's ideas on stewardship later. For now I want to begin by dealing with what the Bible has to say about stewardship, which I have named Secret Giving.

The first person to pay a tithe in the Bible was Abraham. When Lot was captured in a battle, Abraham liberated him. Melchizedek, King and Priest of Salem (Jerusalem) heard about Abraham's victories, and so he went out with bread and wine to bless him:

He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand."
And Abram gave him one tenth of everything.

Abraham's tithe came out of the booty he had taken in his battles against Chedorlaomer and the kings who were allied with him. At first Melchizedek did not want to accept the tithe, but Abraham

insisted on giving it to him. Abraham did not want anyone to think that Melchizedek had made him rich.¹⁶⁶

The second mention of a tithe can be found in the story of Jacob when he stops at Bethel for the night and takes a stone for his pillow. He has a religious experience, which causes him to do three things: (1) he built an altar, (2) he said, “the LORD shall be my God,” and (3) he offered one tenth, to God. The story does not say how the tithe was used, but a religious motivation and intent are present. Unlike Abraham, Jacob is not sharing one tenth of the booty from battle. The one tenth probably came from the produce of the land. The story of Jacob follows:

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you.”¹⁶⁷

While the tithe is first mentioned in the story of Abraham and Melchizedek, and then in the story of Jacob, it has not yet been made into a law that required everyone to give one tenth of their resources or income for religious purposes. One of the most interesting stories in the Bible about giving can be found in the Book of Exodus where Moses asks the people to make voluntary contributions for the construction of God’s sanctuary (tabernacle). Nothing is said about tithing nor is any individual goal mentioned. It would be nice if this story could be repeated today.

¹⁶⁶ Genesis 14:17-23 and Hebrews 7:1-2

¹⁶⁷ Genesis 28:16-22

Moses then called Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful one to whom the LORD had given skill, everyone whose heart was stirred to come to do the work; and they received from Moses all the freewill offerings that the Israelites had brought for doing the work on the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning, so that all the artisans who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task being performed, and said to Moses, “The people are bringing much more than enough for doing the work that the LORD has commanded us to do.” So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp: “No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.” So the people were restrained from bringing; for what they had already brought was more than enough to do all the work.¹⁶⁸

The development of the tithe gets complicated in the rest of the Old Testament. When the Israelites enter the Promised Land the tribe of Levi does not inherit any land, and so the other tribes are expected to support the Levites, the tabernacle, and eventually the temple in Jerusalem. King Hezekiah was the next major figure to mention the tithe. He called upon the people to tithe, and they obeyed.

He commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem to give the portion due to the priests and the Levites, so that they might devote themselves to the law of the LORD. As soon as the word spread, the people of Israel gave in abundance the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, honey, and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything. The people of Israel and Judah who lived in the cities of Judah also brought in the tithe of cattle and sheep, and the tithe of the dedicated things that had been consecrated to the LORD their God, and laid them in heaps. In the third month they began to pile up the heaps, and finished them in the seventh month. When Hezekiah and the officials came and saw the heaps, they blessed the

¹⁶⁸ Exodus 36:2-7

LORD and his people Israel. Hezekiah questioned the priests and the Levites about the heaps. The chief priest Azariah, who was of the house of Zadok, answered him, “Since they began to bring the contributions into the house of the LORD, we have had enough to eat and have plenty to spare; for the LORD has blessed his people, so that we have this great supply left over.”¹⁶⁹

Things didn’t always go this easy. After the second temple was built, the people were not so enthusiastic about tithing. The Kingdom they anticipated had not come, and the economic situation was bad and getting worse. Social life began to break down, and family life was plagued by adultery and divorce. Dishonesty was viewed as the key to success in business. The rich oppressed the poor and God appeared either distant or uninterested. Instead of paying their tithe to support the temple, the priests, and the Levites, the people withheld their tithe. In this setting God spoke through his prophet Malachi:

For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, “How shall we return?” Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, “How are we robbing you?” In your tithes and offerings!¹⁷⁰

After informing the people that, according to God, they have been robbing God, Malachi, challenges the people to give their full tithe and experience divine blessings.

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field

¹⁶⁹ 2 Chronicles 31:4-10

¹⁷⁰ Malachi 3:6-8

shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.¹⁷¹

Much more could be said about tithing in the Old Testament, but two things are clear. There seems to be a blessing for those who give abundantly and God seems to expect the tithe. The Psalmist seems to sum it up:

I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are ever giving liberally and lending, and their children become a blessing.¹⁷²

Beyond the Tithe

Does Jesus talk about tithing? The answer is, “Yes,” but more needs to be said. Jesus only mentions tithing in two places and in both places he criticizes the Scribes and Pharisees who went beyond tithing, but fell short in the weightier matters of the law.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you **tithe** mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.¹⁷³

But woe to you Pharisees! For you **tithe** mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others.¹⁷⁴

The weightier matters of the law include justice, mercy, faith, and love of God. The Scribes and Pharisees tithed ten percent of their crops and domesticated animals according to the Law, but they took it a step further.¹⁷⁵ They expanded the Law to include things

¹⁷¹ Malachi 3:10-12

¹⁷² Psalm 37:25-26

¹⁷³ Matthew 23:23

¹⁷⁴ Luke 11:42

¹⁷⁵ Leviticus 27:30-32

that weren't in the Law, such as "mint and rue and herbs of all kinds." They went beyond the tithe with the little things, and Jesus does not object. He only wants them to include the weightier matters of the Law as well.

One day Jesus and his disciples were watching the rich people put their gifts into the treasury. After they saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins, Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."¹⁷⁶ Jesus didn't tell the woman to put less in the treasury, nor did he say that the rich should put more in the treasury. For all we know they might have been tithing more than ten percent of their income, but they were giving "out of their abundance." Jesus doesn't even accuse the rich of showing off in their giving. They are not like the Pharisee in another of Jesus' parables, who says, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." None of these things, including the tithing, justified this Pharisee. When the rich tithe, they are giving out of their abundance, which won't help them to enter the Kingdom of God. They were just doing the minimum, while the poor widow was doing the maximum out of love for God.

Jesus does not ask us to do the maximum, unless of course, money is blinding our sight. There was one occasion in the New Testament when Jesus did ask a rich young ruler to move from the tithe to the maximum gift. The conversation begins innocently enough, when the rich young ruler asks a spiritual question. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers his question first by informing him that God alone is good, and if he wants eternal life, all he has to do is keep the commandments. Before Jesus has a chance to name all of the commandments, the rich young ruler interrupts, "I have kept all these since my youth." Expecting Jesus to congratulate him and welcome him into the Kingdom of Heaven, he is in for the surprise of his life. Instead of praising him for keeping the commandments,

¹⁷⁶ Luke 21:1-4 and Mark 12:41-44

Jesus presents him with the ultimate test: “There is still one thing lacking Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” The story has a sad ending. When the rich young ruler heard this, “he became sad; for he was very rich.”¹⁷⁷ Jesus understood that where a person’s treasure is, the heart is sure to follow.¹⁷⁸

The above story is followed with a conversation between Jesus and his disciples on the difficulty of the rich gaining entrance into the Kingdom. Jesus begins the conversation by saying, “Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.” Those who heard this asked, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus answered, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” At this point Peter says, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you.” Peter must have felt rich and was wondering if there was any hope for him. Jesus comforts him, saying, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”¹⁷⁹

Jesus’ teaching on giving is simple. Don’t brag about your giving, but give in secret, for God knows what you are giving and he also knows your motivation for giving. Giving is a Spiritual Discipline, which we all need to exercise. No one is asked to give everything unless he or she is blinded by money. Giving more than a tithe is not expected, but those who give much more than the tithe are exercising the Spiritual Gift of giving. They too must give in humility and with the right motivation. Jesus’ teaching on Secret Giving can be summed up in his following statement:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not

¹⁷⁷ Luke 18:18-23

¹⁷⁸ Matthew 6:21

¹⁷⁹ Luke 18:25-30

break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.¹⁸⁰

The Apostle Paul adds one more statement on giving that comes from the lips of Jesus, but is not found in any of the four Gospels. Paul quotes the verse as he says goodbye to the Ephesian Elders.

I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed.¹⁸¹

THE PRACTICAL FOCUS

Spiritual Discipline or Spiritual Gift?

The first question to be answered is whether giving is a Spiritual Discipline or a Spiritual Gift. C. Peter Wagner, in his book, *Your Spiritual Gifts*, indicates that giving is not a gift unless the giving is considerable. The tithe is the minimum gift a Christian should give, not the goal.

As I read the Scriptures, I have to conclude that a tithe, meaning 10 percent of one's income off the top, is the bare minimum for exercising the role of giving. I am not ordinarily legalistic in my views of Christian behavior, but I have to say that I believe that anyone who is under the 10 percent figure is engaging in a form of spiritual cheating. Some cheat the I.R.S. regularly and get away with it. No one cheats God and gets away with it. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7).

¹⁸⁰ Matthew 6:19-21

¹⁸¹ Acts 20:33-36

I have come to agree with Wagner only I would say that those who give less than ten percent are on spiritual welfare.¹⁸² Wagner admits that he does not have the Spiritual Gift of giving. He and his wife have gone a little beyond tithing, but as he stated above, they have only gone a little over the minimum. They give 15 percent, which is not the goal that someone would set if giving were their Spiritual Gift. I have yet to meet a Christian who started to tithe who then went back to not tithing. Giving at this level is a Spiritual Discipline, which should be exercised by all Christians.

Wagner names R.G. Letourneau, the Texas industrialist, as having the Spiritual Gift of giving. The key question is described in Letourneau's autobiography. In it he said, "The question is not how much of my money I give to God, but rather how much of God's money I keep." He answered the question in his life by turning 90 percent of the assets of his company over to his Christian foundation, and then he and his wife gave 90 percent of the income that was realized from the share of the business that they kept.¹⁸³ Letourneau considered himself to be God's business partner. He clearly had the Spiritual Gift of giving.

One doesn't have to be wealthy to have the Spiritual Gift of giving. The poor widow observed by Jesus who gave two copper coins out of her poverty, had the Spiritual Gift of giving. She gave all she had to live on.¹⁸⁴ One might say that she had the Spiritual Gift of giving and of poverty. Perhaps she didn't want to be poor, but she did want to give. In the example of John Wesley we have someone who chose both poverty and giving. Wagner insists that Wesley had the hyphenated gift of giving-voluntary poverty. While Wesley was alive, he discovered that he could live on 28£ a year, and from that time on he gave every penny over that away. His guiding principle was, "Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can. When Wesley died he left a well-worn frock coat

¹⁸² C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1979), p. 93.

¹⁸³ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1979), p. 95.

¹⁸⁴ Luke 21:1-4

and two silver teaspoons in his estate. During his lifetime he gave more than \$150,000 to the Lord's work.¹⁸⁵

Do things like this still happen today? Some time ago, I read the story of the conversion of Asa Candler, of Coca Cola fame. When he was asked if he were a capitalist, he replied, "I was a capitalist; now I am a Christian." Then he went on to explain: "I have only one desire, to be wholly God's. Money is not an end in itself; it is a means, an instrument. We were made, not to be mastered by money, but to make it serve the purposes of God." Candler then went on to draw a contrast between capitalism and Christianity.

Capitalism seeks the increase of mammon; Christianity, the increase of God. Yet capitalism teaches one great truth—to God we are always individuals, and always individually responsible for our stewardship of his gifts. I plan to provide for my children; beyond this, it is my purpose to give everything to the service of my Master, and to give all I own away before I die. I want no part of it. Last year I gave away seventy-five per cent of my income.¹⁸⁶

Like Wesley, Asa Candler possessed the Spiritual Gift of giving, but unlike Wesley, I don't think that he possessed the Spiritual Gift of poverty. He could still live a comfortable life on the twenty-five percent that he kept.

I once served a three-point circuit in the mountains of North Georgia. Mary Logan was a member of one of the three congregations, and Mary was poor, living only on her Social Security check. Her husband had died and she had a son with serious handicapping conditions. In spite of all this, Mary Logan tithed. A few of us thought that Mary didn't need to give anything to the church. She should keep everything she has because she needs everything simply to survive. When I told Mary the *good*

¹⁸⁵ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1979), p. 97.

¹⁸⁶ David Wesley Soper, ed., *These Found the Way: 13 Converts to Protestant Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), p. 60.

news that she didn't need to make any more contributions to the church, I was totally surprised by her response. She said, "How dare you deprive me of the only integrity I have." Mary continued to tithe, and I was very much aware of the sacrifice she was making. Part of my salary was coming out of the tithe of someone who insisted on giving her share. I truly believe that her sacrifice made me a better pastor. Maybe Mary didn't have the Spiritual Gift of giving, but she was certainly exercising the Spiritual Discipline of giving.

How Much Shall We Give?

If we could get all Christians to tithe, most of the financial problems of our churches would be over. Harold Lindsell notes that the Jews under Law do better than Christians under Grace. Isn't it strange that Christians under Grace are so slothful?¹⁸⁷

How much should a Christian give? This is not an easy question to answer. While I do believe that the Bible teaches tithing, tithing is not the goal, but the minimum that a Christian should give. C.S. Lewis expresses my struggle with how much to give:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little."¹⁸⁸

While I do believe that tithing is the absolute minimum a Christian ought to give, I cannot tell anyone how much they should give, nor is it clear to me when a person exercises the Spiritual Discipline of giving or when a person exercises the Spiritual Gift of giving. On the extremes it's easy, but in that vast middle, it's difficult. I do know that the person, who possesses the Spiritual Gift of giving, loves to give. I'd like to think that we, who exercise the Spiritual Discipline of giving, also enjoy giving. I find myself

¹⁸⁷ Harold Lindsell, *Christianity Today*, February 15, 1985, p. 30.

¹⁸⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1952), pp. 81-82.

in agreement with the following passage that comes out of the Apocrypha:

If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. So you will be laying up a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity. For charity delivers from death and keeps you from entering the darkness; and for all who practice it charity is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High.¹⁸⁹

Of all the authors on the subject of giving, two have been most helpful to me. The first is E. Stanley Jones, who suggests two simple steps.

1. I have decided that God is owner. “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” I have been acting as if I were owner, in other words, as if I were God. But I’m not God; God is God. I abdicate; He takes the throne. God is owner, and I am owner. “The government shall be upon his shoulder” —not mine. I obey. That relationship is pegged down. That is our starting point from which we work out.
2. I will set aside one tenth of my income as acknowledgment of His ownership. This does not discharge my total obligation in the matter, but it does set aside a portion as a symbol, a symbol of God’s total ownership. Just as one pays rent as acknowledgment of the ownership of the owner, so I pay one tenth as acknowledgment of God’s ownership over the remaining nine tenths.

The above two steps do not give the total answer to the question, but they do give a starting point that’s crystal clear. Jones goes on to say that the remaining nine tenths still belong to God and must be used under his guidance. God is not looking for a

¹⁸⁹ Tobit 4:8-10

chance to impoverish us, but to enrich us. So we look to God for His guidance, not grudgingly, but gladly.¹⁹⁰

Whether we have giving as our Spiritual Gift or as our Spiritual Discipline, the motivation ought to be the same. We should be joyful givers. To come to this point in the discipline of giving, we need to learn from those who possess the Spiritual Gift of giving. John Wesley possessed the Spiritual Gift of giving, and he left us with three simple principles that can guide our exercising of the Spiritual Discipline of giving. Let's look at those principles, plus a brief explanation of each one, and then a summary of those principles in Wesley's own words.

The first of these is "Gain all you can!" "But this it is certain we ought not to do; we ought not to gain money at the expense of life, nor at the expense of our health." "Some employments are absolutely and totally unhealthy; as those which imply the dealing much with arsenic or other equally hurtful minerals, or the breathing an air tainted with streams of melting lead, which must at length destroy the firmest constitution." We are to gain all we can "without hurting our mind, any more than our body." "Therefore, we may not engage or continue in any sinful trade; any that is contrary to the law of God, or our country." Finally we are "to gain all we can, without hurting our neighbor." This we cannot do if we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Included in this is Wesley's objection to selling spirituous liquors, which may injure our neighbor's body. He recognizes that there might be some use for them in medicine, although, there would rarely be an occasion for them.¹⁹¹ With these cautions and restrictions observed, Wesley concludes, that with respect to money, we should gain all we can by honest industry.

"Having gained all you can, by honest wisdom, and unwearied diligence, the second rule of Christian prudence is, 'Save all you can!'" Do not throw your precious talent into the sea. Do not throw it away in idle expenses. This principle has to do with frugality.

¹⁹⁰ E. Stanley Jones, *The Way* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 175-176.

¹⁹¹ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1964), pp. 579-581.

Wesley advises, “Do not waste any part of so precious a talent, merely in gratifying the desires of the flesh; in procuring the pleasures of sense, of whatever kind, particularly, in enlarging the pleasure of tasting. I do not mean, avoid gluttony and drunkenness only.... Cut off all this expense! Despise delicacy and variety, and be content with what plain nature requires.” Wesley continues, “Do not waste any part of so precious a talent, merely in gratifying the desire of the eye, by superfluous or expensive apparel, or by needless ornaments. Waste no part of it in curiously adorning your houses; in superfluous or expensive furniture; in costly pictures, painting, gilding, books; in elegant rather than useful gardens.”¹⁹² In other words, don’t spend money on things you don’t need, but save it so that you can give it away, which is Wesley’s third stewardship principle.

Having first gained all we can, and secondly, having saved all we can, we are then to give all we can. God has placed us in this world not as a proprietor, but as a steward. He has entrusted to us goods of various kinds, but the sole property of these still rests with Him. This does not mean that we have to give our whole living. Wesley states that we are first to “provide things needful for yourself; food to eat, raiment to put on, whatever nature moderately requires for preserving the body in health and strength. Secondly provide these for your wife, your children, your servants, or any others who pertain to your household. If, when this is done, there be an overplus left, then ‘do good to them that are of the household of faith.’ If there be an overplus still, ‘as you have opportunity, do good unto all men.’”¹⁹³

Wesley certainly expects one to live frugally enough that there will be plenty left over to give to others in need. He even expects that Christians would exceed the tithe in their giving. He sums up his three stewardship principles as follows:

Gain all you can, without hurting either yourself or your neighbor, in soul or body, by applying hereto with

¹⁹² John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1964), pp. 583.

¹⁹³ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1964), pp. 586..

unintermitted diligence, and with all the understanding which God has given you; —save all you can, by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire; to gratify either the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life; waste nothing, living or dying, on sin or folly, whether for yourself or your children; —and then give all you can, or in other words, give all you have to God. Do not stint yourself like a Jew rather than a Christian to this or that proportion. Render unto God not a tenth, not a third, not half, but all that is God's, be it more or less, by employing all on yourself, your household, the household of faith and all mankind in such a manner, that you may give a good account of your stewardship...when the Lord cometh with all his saints.¹⁹⁴

EXERCISING THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF GIVING

My conclusion is that Christians ought to give as much as they can, with the tithe being their minimum gift. There is no single goal for us to aim at, other than to keep on exercising the Spiritual Discipline of giving. We may have to do this by living more frugally and using our money more efficiently. If we don't enjoy giving, then we have neither the Spiritual Discipline of giving nor the Spiritual Gift of giving. If that is the case, then we need to practice this discipline until we begin to feel good about it.

Some time ago I read a story about Mother Teresa, who was speaking in the Los Angeles area. Attracted by the spiritual power, love, and inner peace that emanated from Mother Teresa, Dr. Gerald Jampolski, a physician, wanted to travel with her to Mexico, which was the next stop on her journey. "When I'm near you," said Dr. Jampolski, "I feel the presence of God." Mother Teresa smiled and replied, "Dr. Jampolski, I do not object to your joining me, but you said you wanted to experience inner peace. Find out how much it costs to fly to Mexico and back. Give that money to feed and clothe someone in need, and you will find the inner peace you seek." Dr. Jampolski took Mother Teresa's

¹⁹⁴ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1964), pp. 587-586.

suggestion, and he discovered that she was right.¹⁹⁵ To find peace and enjoyment in giving, one has to exercise the Spiritual Discipline of giving beyond one's own family, even one's own faith community. Our gifts need to penetrate the entire world.

When one looks at how well people are exercising this discipline of spiritual giving in the various Christian Denominations, one can only conclude, not very well. Members of the Roman Catholic Church give approximately 2.1% of their income. Members of most the mainline Churches give somewhere between 2 and 3% of their income. Members of the Assemblies of God give 5.25% of their income.¹⁹⁶ The Assemblies of God stand at the top of the list, but even they fall far short of the tithe as a minimum gift. I realize that these statistics don't tell the whole story. We are all bombarded for charitable gifts from many other sources besides the church, and these gifts should be counted as part of our tithe.

It seems to me that if everyone contributed 5% of their income to their church, most of the church's financial expenses would be easily covered. We could then contribute towards other nonprofit agencies that have similar concerns, many of which are supported by the churches. Last year my wife and I contributed to a dozen other causes, all of which are consistent with the mission of our church. We no longer calculate just what percentage we give. We just make sure that we have gone beyond the tithe and that's where we find the greatest joy in giving. We do not have the Spiritual Gift of giving, but we are doing our best to exercise our Spiritual Discipline of giving.

I would suggest that congregations recognize the need for their members to contribute to other causes than their particular budget. Ask people to give half of their tithe to the budget and encourage them to give the other half to other causes. This could be done on one Sunday, when people are asked to make a pledge to both. A

¹⁹⁵ I read this story in a publication entitled, "Windows to Truth," April/May/June, 1989.

¹⁹⁶ I obtained the statistics on percentage of giving from the web site, *Generous Giving*, which lists the giving for most of the Denominations in the United States.

mission fair could be set up in the fellowship hall and people could visit the various displays and make pledges to them. The gifts could be paid directly to the various missions, saving the church treasure time by not running the gifts through the church books. When you give to many causes, no one knows how much you're giving, including yourself.

What about Secret Giving? Isn't that where we began with this chapter? Like Secret Prayer, we are not to brag about our giving. There's nothing wrong with giving one's church an estimate of giving, but one shouldn't go around bragging about it, like the Pharisee did in one of Jesus' parables. Once you have been touched by divine grace, you will cry with Isaac Watts:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), Number 298 and 299.

6. SECRET FASTING

*And whenever you fast, do not look dismal,
like the hypocrites,
for they disfigure their faces so as to show others
that they are fasting.
Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.*

*But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face,
so that your fasting may be seen not by others
but by your Father who is in secret;
and your Father who is in secret will reward you.*

Matthew 6:16-18 (NRSV)

THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Voluntary and Involuntary Fasting

Of all the Spiritual Disciplines, Fasting and Abstinence is least practiced among Protestants. There is little about Fasting and Abstinence in the Mosaic Law, or in the entire Pentateuch.¹⁹⁸ One could say that Moses fasted involuntarily on Mount Sinai when the LORD instructed him to write the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets. For forty days and nights Moses ate no bread nor did he drink any water.¹⁹⁹

The first person in the Old Testament to voluntarily fast was David, upon the death of the child he fathered with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. When the child became ill, David pleaded with God for the child's life. He fasted, and lay all night on the ground. When his servants informed him that the child had died, David rose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes. He then went into the house of the LORD and worshipped. After worship, he went to his own home and had his servants set food before him, and he ate. His servants were surprised by his activity,

¹⁹⁸ The first five books, Genesis through Deuteronomy, make up the Pentateuch.

¹⁹⁹ Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 9:9

and asked him, “What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive; but when the child died, you rose and ate food.” David replied, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said ‘Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me, and the child may live.’ But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”²⁰⁰ David’s voluntary fast lasted for seven days.

The next major involuntary fast was that of Elijah, who fled for his life from Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah fled a day’s journey into the wilderness and sat down under a broom tree and prayed that he might die. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” After eating, Elijah ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and nights to Horeb, the mount of God. In that place he found a cave, where he spent the night. In the morning God revealed himself to Elijah not in an earthquake or fire, but in the sound of sheer silence, The LORD then assured Elijah that he had seven thousand faithful followers, and there was plenty of work for Elijah to do.²⁰¹

Fasting doesn’t seem to play much of a role among the prophets, who are more concerned with justice than they are with prayer and fasting. As Jeremiah announced the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, there was an attempt to call for a fast before the LORD in the fifth year of King Jehoiakim.²⁰² The hope was that the people would repent and Jerusalem would be saved. A ban was placed on Jeremiah preventing him from speaking, and so he wrote his message on a scroll and had Baruch read the message. Eventually the message made it to the ears of King Jehoiakim, who burned the various sections as they were read. The fast failed to turn things around.²⁰³ Jerusalem’s doom was sealed.

²⁰⁰ 2 Samuel 12:16-23

²⁰¹ 1 Kings 19:1-18

²⁰² 605 B.C.E.

²⁰³ Jeremiah 36:9-26

After Jerusalem was destroyed, another prophet emerged. His name was Zechariah, and during his time they were rebuilding the temple. A delegation from Bethel went to Jerusalem to ask the priests, now that the temple was being rebuilt, could the fasting cease? The question is never answered directly, but we learn a little about the purpose of fasting. Fasting is not done to please God, but to make his people aware of God's ways. Fasting can never be a substitute for righteous living. Zechariah ends his prophecy on a note of joy and gladness for the coming age. God has promised to return to Jerusalem and his people will return from the East and West. Both the old and the young will live together in harmony with one another and with the Lord. As this happens fasting will be transformed from sadness to joy. "Thus says the LORD of hosts:" says Zechariah, "the fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful festivals for the house of Judah: therefore love truth and peace."²⁰⁴

Fasting Redefined

Third Isaiah lived about the same time as Zechariah.²⁰⁵ He redefined the very meaning of fasting. One cannot fast and be involved with injustice. Such fasting blocks effective prayer. The kind of fasting that the LORD approves of is expressed in social concerns and in the right observance of the Sabbath. Micah and Matthew reinforce Third Isaiah's concept of the proper relationship between fasting, true worship, and good works. Faith, which is not expressed in good works, according to James, is insufficient.²⁰⁶ Those who fast and worship by expressing concern for the oppressed and hungry will become a bright shining light in the darkness. The Sabbath cannot be left out, so, I'd like to quote Third Isaiah on his redefinition of the Fast and then what he says about the Sabbath. He wants to keep them together.

²⁰⁴ Zechariah 8:19 (Read all of chapters 7 and 8.) Zechariah was prophesying around 520-518 B.C.E.

²⁰⁵ Third Isaiah was prophesying around 520 to 450 B.C.E.

²⁰⁶ Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 25:31-46; and James 1:27

Fasting

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, “Here I am.”²⁰⁷

The Sabbath

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests,
or pursuing your own affairs;
then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.²⁰⁸

Before moving on to the New Testament, I’d like to mention the angel, Raphael’s advice to Tobias. “Prayer with fasting,” he said, “is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than wealth with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold.”²⁰⁹ We

²⁰⁷ Isaiah 58:6-9

²⁰⁸ Isaiah 58:13-14

²⁰⁹ Tobit 12:8

just need to remember that fasting, like giving, is supposed to be done in secret. We don't brag about either one.

Fasting and Jesus

When we examine fasting in the New Testament, we come first to the involuntary fasting of Jesus. Following his baptism he faces forty days and forty nights of three temptations in the wilderness.²¹⁰ The temptations could be described as economic (turning stones into bread), religious (jumping off the pinnacle of the temple), and political (gaining the kingdoms of the world by bowing down before the tempter).²¹¹ Fasting certainly helped Jesus in resisting the temptation to make the means more important than the goal. He does perform the miracle of the loaves and fishes. He does perform all kinds of miracles, and he will become the King of kings and Lord of lords without making the means more important than the goal. His methods are consistent with his goals.

If fasting was so effective in facing the powers of evil, why didn't Jesus use fasting as a method with his disciples? The disciples of John the Baptist certainly wondered enough to ask the question. "Why," they asked, "do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."²¹² The Pharisees fasted twice a week, and I presume that the disciples of John the Baptist did the same.²¹³ While I can recognize that the disciples might not need to fast as long as they have Jesus with them, at the same time I would think that Jesus might want to teach them about fasting. After all, he criticizes them for failing to heal a boy with serious seizures.²¹⁴

Although I have usually tied fasting in with prayer, perhaps that's not what Jesus was doing. He indicates that the disciples could not heal the boy with seizures because they were lacking in

²¹⁰ Matthew 4:2; Mark 1:13; and Luke 4:2

²¹¹ Matthew 4:1-11

²¹² Matthew 9:14-15; Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35

²¹³ Luke 18:12

²¹⁴ Mark 9:14-29

faith and prayer.²¹⁵ Although the King James Version of the Bible says “by prayer and fasting,” the newer translations leave out “fasting.” I noted previously that Third Isaiah’s redefinition of fasting was consistent with Jesus’ teaching. Fasting for Third Isaiah and Jesus is more related to a concern for the oppressed and the hungry and becoming a shining light in the darkness, than it is to prayer. It is faith and prayer that will move mountains.²¹⁶ Fasting has another purpose, not unrelated to prayer. The purpose of fasting is to loosen the bonds of injustice and to choose persons for the task.

Fasting and the Early Leaders

The tipping point came as a result of worship and fasting. The Holy Spirit spoke to the church in Antioch, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” After fasting and praying they laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off.²¹⁷ Barnabas and Saul organized churches throughout Galatia. “And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.”²¹⁸ The tipping point here was the inclusion of Gentiles. It was important to choose the right elders, for they were about to face the Judaizers who would insist that the Gentiles become Jews before they could become Christians. This debate continued until the Holy Spirit settled it in the Jerusalem Conference. The official statement follows:

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.²¹⁹

The decision was put into a letter, which was sent to the church in Antioch, and when its members received it, “they rejoiced at the

²¹⁵ Matthew 17:20 and Mark 9:29

²¹⁶ Matthew 17:20

²¹⁷ Acts 13:2-3

²¹⁸ Acts 14:23

²¹⁹ Acts 15:28-29

exhortation.”²²⁰ In reflecting back on this crucial decision, Paul added, “They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.”²²¹

What’s so important here is how they chose their leaders and identified their mission. They chose their leaders through prayer and fasting and they identified their mission by abstinence and the goal of inclusion of the Gentiles and remembering the poor. They realized that this may well take division of labor, and so they agreed that Paul and Barnabas were to go to the Gentiles and James, Cephas (Peter), and John would go to the circumcised (the Jews). Remembering the poor was part of Third Isaiah’s redefinition of true fasting.

THE PRACTICAL FOCUS

Is Fasting Important Today?

Most Protestants think only of Fasting during Lent. Two questions come to mind. (1) Does Jesus expect us to fast? (2) Did John Wesley practice this Spiritual Discipline? The answer to both of these questions is, “Yes.” Let’s let Wesley comment on Jesus injunction to fast in secret. Referring to Jesus, Wesley says, “He does not, indeed, in this place expressly enjoin either fasting, giving of alms, or prayer; but his directions *how* to fast, to give alms, and to pray, are of the same force with such injunctions.”²²² Did Wesley practice fasting? Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. answers that question for us:

Wesley was convinced that fasting, abstaining from food or drink, was a practice firmly grounded in the Bible. People in Old Testament times fasted (Ezra 8:23). So did Jesus and his followers (Matthew 4:2; Acts 13:3), and Wesley saw no reason why modern Christians should not follow the same pattern. His plan of fasting sometimes allowed for limited

²²⁰ Acts 15:31

²²¹ Galatians 2:10

²²² John Wesley, *44 Sermons: Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: The Epworth Press, 1964), p. 297.

eating and drinking. He found that fasting advanced holiness.²²³

In his younger years, Wesley fasted two days a week, Wednesdays and Fridays. In his later years, he fasted on Fridays. Wesley acknowledges that Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, endued with supernatural strength for that purpose, fasted for forty days and forty nights; but the time of fasting most frequently mentioned in Scripture, is one day, from morning till evening. In addition to these *full* fasts, there were also the *half-fasts* on the fourth and sixth days of the week (Wednesday and Friday), throughout the year. On those days they abstained from food until three in the afternoon.²²⁴ Included in the term abstinence was the practice of eating little, the abstaining in part, by reason of sickness or bodily weakness. The lowest kind of fasting, according to Wesley, was the mere abstaining from pleasant food.²²⁵

Without a doubt, Wesley takes a traditional approach to fasting. As long as one is healthy, fasting includes abstinence from needful food and drink as well as from pleasant food and drink. Wesley rejects all the arguments against traditional fasting, although he considers the argument of abstaining from sin rather than from food and drink the most plausible. Another argument is the idea of a continual fast. The argument goes like this: “But if fasting be indeed of so great importance, and attended with such a blessing, is it not best, say some, to fast always? Not to do it now and then, but to keep a continual fast.” “But” replies Wesley, “this is not fasting, scriptural fasting; it is never termed so in the Bible.” Wesley’s not opposed to continual fasting, but he doesn’t think it needs to exclude traditional fasting in a particular time frame. His response to those who would pursue the continual fast is as follows:

²²³ Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., *Holiness of Heart and Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 33.

²²⁴ John Wesley, *44 Sermons: Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: The Epworth Press, 1964), pp. 289 and 291.

²²⁵ John Wesley, *44 Sermons: Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: The Epworth Press, 1964), pp. 297-298.

Use continually then as much abstinence as you please; which, taken thus, is no other than Christian temperance; but this need not at all interfere with your observing solemn times of fasting and prayer. For instance: your habitual abstinence or temperance would not prevent your fasting in secret.²²⁶

It is clear that Wesley does not want to separate inward from outward faith. Fasting and Abstinence are not to be confined to abstaining from needful or pleasant foods and drinks, nor are they to be confined to sin and the appearance of evil. Fasting has to do with both the external and the internal. There are foods and drinks, from which we should abstain, and sin and the appearance of evil that should be avoided.

Fasting as Abstaining

Now I'm the last one who would want to disagree with Wesley on anything, but I don't find traditional Fasting and Abstinence very helpful. I need to redefine them without revising the definitions of both. I wish I could say as did one of those early Methodists, Hannah Ball, "The weekly fast day was a fast to my body, but a feast day to my soul."²²⁷ I find myself more in agreement with Third Isaiah when he redefines fasting as loosing the bonds of injustice and setting the oppressed free. I don't think Wesley would disagree with this, but he would want to at the same time observe the more traditional practices of Fasting and Abstinence. I have difficulty with the traditional practices and would prefer a new definition that relates to a continual fast, which would aim at holiness of heart and life, or to put it in slightly different terms, personal and social holiness.

Let's look first at abstinence, which Wesley usually uses right alongside of fasting. There are three kinds of food and drink, from which we fast: the needful, the harmful, and the pleasant. Why not just eliminate the harmful food and drink all the time? Abstain

²²⁶ John Wesley, *44 Sermons: Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: The Epworth Press, 1964), pp. 299-300.

²²⁷ Steve Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1998), p. 51.

from harmful food and drink as part of fasting. There might also be times when it's appropriate to abstain from pleasant food and drink as part of fasting. Wesley certainly thought so. It came up in a conversation Wesley was having with some of his leaders. They decided that it would be a good idea to abstain from tea. They all agreed that, "it would prevent great expense, as well of health as of time and money, if the poorer people of our society could be persuaded to leave off drinking of tea." Wesley describes his experience with abstaining from drinking tea.

Sunday, July 6— We resolved ourselves to begin and set the example. I expected some difficulty in breaking off a custom of six-and-twenty years' standing. And, accordingly, the three first days, my head ached, more or less, all day long, and I was half asleep from morning to night. The third day, on Wednesday, in the afternoon, my memory failed, almost entirely. In the evening I sought my remedy in prayer. On Thursday morning my head-ache was gone. My memory was as strong as ever. And I have found no inconvenience, but a sensible benefit in several respects, from that very day to this.²²⁸

Wesley doesn't tie, abstinence from drinking tea, in with fasting, but why not continually abstain from harmful food and drink and occasionally abstain from pleasant food and drink as part of one's Secret Fasting. I'm assuming that Wesley considered tea as being among the pleasant drinks. Wesley says nothing about abstaining from tea for the rest of his life. He only abstains to save the poor the expense of spending their money on a pleasant drink.

Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish between the needful, the pleasant, and the harmful foods and drinks. When Wesley fills in his first General Rule, to do no harm, he opposes the "buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity." For the most part, he considers spirituous liquors to be among the harmful drinks, except when they are

²²⁸ John Wesley, *Works of John Wesley* (On Compact Disk: Providence House Publishers, October 27, 1743 to November 17, 1746), p. 17.

needed for medicinal reasons.²²⁹ Then they can be listed among the needful drinks. Wine, used in the Lord's Supper would also be among the needful drinks, but when it causes drunkenness, then it becomes harmful. After Jesus shares bread and wine in his Last Supper, he says to his disciples, "I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."²³⁰ At that time, wine will become a pleasant food, and I will be glad to drink it. For now, I consider all alcoholic beverages among the harmful and even hurtful drinks. Until that day, abstinence of alcoholic beverages will be part of my continual fasting. When I'm invited to the heavenly feast, my fasting will end.

Are there other things that should be abstained from temporarily in a continual fast? While I can't think of any, there are plenty of things, which we should abstain from permanently, never to be taken up again. Wesley lists sixteen things so harmful in society that we should avoid them permanently. The harmful things need to be set aside, so that we can focus on the doing of good of every kind. Wesley's General Rules are not all that out of date; they just need to be updated in modern English. I wouldn't delete any of them, but we could probably think of some additions we could make. To some extent, the updating has taken place in our Social Principles, but that document is more complicated than the General Rules.²³¹ The General Rules were designed to be used in the Class Meetings and were printed in a small pamphlet which could be carried in one's pocket or purse. It would be difficult to use the Social Principles in the same way that the early Methodists used the General Rules.

While I recognize that Wesley fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays, I do believe he would agree to continually abstain from all that is harmful and hurtful, so that one could focus on doing every

²²⁹ *The Book of Discipline* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), p. 73.

²³⁰ Matthew 16:29

²³¹ *The Book of Discipline* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008), pp. 97-130.

kind of good. I like the way Pat Corrick Hinton put it in, *Prayers for Growing and Other Pains*:

Lord, Our God,
we want to return
our lives to you.

Teach us to fast
from selfishness
so that we can share
words of comfort.

To fast from food
we don't need
so that the poor can eat.

To fast from
wasting time
so that we can make time
to help others.

To fast from laziness
so that we will be
open and waiting for you
when you come
in all your glory.²³²

This kind of fast needs to be continual. Fasting only during Lent is not sufficient. I know what Wesley would say, for he said it in his sermon on fasting:

The most plausible of these [arguments] I come now to consider. And, first, it has been frequently said, "Let a Christian fast from sin, and not from food; this is what God requires at his hands." So He does; but He requires the other also. Therefore this ought to be done, and that not left undone.²³³

²³² Pat Corrick Hinton, *Prayers for Growing and Other Pains* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, Inc., 1981), p. 85.

²³³ John Wesley, *44 Sermons: Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: The Epworth Press, 1964), p. 298.

I agree, but I also fast and abstain from known sin and harmful and hurtful food and drink. This kind of fast needs to be continual. When it comes to pleasant food and drink, moderation is the goal. I'd like to think that even needful food and drink might be pleasant.

While defending the traditional practices of fasting, Wesley ends his sermon on fasting by turning to Third Isaiah's redefinition of fasting.

And thus God himself expressly and largely declares: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning...."²³⁴

EXERCISING THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FASTING

I'm not trying to get out of Fasting and Abstinence. I just happen to believe that like prayer it is possible to pray and fast without ceasing. Paul put it as follows to the congregation in Thessalonica:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything, hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil.²³⁵

Is this possible? I believe that it is. In fact, it may well be easier to fast and abstain continually than it is to pray without ceasing. If we have really exercised the Spiritual Disciplines that precede Fasting and Abstinence, this one ought to be easy. What's the secret?

²³⁴ John Wesley, *44 Sermons: Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: The Epworth Press, 1964), p. 304.

²³⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:17-22

Brother Lawrence made it crystal clear when he wrote, “I have found in many books many different ways of going to God and many different practices in living the spiritual life. I began to see that this was only confusing me, as the only thing I was seeking was to become wholly God’s.”²³⁶ Working in the kitchen, performing the most mundane of jobs, he was able to say:

The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.²³⁷

If Brother Lawrence could blend work with prayer, we ought to be able to blend Fasting and Abstinence with life in all of its many facets. The secret lies in one’s willingness to converse with God in meekness, humility, and love. Brother Lawrence renounced, for the love of God, everything that was not God, and he began to live as if there was none but God in the world. Most of us are like Brother Lawrence in that we may not have jobs with much prestige or status. Seldom will our daily decisions make much difference in the world; and yet, like Brother Lawrence we can experience the continual presence of God. And perhaps that experience is the most important of all.

We can hardly keep such an experience a secret, but we don’t have to brag about it. The first Christian to impress me was a man who simply ran a drill press for eight hours a day in a Machine Shop. He sang hymns all day to himself. I believe he was praying without ceasing. He sang in a whisper because he was praying in secret. You only knew he was doing it if you were working close

²³⁶ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, printed in *Devotional Classics*, edited by Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), p. 370.

²³⁷ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, printed in *Devotional Classics*, edited by Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), p. 369.

by him; otherwise, all you saw and heard were a man drilling holes in cast iron. I never asked this man about Secret Fasting or Secret Prayer. I just assumed that if he was doing one, he was also doing the others.

I happen to enjoy a good glass of wine or a cold beer, but I've decided to abstain until I'm invited to the heavenly feast. If others drink alcoholic beverages, it's none of my business unless they become a danger to themselves and others. In this world alcoholic beverages can easily become a harmful or hurtful drink, but in the next world they will be pleasant drinks. My favorite pleasant food is a luscious piece of thick sour cherry pie smothered with ice cream. Most of the time I abstain from such pleasant food, except for special days like my birthday and thanksgiving. In those times my Fasting and Abstinence becomes a feast.

CONCLUSIONS

*Therefore, since we are surrounded
by so great a cloud of witnesses,
let us also lay aside every weight and sin that cling so closely,
and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*

Hebrews 12:1 (NRSV)

We exercise the Spiritual Disciplines so that we can run the spiritual race in front of a great cloud of witnesses who have already run ahead of us. They know what it's like because they have finished the race, and we can learn from their experiences how to succeed. This is why I have introduced the six Spiritual Disciplines by tracing them through the high points of the Bible. Only after I did that, did I analyze them from tradition, reason, and my own personal experience.

I have no objection to what David Watson and Reuben Job have done to update John Wesley's General Rules. What I have attempted to do here is to clarify what Wesley calls "the Ordinances of God" and David Watson refers to as "the acts of piety," and Bishop Job redefines as "staying in love with God."

I have identified six Spiritual Disciplines, which help us to awaken our Spiritual Senses. Without exercising our Spiritual Disciplines, our Spiritual Senses lay dormant. For the most part, I used Wesley's "Ordinances of God," but I combined some and added one on giving." I deal with the Spiritual Senses in another book, which is beyond the scope of this work.²³⁸ It is important, however, to understand how everything works together.

Beyond the Spiritual Senses, we grow the nine Spiritual Fruit, described by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. C. Peter Wagner has defined twenty-seven Spiritual Gifts,²³⁹ and I would suggest that

²³⁸ James T. Reuteler, *Our Spiritual Senses* (Amazon), 2010.

²³⁹ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts* (Ventura: Regal Books), 1979,

every disciple of Jesus Christ has one of those gifts. The trick is to discover one's Spiritual Gift or Gifts, and that will take exercising one's Spiritual Disciplines to awaken one's Spiritual Senses. Only then will we be able to grow the nine Spiritual Fruit and discover our Spiritual Gift or Gifts, and get in the race.

We don't run that race alone. We need the small group to support us and to keep us accountable as we run towards our destination of holiness of heart and life, or one could say personal and social holiness. I am convinced that these small groups should not exceed twelve persons and better function between five and eight persons. Their purpose is transformative, and genuine participation is hindered when there are too many people in the group. Those who participate will be transformed. All of these Spiritual Disciplines work together to enable us to see with our Spiritual Senses.

Having worked through each of the Spiritual Disciplines, I'd like to summarize my conclusions. My two biggest points is that all work together and they enable us to see spiritual reality with the Spiritual Senses. The first thing to notice is that three of these Spiritual Disciplines are secret and three are public. In the end, however, they all are public.

Public Worship

We begin with Public Worship. Everyone should be welcome in Public Worship. They don't have to be members. People should not join until they are ready to take on the challenge of discipleship. Worship should so inspire us that we will not know whether we are in heaven or on earth. The sermon and music should so inspire us that we will want to fly like angels.

The opening hymn should lead us to praise God. The second hymn should support the message. Every service of worship should be a mini Easter and call us to commit our lives to the will of God. The final hymn should be a hymn of invitation, which welcomes us to the Lord's Table and into the presence of God, where we can experience transformation. The church is not a building, but the people, who are living stones making up a spiritual temple. In worship we join together to be the Body of Christ. Our destination

is holiness of heart (personal holiness) and holiness of life (social holiness).

When we leave worship, we are ready to bear witness to the whole world, and we do this by letting our light shine. We want everyone to experience what we have experienced and we can't wait until we can join in Public Worship again. At the same time, we need to mature in faith and that will require that we become part of a small discipleship group. Such groups should be required for members. This is where nurturing, support, and accountability take place. This is also the place to learn the fundamentals of the faith and to discuss controversial issues. Every member should be aware of the fundamentals and be ready to put them into practice. This will make Public Worship more exciting. Public Worship needs to be driven by theology rather than sociology.

Bible Study

The Bible is the Christian's primary source for theology and ethics, for faith and morality; but, how do we exercise this important Spiritual Discipline?

My first conclusion is that it's dangerous to study the Bible by one's self. Bible Study is a group activity, which needs a capable leader. My second conclusion is that the Bible must be studied in its context. This means that we don't pick and choose, but that we study the whole Bible from beginning to end, or should I say from end to beginning? Perhaps Martin Luther had the right idea when he suggested reading the Bible backwards. Becoming acquainted first with Jesus will enable us to read critically all those Old Testament passages that seem to contradict the teachings of Jesus.

The Bible is well organized and I can see some value in reading it forwards and in reading it backwards. I study the Bible book by book. The only major section of the Bible, which I would change, is the Prophetic Books. They are not in chronological order, and I prefer to study them in chronological order. All of the other books of the Bible should be studied book by book, whether you start from the beginning or the end. I prefer to start with the Book of Revelation.

The first requirement in studying any book of the Bible is to become familiar with what it meant to the author and to the people

to whom the author was writing. Only after we understand that context, are we ready to inquire into what it might mean for us today.

It takes time to study the Bible. It took me six years to work through the entire Bible, and that does not include the Apocrypha, which took me another year. We need to accept the fact that we will need to study the Bible for the rest of our lives, and still, we will have only touched the surface. Although we can spend some time studying the Bible within small discipleship groups, it's better to study the Bible in a setting dedicated completely to Bible Study. This means that we need to be involved in both a discipleship group for nurture and support and a Bible Study group to gain an understanding of both the Old and New Testaments, our primary source for faith and morality.²⁴⁰

Secret Prayer

Prayer, like Bible Study is a life-long pursuit. Our first experience with prayer might be in bargaining with or begging God, when it should be simply learning how to listen. Listening to God isn't easy, for God doesn't talk to us in an audible voice.

We read the promises in the Bible that those who have faith can move mountains, and if we pray in Jesus' name our prayers will be answered. God is certainly willing to answer our prayers; in fact, he is more willing to answer our prayers than we are to pray. Our difficulty is that we want our prayers answered according to our will, and if that doesn't happen, then we think God has not answered our prayers. In order to get an acceptable answer, we encourage others to pray for our need or request. Even when we pray for others, we think that the more people we can get to pray, the more likely the prayer will be answered. That's why we have telephone prayer lists and recruit prayer partners with emails. We need to realize that God knows every need before we pray, and he

²⁴⁰ In the United Methodist Church, *Disciple Bible Study* is the Bible Study program and *Covenant Discipleship* is the program for nurture and support. The two programs are complimentary and work together.

is willing to respond to our needs, but not always to our selfish desires.

Both Jesus and Paul prayed three times and submitted their lives to God, ready to accept God's will, even though it wasn't their own. Jesus faced the cross depending upon God's grace. Paul accepted his thorn in the flesh, realizing that God's grace was sufficient and that God's power was made perfect in Paul's weakness. Are we only to pray three times and give up? Yes and no! After we pray three times, we probably have the answer to our prayer, but prayer needs to be a life long experience.

We are to pray without ceasing. That means that we are always listening to that still small voice within, and that we are always ready to cooperate with God, to be part of the answer to our own or someone else's prayer. Prayers don't have to be long to be effective. They just have to avoid arrogance and an unforgiving spirit. That's why Jesus tells us to go into our closet and pray in secret. We're not to show off with our prayers. We need to find a quiet place or space to communicate with God, who is always ready to listen to the prayer of a humble heart. We just need to clear the clutter from our lives so that we can hear and experience his answer.

Holy Communion

The Spiritual Discipline of Holy Communion cannot be done privately or in secret, but it can be done wherever two or three believers or seekers are present. There are essentially three meanings attached to this Spiritual Discipline: (1) Holy Communion is a memorial of Jesus' sacrifice; (2) Holy Communion is an experience of Christ's presence; and, (3) Holy Communion is an anticipation of Christ's Kingdom.

What happens when we participate in this spiritual exercise? Do we actually drink Jesus' blood and eat his flesh? The one thing both Jews and Gentiles are told not to do in the Bible is to drink blood; and if this is so, then how do we experience the Real Presence of Christ?²⁴¹ The issue is not whether Christ is in the elements, co-existing with the elements, or symbolized by the

²⁴¹ Acts 15:29

elements. What needs transforming, are not the elements, but we who take the elements in simple, contrite humility. When we become aware of the presence of Christ, we will experience forgiveness and the ability to forgive.

Holy Communion is a converting ordinance. This means that we can experience a transformation as we partake of the elements of bread and wine. The wine does not have to contain alcohol. Grape Juice is just as much a symbol as wine. This spiritual exercise is for believers and seekers alike. It is for those who repent of their sins and seek to follow Jesus; hence, the table should be open for all who desire to enter into this new covenant, in which we remember Jesus' sacrifice, experience his presence, and anticipate the coming of his kingdom.

Martin Luther called for frequent communion. John Wesley called for constant communion. There is no correct answer to how frequently we should be practicing this spiritual exercise. It seems to me that we should participate in Holy Communion at least once a week, but this presents us with a problem. How can we participate weekly if our congregation does not offer weekly Communion? My answer is to celebrate Holy Communion in small groups. If we really believe in the priesthood of all believers, then this should be a possibility. We just have to heed Paul's admonition for approaching Holy Communion with respect. The pastor could train a number of persons, who then could take Holy Communion to the sick, shut-ins, and to small groups.

Secret Giving

Secret Giving was not listed in John Wesley's Ordinances of God, but Wesley certainly believed in giving. He gave so much that Wagner lists Wesley's giving as a Spiritual Gift. I agree with that conclusion. Giving, however, is not everyone's Spiritual Gift, but it should be everyone's spiritual exercise. The basic minimum of our giving should be ten percent of our gross income. If we don't give at least ten percent, then we are living on spiritual welfare.

Do we have to give our whole tithe to the church? I would suggest that we do not, but we do have to give enough to support the buildings, the staff, and its ministries. At the same time we

should not spend so much on buildings that they require our whole tithe. Wesley warns that our buildings should be modest so that we don't need resources from the wealthy.

Let all preaching-houses be built plain and decent; but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable: Otherwise the necessity of raising money will make rich men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent upon them, yea, and governed by them. And then farewell to the Methodist discipline, if not doctrine too.²⁴²

Since we are not in business to serve ourselves, my opinion is that buildings, staff, and ministries should not take more than fifty percent of our tithes, and the other fifty percent should go to causes consistent with the church's mission. I admit that there is no scripture supporting this decision, but Jesus did warn the Pharisees that in tithing they should make sure that they not neglect the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith. Half of our tithes should support those weightier matters. No one person knows what all those weightier matters are, and so I would suggest that we all make our contributions with the other half of our tithes. In addition to contributing money, we should also consider volunteering our time. There is real joy in giving to a cause we believe in and for which we are ready to give our time.

How would all this work out? Once a year, as our church asks for pledges, the various ministries could be displayed and represented in the fellowship hall. Members of the church would be invited to investigate the various ministries and commit half of their tithe, along with their time and talent, to ministries they choose. The money could go directly to the chosen ministries, relieving the church treasurer of having to write out checks to the various ministries. I would not limit people from including other ministries not present at the one-day event. We are all asked for money for good causes from time to time, and they could also be part of half of our tithe.

²⁴² Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 65.

By Secret Giving, I don't think Jesus meant that we shouldn't fill out a pledge card. Every church needs to know what its resources will be so that it can set its budget and meet its financial obligations. What we are not to do is to brag about our giving. Once we have met our minimum, which is the tithe, we should attempt to go beyond the tithe, not knowing or bragging about the percentage of our income we have returned to God for his work on earth.

Fasting and Abstinence

Jesus didn't require Fasting and Abstinence from his disciples, at least not in the traditional sense. After Jesus ascended into Heaven, some of his disciples did exercise this Spiritual Discipline. Wesley found it useful, as did Hannah Ball. Obesity and alcoholism are serious problems in our world today. If for no other reason, some kinds of Fasting and Abstinence are needful.

A video appeared on You-Tube offering a modern interpretation of fasting and feasting during forty days of Lent.

- To fast from anger
to feast on patience.
- To fast from discouragement
to feast on hope.
- To fast on selfishness
to feast on compassion.
- To fast on mediocrity
to feast on excellency
- To fast on laziness
to feast on enthusiasm
- To fast on sadness
to feast on happiness.
- To fast on insincerity
to feast on truthfulness.
- To fast on dissatisfaction
to feast on contentment.
- To fast on hatredness
to feast on forgiveness.
- To fast on individualism
to feast on fraternal life.

But why should we stop at the end forty days? Wouldn't it be better if we fasted like this all year long? Maybe it would make more sense to put the emphasis on spiritual feasting?

Why would we want to keep this kind of Fasting and Abstinence secret? Jesus gave the answer in his parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. He doesn't want us to brag about exercising our Spiritual Disciplines. He doesn't want us to become modern day Pharisees. In one sense we can't keep true Fasting and Abstinence a secret. People will notice and inquire. When that time comes Peter offers some good advice: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence."²⁴³ Perhaps we should call this Spiritual Discipline "Abstinence and Feasting."

²⁴³ 1 Peter 3:15-16

APPENDICES

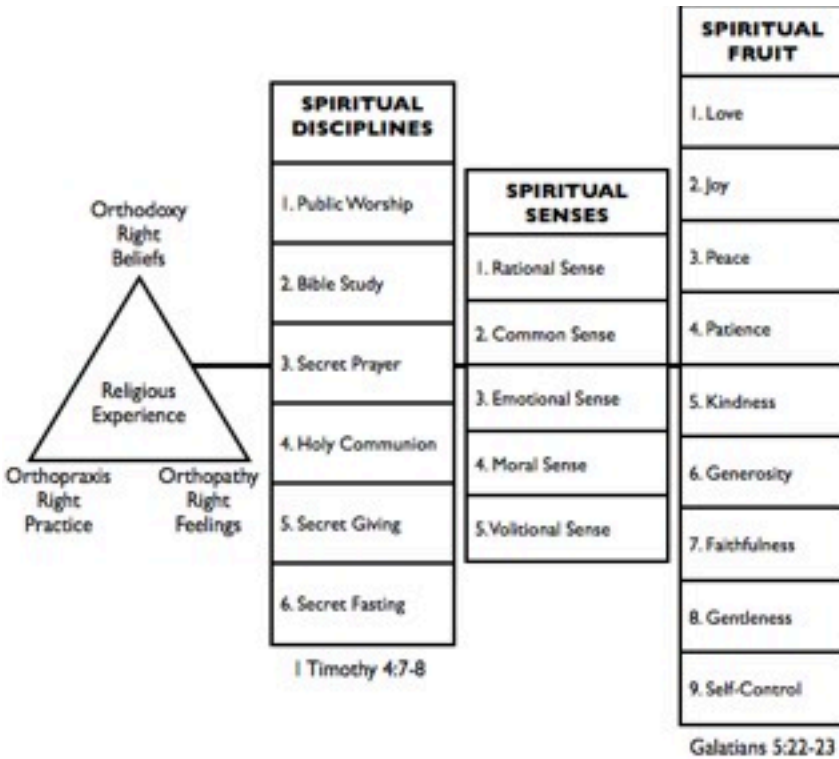
- 1. Holiness Chart: Part One**
- 2. Holiness Chart: Part Two**
- 3. The General Rules**
- 4. The Character of a Methodist**

The purpose of this appendix is to set the Spiritual Disciplines in their context. It is within the third general rule that we find the Spiritual Disciplines. The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is to awaken us to the Spiritual Senses.²⁴⁴ My list of the Spiritual Senses can be found in the chart, which follows The General Rules. I have named this chart “Holiness Chart: Part One.” The other part of this chart appears on the next page and is named “Holiness Chart: Part Two.” In this second chart one can view the Spiritual Gifts. The Spiritual Disciplines awaken in us the Spiritual Senses which enable us to experience the presence of God and help us to choose our Spiritual Gift (or Gifts). Altogether, we move toward holiness of heart and life, or maturity in Christian discipleship.

What would that maturity in Christian discipleship look like? To define such maturity, which Wesley called Christian perfection or entire sanctification, I have included Wesley’s classic work on Methodism, which he named, “The Character of a Methodist.” If anyone would say, upon reading Wesley’s definition, “Why, these are only the common fundamental principles of Christianity!” Wesley would answer, “I know they are no other; and I would to God both thou and all men knew, that I, and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men, by any but the common principles of Christianity, -- the plain, old Christianity that I teach, renouncing and detesting all other marks of distinction.”

²⁴⁴ James T. Reuteler, *Our Spiritual Senses* (Amazon.com), 2010. Wesley did not define what he meant by the Spiritual Senses. This book is my attempt to define the Spiritual Senses.

HOLINESS CHART: PART ONE



*It is not possible in the nature of things
that a person should be happy who is not holy.*

John Wesley

HOLINESS CHART: PART TWO

SPIRITUAL GIFTS		
1. Prophecy	10. Faith	19. Evangelist
2. Service	11. Healing	20. Pastor
3. Teaching	12. Miracles	21. Celibacy
4. Exhortation	13. Discernment	22. Poverty
5. Giving	14. Tongues	23. Martyrdom
6. Leadership	15. Interpretation	24. Hospitality
7. Mercy	16. Apostle	25. Missionary
8. Wisdom	17. Helps	26. Intercession
9. Knowledge	18. Administration	27. Exorcism



Mark 12:29-31
 John 13:34-35
 I Peter 1:15-16

C. Peter Wagner, Your Spiritual Gifts
 Ephesians 4:11-13
 Romans 12:6-8
 Corinthians 12:1-31

Moving towards Holiness of Heart and Life

THE GENERAL RULES

The General Rules are printed here in the text of 1808 (when the fifth Restrictive Rule took effect), as subsequently amended by constitutional actions in 1848 and 1868.

The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies

In the latter end of the year 1739 eight or ten persons came to Mr. Wesley, in London, who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired, as did two or three more the next day, that he would spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come, which they saw continually hanging over their heads. That he might have more time for this great work, he appointed a day when they might all come together, which from thenceforward they did every week, namely, on Thursday in the evening. To these, and as many more as desired to join with them (for their number increased daily), he gave those advices from time to time which he judged most needful for them, and they always concluded their meeting with prayer suited to their several necessities.

This was the rise of the United Society, first in Europe, and then in America. Such a society is no other than “a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”

That it may the more easily be discerned whether they are indeed working out their own salvation, each society is divided into smaller companies, called classes, according to their respective places of abode. There are about twelve persons in a class, one of whom is styled the leader. It is his duty:

1. To see each person in his class once a week at least, in order:
 - (1) to inquire how their souls prosper;
 - (2) to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort, as occasion may require;

- (3) to receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the preachers, church, and poor.
2. To meet the ministers and the stewards of the society once a week, in order:
 - (1) to inform the minister of any that are sick, or of any that walk disorderly and will not be reproved;
 - (2) to pay the stewards what they have received of their several classes in the week preceding.

There is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these societies: “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.” But wherever this is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits.

It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced, such as:

1. The taking of the name of God in vain.
2. The profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or by buying or selling.
3. Drunkenness: buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity.
4. Slaveholding; buying or selling slaves.
5. Fighting, quarreling, brawling, brother going to law with brother; returning evil for evil, or railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling.
6. The buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty.
7. The giving or taking things on usury—i.e., unlawful interest.
8. Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation; particularly speaking evil of magistrates or of ministers.
9. Doing to others as we would not they should do unto us.
10. Doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as:
11. The putting on of gold and costly apparel.
12. The taking such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus.
13. The singing those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God.
14. Softness and needless self-indulgence.
15. Laying up treasure upon earth.

16. Borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.

It is expected of all who continue in these societies that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

Secondly: By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men:

1. To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison.
2. To their souls, by instructing, reproofing, or exhorting all we have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine that “we are not to do good unless our hearts be free to it.”
3. By doing good, especially to them that are of the household of faith or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others; buying one of another, helping each other in business, and so much the more because the world will love its own and them only.
4. By all possible diligence and frugality, that the gospel be not blamed.
5. By running with patience the race which is set before them, denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily; submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should say all manner of evil of them falsely, for the Lord’s sake.

It is expected of all who desire to continue in these societies that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

Thirdly: By attending upon all the Ordinances of God; such are:

1. The Public Worship of God.
2. The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.
3. The Supper of the Lord.
4. Family and private prayer.
5. Searching the Scriptures.
6. Fasting or abstinence.

These are the General Rules of our societies; all of which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written Word, which is the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these we know his Spirit writes on truly awakened hearts. If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be known unto them who watch over that soul as they who must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But then, if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church - 2008.
The United Methodist Publishing House.

THE CHARACTER OF A METHODIST

by John Wesley

Not as though I had already attained.

TO THE READER

1. SINCE the name first came abroad into the world, many have been at a loss to know what a Methodist is; what are the principles and the practice of those who are commonly called by that name; and what the distinguishing marks of this sect, “which is everywhere spoken against.”

2. And it being generally believed, that I was able to give the clearest account of these things, (as having been one of the first to whom that name was given, and the person by whom the rest were supposed to be directed,) I have been called upon, in all manner of ways, and with the utmost earnestness, so to do. I yield at last to the continued importunity both of friends and enemies; and do now give the clearest account I can, in the presence of the Lord and Judge of heaven and earth, of the principles and practice whereby those who are called Methodists are distinguished from other men.

3. I say those who are called Methodists; for, let it be well observed, that this is not a name which they take to themselves, but one fixed upon them by way of reproach, without their approbation or consent. It was first given to three or four young men at Oxford, by a student of Christ Church; either in allusion to the ancient sect of Physicians so called, from their teaching, that almost all diseases might be cured by a specific *method* of diet and exercise, or from their observing a more regular *method* of study and behaviour than was usual with those of their age and station.

4. I should rejoice (so little ambitious am I to be at the head of any sect or party) if the very name might never be mentioned more, but be buried in eternal oblivion. But if that cannot be, at least let those who will use it, know the meaning of the word they use. Let us not always be fighting in the dark. Come, and let us look one another in the face. And perhaps some of you who hate what I am *called*, may love what I *am* by the grace of God; or rather, what “I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.”

The Character of a Methodist

1. THE distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point. Whosoever, therefore, imagines that a Methodist is a man of such or such an opinion, is grossly ignorant of the whole affair; he mistakes the truth totally. We believe, indeed, that “all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God;” and herein we are distinguished from Jews, Turks, and Infidels. We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice; and herein we are fundamentally distinguished from those of the Romish Church. We believe Christ to be the eternal, supreme God; and herein we are distinguished from the Socinians and Arians. But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think. So that whatsoever they are, whether right or wrong, they are no distinguishing marks of a Methodist.

2. Neither are words or phrases of any sort. We do not place our religion, or any part of it, in being attached to any peculiar mode of speaking, any quaint or uncommon set of expressions. The most obvious, easy, common words, wherein our meaning can be conveyed, we prefer before others, both on ordinary occasions, and when we speak of the things of God. We never, therefore, willingly or designedly, deviate from the most usual way of speaking; unless when we express scripture truths in scripture words, which, we presume, no Christian will condemn. Neither do we affect to use any particular expressions of Scripture more frequently than others, unless they are such as are more frequently used by the inspired writers themselves. So that it is as gross an error, to place the marks of a Methodist in his words, as in opinions of any sort.

3. Nor do we desire to be distinguished by actions, customs, or usages, of an indifferent nature. Our religion does not lie in doing what God has not enjoined, or abstaining from what he hath not forbidden. It does not lie in the form of our apparel, in the posture of our body, or the covering of our heads; nor yet in abstaining from marriage, or from meats and drinks, which are all good if received with thanksgiving. Therefore, neither will any man, who

knows whereof he affirms, fix the mark of a Methodist here, -- in any actions or customs purely indifferent, undetermined by the word of God.

4. Nor, lastly, is he distinguished by laying the whole stress of religion on any single part of it. If you say, "Yes, he is; for he thinks 'we are saved by faith alone.'" I answer, You do not understand the terms. By salvation he means holiness of heart and life. And this he affirms to spring from true faith alone. Can even a nominal Christian deny it? Is this placing a part of religion for the whole? "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid! Yea, we establish the law." We do not place the whole of religion (as too many do, God knoweth) either in doing no harm, or in doing good, or in using the Ordinances of God. No, not in all of them together; wherein we know by experience a man may labour many years, and at the end have no religion at all, no more than he had at the beginning. Much less in any one of these; or, it may be, in a scrap of one of them: Like her who fancies herself a virtuous woman, only because she is not a prostitute; or him who dreams he is an honest man, merely because he does not rob or steal. May the Lord God of my fathers preserve me from such a poor, starved religion as this! Were this the mark of a Methodist, I would sooner choose to be a sincere Jew, Turk, or Pagan.

5. "What then is the mark? Who is a Methodist, according to your own account?" I answer: A Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;" one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul; which is constantly crying out, Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee! My God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!"

6. He is therefore happy in God, yea, always happy, as having in him "a well of water springing up into everlasting life," and overflowing his soul with peace and joy. "Perfect love" having now "cast out fear," he "rejoices evermore." He "rejoices in the Lord always," even "in God his Saviour;" and in the Father, "through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom he hath now received the atonement." "Having" found "redemption through his blood, the

forgiveness of his sins," he cannot but rejoice, whenever he looks back on the horrible pit out of which he is delivered; when he sees "all his transgressions blotted out as a cloud, and his iniquities as a thick cloud." He cannot but rejoice, whenever he looks on the state wherein he now is; "being justified freely, and having peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." For "he that believeth, hath the witness" of this "in himself;" being now the son of God by faith. "Because he is a son, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into his heart, crying, Abba, Father!" And "the Spirit itself beareth witness with his spirit, that he is a child of God." He rejoiceth also, whenever he looks forward, "in hope of the glory that shall be revealed;" yea, this his joy is full, and all his bones cry out, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten me again to a living hope -- of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for me!"

7. And he who hath this hope, thus "full of immortality, in everything giveth thanks;" as knowing that this (whatsoever it is) "is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning him." From him, therefore, he cheerfully receives all, saying, "Good is the will of the Lord; and whether the Lord giveth or taketh away, equally "blessing the name of the Lord." For he hath "learned, in whatsoever state he is, therewith to be content." He knoweth "both how to be abased and how to abound. Everywhere and in all things he is instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and suffer need." Whether in ease or pain, whether in sickness or health, whether in life or death, he giveth thanks from the ground of his heart to Him who orders it for good; knowing that as "every good gift cometh from above," so none but good can come from the Father of Lights, into whose hand he has wholly committed his body and soul, as into the hands of a faithful Creator. He is therefore "careful" (anxiously or uneasily) "for nothing;" as having "cast all his care on Him that careth for him," and "in all things" resting on him, after "making his request known to him with thanksgiving."

8. For indeed he "prays without ceasing." It is given him "always to pray, and not to faint." Not that he is always in the house of prayer; though he neglects no opportunity of being there. Neither is he always on his knees, although he often is, or on his face, before

the Lord his God. Nor yet is he always crying aloud to God, or calling upon him in words: For many times “the Spirit maketh intercession for him with groans that cannot be uttered.” But at all times the language of his heart is this: “Thou brightness of the eternal glory, unto thee is my heart, though without a voice, and my silence speaketh unto thee.” And this is true prayer, and this alone. But his heart is ever lifted up to God, at all times and in all places. In this he is never hindered, much less interrupted, by any person or thing. In retirement or company, in leisure, business, or conversation, his heart is ever with the Lord. Whether he lie down or rise up, God is in all his thoughts; he walks with God continually, having the loving eye of his mind still fixed upon him, and everywhere “seeing Him that is invisible.”

9. And while he thus always exercises his love to God, by praying without ceasing, rejoicing evermore, and in everything giving thanks, this commandment is written in his heart, “That he who loveth God, love his brother also.” And he accordingly loves his neighbour as himself; he loves every man as his own soul. His heart is full of love to all mankind, to every child of “the Father of the spirits of all flesh.” That a man is not personally known to him, is no bar to his love; no, nor that he is known to be such as he approves not, that he repays hatred for his good-will. For he “loves his enemies;” yea, and the enemies of God, “the evil and the unthankful.” And if it be not in his power to “do good to them that hate him,” yet he ceases not to pray for them, though they continue to spurn his love, and still “despitefully use him and persecute him.”

10. For he is “pure in heart.” The love of God has purified his heart from all revengeful passions, from envy, malice, and wrath, from every unkind temper or malign affection. It hath cleansed him from pride and haughtiness of spirit, whereof alone cometh contention. And he hath now “put on bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering:” So that he “forbears and forgives, if he had a quarrel against any; even as God in Christ hath forgiven him.” And indeed all possible ground for contention, on his part, is utterly cut off. For none can take from him what he desires; seeing he “loves not the world, nor” any of “the things of the world;” being now “crucified to the world, and the world crucified to him;” being dead to all that is in the world, both to “the

lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life.” For “all his desire is unto God, and to the remembrance of his name.”

11. Agreeable to this his one desire, is the one design of his life, namely, “not to do his own will, but the will of Him that sent him.” His one intention at all times and in all things is, not to please himself, but Him whom his soul loveth. He has a single eye. And because “his eye is single, his whole body is full of light.” Indeed, where the loving eye of the soul is continually fixed upon God, there can be no darkness at all, “but the whole is light; as when the bright shining of a candle doth enlighten the house.” God then reigns alone. All that is in the soul is holiness to the Lord. There is not a motion in his heart, but is according to his will. Every thought that arises points to Him, and is in obedience to the law of Christ.

12. And the tree is known by its fruits. For as he loves God, so he keeps his commandments; not only some, or most of them, but all, from the least to the greatest. He is not content to “keep the whole law, and offend in one point;” but has, in all points, “a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man.” Whatever God has forbidden, he avoids; whatever God hath enjoined, he doeth; and that whether it be little or great, hard or easy, joyous or grievous to the flesh. He “runs the way of God’s commandments,” now he hath set his heart at liberty. It is his glory so to do; it is his daily crown of rejoicing, “to do the will of God on earth, as it is done in heaven;” knowing it is the highest privilege of “the angels of God, of those that excel in strength, to fulfil his commandments, and hearken to the voice of his word.”

13. All the commandments of God he accordingly keeps, and that with all his might. For his obedience is in proportion to his love, the source from whence it flows. And therefore, loving God with all his heart, he serves him with all his strength. He continually presents his soul and body a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God; entirely and without reserve devoting himself, all he has, and all he is, to his glory. All the talents he has received, he constantly employs according to his Master's will; every power and faculty of his soul, every member of his body. Once he “yielded” them “unto sin” and the devil, “as instruments of unrighteousness;” but now,

“being alive from the dead, he yields” them all “as instruments of righteousness unto God.”

14. By consequence, whatsoever he doeth, it is all to the glory of God. In all his employments of every kind, he not only aims at this, (which is implied in having a single eye,) but actually attains it. His business and refreshments, as well as his prayers, all serve this great end. Whether he sit in his house or walk by the way, whether he lie down or rise up, he is promoting, in all he speaks or does, the one business of his life; whether he put on his apparel, or labour, or eat and drink, or divert himself from too wasting labour, it all tends to advance the glory of God, by peace and good-will among men. His one invariable rule is this, “Whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”

15. Nor do the customs of the world at all hinder his running the race that is set before him. He knows that vice does not lose its nature, though it becomes ever so fashionable; and remembers, that “every man is to give an account of himself to God.” He cannot, therefore, “follow” even “a multitude to do evil.” He cannot “fare sumptuously every day,” or make provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof.” He cannot “lay up treasures upon earth,” any more than he can take fire into his bosom. He cannot “adorn himself,” on any pretence, “with gold or costly apparel.” He cannot join in or countenance any diversion which has the least tendency to vice of any kind. He cannot “speak evil” of his neighbour, any more than he can lie either for God or man. He cannot utter an unkind word of any one; for love keeps the door of his lips. He cannot speak “idle words;” “no corrupt communication” ever “comes out of his mouth,” as is all that “which is” not “good to the use of edifying,” not “fit to minister grace to the hearers.” But “whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are” justly “of good report,” he thinks, and speaks, and acts, “adorning the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in all things.”

16. Lastly. As he has time, he does good unto all men; unto neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies: And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies, by “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison;” but

much more does he labour to do good to their souls, as of the ability which God giveth; to awaken those that sleep in death; to bring those who are awakened to the atoning blood, that, "being justified by faith, they may have peace with God;" and to provoke those who have peace with God to abound more in love and in good works. And he is willing to "spend and be spent herein," even "to be offered up on the sacrifice and service of their faith," so they may "all come unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

17. These are the principles and practices of our sect; these are the marks of a true Methodist. By these alone do those who are in derision so called, desire to be distinguished from other men. If any man say, "Why, these are only the common fundamental principles of Christianity!" thou hast said; so I mean; this is the very truth; I know they are no other; and I would to God both thou and all men knew, that I, and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men, by any but the common principles of Christianity, -- the plain, old Christianity that I teach, renouncing and detesting all other marks of distinction. And whosoever is what I preach, (let him be called what he will, for names change not the nature of things,) he is a Christian, not in name only, but in heart and in life. He is inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God, as revealed in the written word. He thinks, speaks, and lives, according to the method laid down in the revelation of Jesus Christ. His soul is renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and in all true holiness. And having the mind that was in Christ, he so walks as Christ also walked.

18. By these marks, by these fruits of a living faith, do we labour to distinguish ourselves from the unbelieving world from all those whose minds or lives are not according to the Gospel of Christ. But from real Christians, of whatsoever denomination they be, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all, not from any who sincerely follow after what they know they have not yet attained. No: "Whosoever doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." And I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that we be in no wise divided among ourselves. Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine? I ask no farther question. If it be, give me thy hand. For opinions, or

terms, let us not destroy the work of God. Dost thou love and serve God? It is enough. I give thee the right hand of fellowship. If there be any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies; let us strive together for the faith of the Gospel; walking worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called; with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; remembering, there is one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called with one hope of our calling; “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

From the Thomas Jackson edition of *The Works of John Wesley*,
1872.

AFTERWORD

I affirm the work done by David Watson and Bishop Reuben P. Job when they try to recover in contemporary forms Wesley's three General Rules. In this book, my purpose has been to define the third general rule, *Attend all the Ordinances of God*, which Watson calls *Works of Piety* and Bishop Job renames, "*Stay in Love with God*." My concern has been to expand on Wesley's six *Ordinances of God*, which point the way to the *Works of Piety* and how we might *Stay in Love with God*.

In order to accomplish this task, I decided to follow Wesley down another track by using what has been called the Wesley Quadrilateral. Albert Outler, one of the best known Wesleyan scholars, defines briefly the Quadrilateral:

Scripture is our authority, fundamental and decisive.

Tradition is the collective wisdom of the church in interpreting Scripture.

Reason is the critical discipline used in judging the credibility of all interpretation.

Experience is to the person what tradition is to the whole Christian community.

"Tradition, reason, experience," Outler concludes, "are ways of understanding and interpreting Scripture. But Scripture is central...." We believe in the warm heart and the open mind. When God warms the heart and fills the mind, the result is our third heritage—the evangelistic spirit.

In my attempt to expand on Wesley's *Ordinances of God*, the *Spiritual Disciplines*, I always began with Scripture, proceeded with tradition, attempted to use reason, and drew conclusions from my own experiences. I invite others, who can see flaws in my thinking, to offer constructive criticism. If you have questions on my conclusions, I would be happy to respond.

James T. Reuteler, Ph.D.

Jim@Reuteler.org

www.Jim.Reuteler.org

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