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The Practical Theology of the General Rules

Abstract

The “General Rules of the United Societies” were a central component of the early Methodist movement under John Wesley’s leadership. Examinations of the General Rules in contemporary literature tend to focus on their role in personal and organizational discipline for early Methodists and for the movement as a whole. Yet a close examination of the rules shows that they served a greater purpose: as the practical theological articulation of how Methodists could expect to experience sanctification in the context of their lives. This crucial aspect of the General Rules’ use can be seen by exploring Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace and how the rules were intended as a framework for the means of grace in Methodist discipleship.

Key Words: John Wesley, Methodist history, Wesleyan theology, General Rules, means of grace

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Introduction

In 1743, John Wesley published a short tract entitled, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies.” This text—commonly known as the “General Rules”—was written by Wesley in response to disciplinary problems he encountered with the Methodist society at Newcastle. In time, the General Rules became a regulatory mechanism by which all Methodist societies under Wesley’s control were governed. Methodist folk were expected to abide by the rules in order to have the quarterly tickets for their class meetings renewed. Wesley and his assistants personally interviewed members of the societies with the General Rules as the basis for their examinations (Albin, 2001:58-60; Heitzenrater, 1995:138-139). The rules therefore served as the way in which genuine seriousness about participation in a local society was measured. Their use was a check against the early Methodist movement becoming diluted by members whose reasons for participation were something other than the pursuit of holiness of heart and life.

Scholarly treatments of the General Rules are relatively rare in recent decades. Of those examples of scholarly analysis that do exist, it is the disciplinary function of the rules that is highlighted as their signal importance to the movement. Yet a close examination of the content of the rules and their development in Wesley’s thought reveals that the regulatory function, while important, was secondary to the theological significance Wesley attached to them. My aim in the present essay is to identify the practical theology inherent in the General Rules. In particular, I argue that the General Rules express Wesley’s theology of the means of grace in a practical way appropriate for use by men and women searching for a method by which Wesley’s teaching on sanctification could be embodied in daily life. In short, the rules are not simply a framework for organization and personal discipline. They are also a framework for the means of grace, which means that they carry a theological importance related to the way in which Methodists could reasonably be expected to experience the sanctifying grace of God in the process of their daily discipleship. In the following essay, I will pursue this argument first, with an historical review of the origin of the General Rules themselves; second, with a review of recent scholarly and popular treatments of the General Rules, and third, with an examination of the way in which Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace and the logic of the General Rules coalesce from the early period in his ministry.

“The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies”

The genesis of the General Rules came through Wesley’s efforts to regulate the Methodist society in Newcastle following the establishment of Methodist activity there in the early 1740s. Wesley had first visited the city in May of 1742, observing the area to be ripe for Methodist evangelism (Wesley, 1990:268-

270; cf. Heitzenrater, 1995:137-139). On a return trip in February and March of the following year, however, he was disappointed to find that discipline among many of the society members was flagging. Wesley set about to examine the whole of the society—an undertaking that had to be repeated as soon as it was accomplished the first time. Ultimately, the examination led to an exodus of 140 from the society (Wesley, 1990:315-318). Some 76 of those who departed fellowship with the Methodists did so voluntarily, and 64 persons were expelled by Wesley himself.

A notation in the section of Wesley's published *Journal* that describes the 1743 examination is instructive. Wesley records for March 6, 1743, "I read over in the society the rules which all our members are to observe, and desired everyone seriously to consider whether he was willing to conform thereto or no" (Wesley, 1990:316). The "rules" Wesley mentions here are those that would become known as the General Rules. They were published for the first time in Newcastle in February of 1743 carrying the full title, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, and Newcastle upon Tyne" (Wesley, 1989:67-75). Wesley's experience in Newcastle led him to develop the General Rules to serve a number of broad functions for the Methodist movement as a whole that are commonly cited in subsequent literature: to explain the purpose of a Methodist society, to lay out expectations for ongoing participation in the society, and to provide the basis by which tickets for class meetings (and therefore for society membership) would be renewed via examination. Over the course of Wesley's lifetime, the General Rules would be published in more than 30 editions in a number of places around the British Isles, in addition to a handful of editions published in New York and Philadelphia (Wesley, 1989:547-550). By laying out the baseline measure of commitment for continued participation with the Methodists in a given locale, the rules were one part of the peculiar form of organization that the Wesleyan revival was developing in the 1740s (Rack, 1992:237-250; Heitzenrater, 1995:103-146).

The text of the General Rules contains a prefatory section that gives historical background behind the development of the rules. Wesley points to the origin of the revival in 1739, when groups of men and women sought him out for pastoral guidance—persons who were "deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption" (Wesley, 1989:69). As Wesley tells it, this was the beginning of a form of organization that came to be called a "United Society."¹ Wesley describes a society as "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" (Wesley, 1989:69). He then explains the major subset of each society, which was the "class"—a unit that was still evolving to a degree when the rules were initially published

but which was quickly becoming the chief administrative and pastoral division of the society. Class meetings were made up of around 12 members and overseen by a “class leader,” an office described in the General Rules whose functions were itself both administrative (taking up collections and meeting with leadership) and pastoral (inquiring into the spiritual state of the class members and offering guidance and correction) (D.Watson, 1985; Albin, 2001).

Working from this background, Wesley then notes first that there was a low threshold to cross for those seeking to join a Methodist society, i.e., “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.” However, he then goes on to state that whenever this desire is genuinely held, “it will be shown by its fruits” (Wesley, 1989:70). He thus puts forth a standard for members to continue in the society; it is that they “should continue to evidence their desire of salvation” by adhering to three specific rules. The General Rules are then enumerated as follows (here in abbreviated form):

First, By doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind—especially that which is most generally practised...

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 is possible to all men:

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.

To their souls, by instructing, *reproving*, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine of devils, that ‘we are not to do good unless *our heart be free to it*.’...

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; and
Fasting, or abstinence (Wesley, 1989:70-73).²

Following this enumeration of the General Rules, Wesley concludes by emphasizing their central place in governing the Methodist movement. He writes,

If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any one of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul, as they that must give account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But if then he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls (Wesley, 1989:73).

From their beginning in Newcastle, these regulations then would quickly come to guide Wesley's oversight of all the Methodist societies under his leadership.

The General Rules in Contemporary Literature

Given the importance of the General Rules historically in early Methodism, it is perhaps surprising that relatively little attention has been paid to them in contemporary literature of either a pastoral or scholarly nature (Frank, 2009:245).³ In the mid-20th century, books concerned with the nature of church membership or church organization at times included sections on the General Rules (Harmon, 1955, 1977; Norwood, 1958; Kennedy, 1960). More relevant to the topic at hand are those works that have appeared in recent decades and fall generally into one of three types: *historical analyses*, *constructive engagements*, and *proposals for practical use*. While some overlap exists between the examples in each of these three categories, there is enough differentiation between the three that employing such a typology with respect to the contemporary literature can serve as a helpful way to survey the way scholars and clergy have interacted with the General Rules in recent years.

The first major type of treatment the General Rules have received in recent decades has been in the mode of historical analysis. Most of these locate the significance of the General Rules in early Methodist practice with some aspect of the Methodist understanding of “discipline.” This is not surprising given the original reason the rules were put in place by Wesley. Russell E. Richey, for instance, links the General Rules in a larger consideration of Methodist discipline as “practices that maintain one in holy living” (Richey, et al., 2005:78). Richey in his analysis recognizes the diverse constellation of such practices that the General Rules aim at engendering. The rules are intended to discipline not just one part of life but rather all of one's daily thoughts, actions, and habits. Thus, the rules cover the inner spiritual life, habits of speech, daily routine, interpersonal interactions, and relationship to the larger faith community—in other words, a comprehensive set of practices that together constitute the overall practice of the faith (Richey, et al., 2005:78-79).

The theme of discipline as the signal importance of the General Rules is echoed in the analyses of Charles W. Brockwell, Jr., and Thomas Edward Frank. Both authors see the rules as functioning in the establishment and regulation of disciplinary practice for the early Methodist communities, which Frank characterizes as a “common rule of life” for the societies of Wesley's Methodism (Frank, 2009:246). For Brockwell, this expression of religious life constitutes something like a religious order, and in that sense the General Rules should be seen alongside such structural features as circuit preaching, the class meetings, and the annual conferences as the framework for that order (Brockwell, 1984:9-12). Frank's claims for the ordered character of early Methodism and the function of the rules within it are somewhat less bold,

but he does see the rules as situated at the center of the common life of early Methodists. He writes:

The logic of the General Rules is central to how Methodism has characteristically understood discipline. This logic is grounded on an assumption of invitation into a way of life, structured by practices of studying and conversing in community to find the most useful ways to do good, avoid evil, and grow in the knowledge and love of God, and given substance by the divine ordinances through which God's grace is present (Frank, 2009:247-248).

Thus, while Frank does not claim that the General Rules are analogous to the regulated life of a religious order, he clearly does see them as providing the disciplined structure for the kind of life that in Methodism has historically been considered faithful.

The last example of an historical analysis comes from David Lowes Watson. Given the historical connection between the General Rules and the class meeting, Watson's extensive work on the latter gives his view of the rules an added significance. And perhaps unsurprisingly, Watson's evaluation of the General Rules runs parallel to his interpretation of the class meeting in many ways. He refers to the General Rules as "the form of Christian discipleship" (D.Watson, 1990:45). By following them with discipline and obedience, Christian believers prepare themselves for the power of grace when that power comes to them by the Holy Spirit. Watson underscores the central place of the General Rules in Wesley's Methodism by pointing to the various ways the rules were emphasized: in disciplining the societies through periodic examination of the classes, through conversation with the preachers at annual conference, and in personal correspondence between Wesley and others (D.Watson, 1990:40-44). Watson's view is informed by his deep knowledge of the practical organization of early Methodism, but in the end his interpretation runs along similar lines as those of Richey, Brockwell, and Frank. All these historical evaluations of the General Rules primarily focus on their role in fostering discipline in the early Methodist movement—both personal discipline for individual Methodists and organizational discipline within the constituent structures of Methodist societies (and in particular, the class meeting). There are hints in these scholars' work of a spiritual efficacy of the rules, but the weight of their interpretation is on the theme of discipline.

Somewhat different in approach is the second type of engagement with the General Rules, which includes those that are constructive in nature. Two examples in recent literature bear highlighting in this category. The first is a fascinating essay by Helmut Nausner the chief aim of which is an almost exegetical interpretation of the rules that highlights key biblical and pastoral

themes. Besides this historical exegesis, there is a major section of the essay that also sketches a rudimentary ecclesiology out of the General Rules. Nausner assumes that the rules are intended to speak to a particular kind of church, and he attempts to set forth the theological tenets of a General Rules-based ecclesial fellowship. For Nausner, these include that the church is to be an “open church,” that it is “God sent,” that it exists as a “church in expectation,” and that it is always marked as an “alive and committed fellowship” (Nausner, 1989:44-47). These phrases are all unpacked by Nausner to greater and lesser extents, a process that is less important here than it is simply to note that Nausner sees the General Rules as fertile ground for constructive theological work. Whether the General Rules possess the theological depth to support a full ecclesiology is clearly open to question and deserves further development, but Nausner’s initial effort at doing so represents a possible avenue for further work around Wesleyan/Methodist ecclesiology—itsself a relatively underdeveloped aspect of the tradition.

Joining Nausner in treating the General Rules in constructive theological fashion is Christopher Momany, who uses them as the basis for what he calls a “paradigm for postmodern ethics” (Momany, 1993). Momany sees the General Rules as a “decidedly premodern ethical construct” that is unencumbered by the development of critical ethical paradigms over the past two hundred years within philosophical ethics (Momany, 1993:9). His interest is in connecting what he sees as Wesley’s premodern approach to the ethical life with the emerging postmodern sensibility of the present. In particular, Momany sees great potential in appropriating the three-part formulation of the General Rules in the service of a second or “willed” naivete as regards the ethical life. Momany draws heavily on James Fowler’s work on stages of faith development for this constructive move, and a part of it incorporates reference to Wesley’s own biography (Momany, 1993:9-11). As with Nausner’s work, there are some points at which Momany seems to want the General Rules to do work for which they are not particularly well-suited (at least in their original intent).⁴ Yet also like Nausner, the interest that Momany has in using the General Rules in constructive fashion may suggest something about their depth as a theological resource that is a bit deceptive given their relatively simple formulation.

Finally, there are three works of a pastoral nature published within the last decade that fit into the third category—those that in some way propose the General Rules for practical use in the present. These examples include Rueben Job’s *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*, Kevin Watson’s *A Blueprint for Discipleship: Wesley’s General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living*, and Michael Cartwright & Andrew Kinsey’s *Watching Over One Another in Love: Reclaiming the Wesleyan Rule of Life for the Church’s Mission*. While all of them are intended for church audiences at the popular level, they are significant for our

consideration in that they represent a renewed interest generally in the General Rules and see them as appropriate for contemporary discipleship.

Of these three texts, the most widely read has been Reuben Job's *Three Simple Rules*.⁵ Job is a retired bishop in the United Methodist Church and is well known as a spiritual writer whose work has emphasized the devotional life within a Wesleyan framework (cf. Job, 1998). His interpretation of the General Rules emphasizes their use as it applies to devotional practice; this approach should not be surprising given Job's interests, but it may also represent something of a distortion of the communal and pastoral context of the General Rules' original formulation. For Job, the usefulness of the General Rules in the present is primarily geared toward personal spiritual growth. He often writes in the first person plural ("we") but *Three Simple Rules*' orientation is toward the individual and his or her devotional life.⁶ His interest is in the ability of the rules to bring persons into the felt experience of God's love. This explains the absence of any real attention to the importance of the Christian community in Job's presentation.⁷ It also explains a curious decision on Job's part—the alteration of the third rule from "attend upon the ordinances of God" to "stay in love with God."⁸ In the General Rules as Wesley renders them, the third rule serves to establish the practices that together constitute the community of faith; for Job, the admonition to "stay in love with God" is intended to "help keep us positioned in such a way that we may hear and be responsive to God's slightest whisper of direction and receive God's promised presence and power every day and in every situation" (Job, 2007:55). Here as elsewhere, the language of individual devotion pervades.

Kevin Watson's *A Blueprint for Discipleship*, is not as well-known as Job's *Three Simple Rules* but surpasses it in terms of providing the proper historical context in which to read the General Rules and presenting the rules to the contemporary church in a way that tries to attend to the tradition out of which the rules arise. His presentation includes chapters on both the nature of grace and the historical context of early Methodism, both of which precede his description of the General Rules themselves (K. Watson, 2009: 25-36 and 37-47). Watson attends less to matters of person devotion and more to the concept of discipleship formation, which he presses with reference to the "mutual accountability" of Christian believers practicing their faith in community with one another.⁹ One of the key ways he differs from Job can be seen in how he approaches the third rule; Watson, too, sees the need to rephrase Wesley's "attend upon the ordinances of God," but he does so using the language of "practicing the spiritual disciplines." The emphasis throughout is on a disciplined method to the practice of faith within the life of the faith community, a presentation of the General Rules for a contemporary audience that captures their original Wesleyan tenor.

The third text is also the most recent: Cartwright & Kinsey's *Watching Over One Another in Love*. In it, the authors encourage their readers toward an "engagement with the canonical text of the General Rules," something they see as distinct from the overview presentations of Job and Watson (Cartwright & Kinsey, 2011:11). Thus, they follow the format of a four-week long manual that guides readers through selections from the General Rules and also includes pastoral reflections, Scripture passages, and suggested prayers. The interest of Cartwright and Kinsey is not in providing a study or commentary on the General Rules; it is in motivating their readers to prayerfully engage with the three rules in a firsthand way. In pursuing this format, Cartwright & Kinsey reflect something of the devotional interest of Job but clearly want to locate personal faith in a communal context (Cartwright & Kinsey, 2011:8-10). They consider the General Rules to represent a Wesleyan "rule of life" and understand their project to be geared toward spiritual formation.

The General Rules in Wesley's Practical Theology

The recent engagements with the General Rules, while relatively few in number, do point to the diverse ways in which this key Wesleyan text can be appropriated. The historical examinations surveyed above, in particular, have shown the ways in which the General Rules served a disciplinary function in early Methodism. The constructive engagements appropriate the rules as resources for other theological projects. And the proposals for practical use seek to present the rules as a viable guideline for discipleship in the present. My aim here is to explore the theology of the General Rules. That task in many ways builds off of the various treatments of the General Rules already examined, but it also differs in a significant way. I want to explore the theology that inheres in the General Rules as they find articulation in Wesley, and that Wesley intended the General Rules to impart to the early Methodists who utilized them in their practice of the faith. (This of course means that I am operating under the conviction that the rules existed as more than a disciplinary mechanism from the time they were first published.) My hope for the outcome of this exploration is that a practical theology of the General Rules will emerge—the possibility of which requires examining the development of the rules in Wesley's thought and, in particular, their connection with the theology of the means of grace. In doing so, I believe the theological significance of the rules is seen to be their primary contribution to the Wesleyan understanding of discipleship.

A) The Nature of Practical Theology

"Practical theology" can be a somewhat ambiguous term, so a first step in approaching a practical theology of the General Rules should be in coming to grips with what we mean by it. Within a Wesleyan framework, one fruitful

interpretation of practical theology has been made by Randy L. Maddox. Maddox engaged the shifting definition of practical theology, including recent proposals to reclaim the sense of theology itself as a practical discipline, in a series of essays preparatory to his influential study, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (see Maddox, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1994). A part of Maddox's concern is to recover the sense of theology in the early church as a *habitus* whose purpose is to form Christian character and whose media tend to be sermons, liturgies, hymns, pastoral letters, catechetical treatises, and the like. Theology viewed in this way calls for an action-reflection dynamic that Maddox believes is expressed in the Greek sense of *phronesis* as a kind of practical wisdom gained from experience. Seen in this way, the heart of theology is neither purely in theory nor purely in practice; it is rather a praxis-oriented endeavor whose direction is constantly set by the aim of nurturing Christian discipleship and is enriched by reflection on that discipleship in the context in which the theologian works.¹⁰ The articulation of such a practical theology is thus grounded in a specific social and historical context, dependent upon practical wisdom gained by immersion in and commitment to that context, and aimed at illuminating faithful discipleship for persons and communities in the theologian's purview.

Maddox' reflections on the character (and future) of practical theology have much to recommend them. My purpose here, however, is less an evaluation of Maddox *per se* and more a proposal that the General Rules fit as an example of practical theology is just the way Maddox is suggesting. To do so, we must consider that the General Rules represent more than a mechanism for personal and organizational discipline—a consideration that I believe is substantiated by comparing the text of the rules with evidence of their development in Wesley's thought and with the broader context of Wesley's theology of the means of grace. So it is with this vision of practical theology that we should proceed in evaluating the General Rules at present.

B) *The Character of the Means of Grace*

For Wesley, the means of grace are made up of certain practices whereby God's grace is conveyed to the lives of persons such that they are brought into a saving relationship with God, or else sustained and nurtured in that relationship (cf. Wesley, 1984:381). He calls them the "usual channels of [God's] grace" (Wesley, 1984:378). An efficacious encounter with such means can occur prior to the knowledge of God in the experience of justification, such as when he refers to the Lord's Supper as a "converting ordinance" (Wesley, 1990:158). More regularly, the means of grace are those practices in which Christian believers engage for their sanctification, in which they open persons up to ongoing encounters with God that facilitate their growth in holiness of heart and life. The major categories that Wesley employs to describe

the means of grace are three in number: *instituted means of grace*, *prudential means of grace*, and *general means of grace*. While Wesley never develops these subcategories of the means of grace in any systematic way, he does offer enough material on them so that their fundamental contours are evident (see Knight, 1992; Thompson, 2012).

The instituted means of grace are those practices that can be discerned from the teaching and example of Jesus Christ in the gospels. While Wesley's lists of such means differ depending on the context in which he is suggesting them, a standard number can be inferred from his enumeration in the edition of the "Large Minutes" of 1789: Prayer, Searching the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper, Fasting, and Christian Conference (a list strikingly similar, though not identical, with the third rule of the General Rules) (Wesley, 2011:922-923). The concept of the means of grace became explicitly central to Wesley's understanding as early as 1731 as evidenced in a letter to his mother Susanna in which he discusses the importance he places on them (Wesley, 1980:282-284). Implicitly, Wesley's Anglican formation from the time of his childhood meant that engagement with such practices was always fundamental to his understanding of the faith. In the crucial period of his theological development from the 1730s and early 1740s, it was his conviction about the importance of the means of grace that caused him to part ways first with the mysticism of William Law and later from the Moravians (Thompson, 2012:90-122). In this development, Wesley consistently pointed to the biblical basis of the instituted means of grace as non-negotiable aspects of faithful discipleship: they are means of grace, to be sure, but they are also ordinances of God clearly commanded to Christian believers in Scripture (cf. Wesley, 1990:157).

The prudential means of grace are those that are discovered to be means of grace through Christian prudence, or the wisdom gained by an engaged participation in the life of discipleship.¹¹ Henry H. Knight III has suggested a listing of the prudential means of grace that aggregates examples from Wesley at various times and includes particular rules of holy living (such as those contained in the first two of Wesley's General Rules), class and band meetings, auxiliary services of worship (e.g., watch-nights, covenant renewals, and love feasts), visiting the sick, and devotional or theological study (Knight, 1992:5).¹² The eclectic nature of such a list points to the open-ended character of the prudential means of grace. There is no real limit to such a category, so long as it is understood within certain parameters—what Ole E. Borgen describes as, "Whatever is conducive to holiness and love becomes, to that extent, a means of grace" (Borgen, 1986:105).¹³ For Wesley, the fact that such practices are discovered to be means of grace through practical experience makes them no less true means of grace.¹⁴ And moreover, the prudential means of grace tend to be context-related responses to commands that *are*

explicitly Scriptural—as when Wesley relates the idea of “works of mercy” with Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25:31-40 (cf. Wesley, 1984:164-165; 1984:573; and 1986:191).

The general means of grace make up the least well-developed category in Wesley’s thought and tend to refer to dispositional qualities of character associated with New Testament concepts associated with the imitation of Christ or obedience to Christ’s commands. Wesley’s explicit use of the term is found in the *Minutes* of the 1745 Conference, where he refers to such dispositions as “universal obedience; in keeping all the commandments; in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily” as among the general means of grace (Wesley, 2011:155). Though he does not appear to use the term “general means of grace” elsewhere, he certainly employs the concept when he writes about individual items that fit into the category (cf. Wesley, 1985:238-250). He also assigns a special kind of importance to the general means of grace, which is seen in his claim in the *Large Minutes* that the general means of grace will always produce fruit in the life of the believer whereas it is possible that instituted and prudential means of grace can be used without fruits (Wesley, 2011:924). Wesley’s reasoning behind such a statement seems to be related to the contemplative character of such means; they are forms of inward spiritual discipline whereby one is brought into harmony with the will of God.¹⁵ In that sense, it is absolutely crucial to use the general means of grace in conjunction with those of an instituted and prudential character.

It is no exaggeration to say that the means of grace stand as the sacramental grammar of Wesley’s thought.¹⁶ They are expansively sacramental, of course, in that they include both the sacraments proper as well as other practices understood to have a certain sacramental power. But so long as we understand “sacramental” to mean “sacramental in a broad sense,” then the attribution of the means of grace as Wesley’s sacramental grammar is entirely appropriate. With respect to the efficacy of the means of grace for salvation, it is important to emphasize the way grace itself is understood in the Wesleyan vein—namely, as an expression of God’s love that is enabling and co-operative, and which is generally experienced via engagement with practices of worship, devotion, and outreach. In addition, it is characteristic of the means of grace in the Wesleyan understanding that they are inherently communal in character. The quintessential expression of this idea is Wesley’s statement that there is “no holiness but social holiness,” an oft-misunderstood phrase that is intended to refer to the way in which holiness or sanctification becomes a reality in individuals only insofar as those individuals are located in a community of faith where their practice of discipleship is grounded and carried out in company with fellow believers (Wesley, 1958b:321-322).

There is ample evidence that Wesley’s theology of the means of grace was reaching a mature form even prior to his well-known experience on Aldersgate

Street on 24 May 1738. While the period following Aldersgate saw some continuing spiritual turmoil in Wesley's life, it is significant that the theological understanding he came to have in the following years (and one that distanced him from his erstwhile Moravian mentors) was one that was centered around the means of grace. In this, Wesley holds in tension a theological position not always seen as compatible: a strong belief in justification by faith as experienced in the reality of new birth, together with a deeply sacramental sense of ongoing sanctification via participation in the practices of the faith. The use of the means of grace is, of course, appropriate for both those who are awaiting the gift of faith and those who are already well on the road of sanctification. They are simply the normal vehicle appointed by God for encountering his redeeming grace, regardless of one's location at any given time along the way of salvation. Those who await faith in Christ Jesus are encouraged by Wesley to "wait in the means." For those who have a living faith, the use of the means of grace facilitates their growth in holiness of heart and life—a conviction reflected in Wesley's 1765 sermon, "The Lord Our Righteousness," where he asserts that there is no one to whom Christ imputes his righteousness that he does not also implant that righteousness (Wesley, 1984:458-459). As righteousness is implanted, the means of grace become the way whereby holiness grows over time as true Christian character is formed in the life of the believer. The means of grace therefore serve as a linchpin in Wesley's theology that allows him to hold together a robust conception of both justification and sanctification.

C) The General Rules and the Means of Grace

Wesley's focus on the means of grace incorporates considerations of the idea that will develop into the General Rules as far back as his Oxford period. Indeed, some of his early statements about the means of grace are directly connected to an early conviction about the General Rules; key initial considerations of each of them come practically in the same breath. We see this in a pair of letters written by Wesley in 1731—the first to Mary Pendarves (whom Wesley called "Aspasia") and the second to his brother, Samuel Wesley, Jr. Earlier in the same year, Wesley had begun to think about the means of grace in categories of "instituted" and "prudential" following his reading of the philosopher John Norris' *Treatise Concerning Christian Prudence* (Wesley, 1980:282-284). The categorization was apparently helpful to Wesley in thinking about the ways in which he and the Oxford Methodists were engaging in their practice of the faith. To Aspasia, Wesley writes a defensive letter complaining of criticism he has received by those in Oxford who think he is guilty of "being too strict, with carrying things too far in religion, and laying burdens on myself, if not on others, which were neither necessary nor possible to be borne." Wesley responds to such accusations by claiming that he only

wants to know true happiness, a state he equates with holiness and which is attainable only by loving God. The way to attain this holiness is by the means of grace. Wesley describes the instituted means of grace as “such means as are ordered by God.” The prudential means of grace he calls, “such as are recommended by experience and reason” (Wesley, 1980:294). He goes on in the letter to elaborate on both these categories, and his description of the prudential means of grace merits special attention here. To Aspasia, Wesley writes

As to prudential means, I believe this rule holds, of things indifferent in themselves: whatever hinders the extirpating my vile affections or the transferring my rational ones to proper objects, that to me is not indifferent, but resolutely to be abstained from, however familiar and pleasing. Again, of things indifferent in themselves, whatever helps me to conquer vicious and advance in virtuous affections, that to me is not indifferent, but to be embraced, be it ever so difficult or painful (Wesley, 1980:294).

Wesley’s wording is a bit convoluted, but his meaning is clear enough. His view of such prudential means—those “recommended by experience and reason”—is that they assist in the formation of oneself in holiness either by facilitating the avoidance of things detrimental or the pursuance of things beneficial.

Wesley’s letter to his brother Samuel later in the same year runs parallel to the earlier one to Aspasia. He is again concerned to lay out his understanding about the use of the means to true happiness and holiness (which he here refers to as “all those practices for which ... I am generally accused of singularity,” doubtless in reference to opposition to him at Oxford) (Wesley, 180:321). Here he describes the prudential means of grace as follows: “I believe this rule holds of things indifferent in themselves: whatever I know to do me hurt, that to me is not indifferent, but resolutely to be abstained from; whatever I know to do me good, that to me is not indifferent, but resolutely to be embraced” (Wesley, 1980:322). It is a statement worded in a less complicated way than the parallel in the letter to Aspasia, and one carrying much the same meaning.

These two letters bear significance for what they reveal about the prudential means of grace and the General Rules. Wesley is giving descriptive contours to the prudential means of grace in a way that clarifies a concept that is sometimes treated in confusing fashion in contemporary Wesleyan theology. With respect to the General Rules in particular, his connection of the prudential means of grace with the first two rules puts the General Rules as a whole in a somewhat different light than what we have seen in other treatments of them—namely, as a method of discipline. It isn’t that the role of the General Rules in promoting discipline is contradicted here; far from it. There is something important added, though, and it is that the General Rules are

posited as guidelines for engagement with the means of grace. Thus, the regulatory function of the rules does not exhaust their usefulness. For instance, it is not that the rules govern proper behavior *so that* society members might be put in the kind of place where they can encounter God's grace in other ways. It is rather that the rules *themselves* are expressions of the means of grace. The means of grace that are termed "prudential" are dependent on context for the form they take, and they are dependent on the exercise of practical wisdom for identifying that those context-dependent forms are indeed true means of grace. They are, however, no less means of grace for their prudential character; the first two of the General Rules are meant to articulate this point in ways that can be embraced and pursued by Christians at the level of their daily practice.¹⁷

When we view the first two of the General Rules as summary statements of the prudential means of grace, it helps to understand why the third rule ("attending upon the ordinances of God") is included with the first two and framed in the way that it is. The list of these ordinances (prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper, etc.) is representative of what Wesley considers to be the instituted means of grace. It is clear from elsewhere in his writing on the means of grace that Wesley does not want the Methodists ever to fall into the habit of practicing them in a purely regulatory way, as duties the performance of which suffices for the fulfillment of the religious life. Such a mistake is foremost in the critique Wesley makes in his sermon, "The Means of Grace," when he states that the formalist abuse of the means of grace is committed by those who "did not conduce to the end for which they were ordained" (Wesley, 1984:379). And in "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, II," Wesley actually refers to the General Rules as a whole (with the third rule now termed collectively "the means of grace") as "what the world accounts religion," which he contrasts with the earnest believer "who hungers after God" (Wesley, 1984:496-497). None of this suggests that Wesley is contradicting himself. It rather simply means that he wants the rules to be seen for the purpose he believes they are intended: as true means to the end of loving God and neighbor. It is only when the ordinances of God are viewed and pursued in this way that the believer can "be filled with righteousness and true holiness" (Wesley, 1984:497). It is therefore appropriate to include the third rule with the first two exactly because all three of the General Rules are meant to nurture their practitioners in a relationship with the living God. Collectively, the General Rules are a practical theological articulation of the means of grace.¹⁸

The General Rules as we find them in published form in 1743 were thus not the spontaneous creations of Wesley following his encounter with the recalcitrant Methodist society in Newcastle. They were rather the articulation of a principle long operative in Wesley's theology stretching back some 15

years that was meant to provide a practical framework of spiritual discipline whereby seekers after salvation could reasonably expect to encounter grace. That is, they were a framework for the means of grace. It is in just this sense that we can say that the practical theology of the means of grace inheres in the General Rules. The textual material in which the rules are narrated may not at first glance seem like the stuff of a robust theology. But it is certainly the stuff of a robust practical theology, if by that term we mean (following Maddox) a theology aimed at a certain kind of Christian practice, geared toward nurturing faithful Christian character, and expressed in a literary genre most appropriate to the task for which it was intended. That the General Rules were used in a disciplinary manner within Methodist societies there can be no doubt. Viewing them primarily as a regulatory mechanism in this way, however, sells short the full purpose for which they were intended. That purpose was a pastoral one, whereby a theology of the means of grace was communicated to men and women in Methodist societies in an intimately practical manner so that their Christian practice might itself be formed and informed.

Conclusion

Late in his life, Wesley penned a sermon now known by the title, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in which his emphasis on the use of the means of grace reaches something of a homiletical crescendo. In it, he cites those “steps which the Scripture directs us to take, in the working out of our own salvation” (Wesley, 1986:205). He begins by mentioning a version of the first two of the General Rules—that we should “carefully avoid every evil word and work” and that we should “learn to do well.” He then goes on to name a version of the instituted means of grace, thereby inserting the third rule into his counsel as well.¹⁹ It is significant that these practices are not mentioned in this instance as regulatory items to be adhered to for the purpose of discipline. They are instead grouped together under the heading of “every means of drawing near to God” (Wesley, 1986:206). In other words, they are articulated with reference to salvation.

Wesleyans in the present should take notice of the caution such a pastoral counsel provides. Wesley himself is saying that there can be no embrace of a set of rules that, by formal adherence, can substitute for what God intends to do in present salvation. Rather, the General Rules are a practical theological expression of the means of grace, intended to assist Christian believers in coming to a knowledge of God and thereby nurturing them into the life of holiness that simply *is* salvation in this life. Writing in 1984, Brockwell could only lament the fate of the General Rules in Methodist discipleship. He referred to the Rules as “relics altogether,” a judgment he believed was appropriate because “their origin and interpretation have been forgotten” (Brockwell, 1984:19).²⁰ If that has been the case in recent decades, it need not

be the case in the decades to come. The best chance Wesleyans have to reclaim the central importance of the General Rules is in seeing them as Wesley originally intended: as a pattern for the use of the means of grace.

End Notes

¹ Though it does not bear on the argument of the present essay, it is worth pointing out that Wesley seems to be confused as to the location of the first “United Society”—he claims it was at London, whereas the actual bringing together of separate groups into a larger society under Wesley’s leadership was at Bristol. See, e.g., Heitzenrater, 1995:105.

² There is significant material for the first and second rules of the General Rules that I have omitted here for the sake of brevity. In the case of the first rule, Wesley includes a number of examples of the kind of activities and attitudes he has in mind (from brawling to drunkenness, and from malicious gossip to the practice of usury). In the case of the second rule, Wesley’s examples are less in terms of specific acts and more oriented toward the practice of Christian virtues expressed with allusions to the New Testament (doing good to those of the household of faith, running the race set before them, taking up the cross, etc.). In each case, there is an attempt by Wesley to provide guidance for the contextual situations in which early Methodists might find themselves at the time.

³ In his consideration of discipline in Methodist practice, Thomas Edward Frank notes the lack of scholarly attention to the topic of discipline in studies of Methodist history generally. As he considers the General Rules primarily under the heading of discipline, his broader judgment would apply here to the rules more narrowly.

⁴ This is especially the case when Momany begins to link the rules to “do not harm” and “do good” with ethical principles of nonmaleficence and beneficence, connections which obviously have a superficial similarity but which also rely on taking the General Rules wholly out of their own context in order to identify them within the frame of philosophical ethics as Momany wants to do (see Momany, 1993:14-17). My point here will be implicitly underscored in the following section of the present essay, which examines the General Rules as guidelines for the means of grace which bear on the understanding of salvation within a Wesleyan practical theology.

⁵ The wide success of Job’s book has been undoubtedly helped by a major marketing effort of its publisher, Abingdon Press, which has turned it into something of a brand. Abingdon has produced a host of age-related short-term studies around the “Three Simple Rules” motif, a DVD-based video featuring Job, and has translated Job’s book into multiple languages. The publisher’s marketing effort has even produced a “Three Simple Rules” bookmark that can be purchased in bulk! Whatever one thinks about the General Rules as a consumer product, the popularity of Job does at least suggest that the General Rules are becoming more well-known among Methodist folk than they have for decades.

⁶ This can be seen in *Three Simple Rules* where Job lapses from using “we” into the first person “I” for an extended period in a way that accentuates the individual devotional orientation of his treatment of the rules (see Job, 2007:31-49).

⁷ Note, e.g., Job’s singular emphasis on the individual as regards the significance of the rule to do no harm (Job, 2007:31-32).

⁸ Of all Job's idiosyncratic ways of interacting with the General Rules, it is his alteration of the third rule that is the most telling. In Job's presentation, the original Wesleyan insistence on attending upon the ordinances of God becomes transformed into a counsel that "This simple rule will be constructed differently for each of us because each of us is unique" (Job, 2007:55).

⁹ The theme of accountability within community, present throughout Watson's work, is underscored by a penultimate chapter on the "importance of Christian community" (K. Watson, 2009:103-111). By attending to the communal context of discipleship as framed by the General Rules, Watson goes a long way in preserving the Wesleyan character of the rules and their intended use.

¹⁰ Maddox refers to this guiding aim as an "orienting concern" that brings consistency to the work of practical theology. He employs "responsible grace" as the orienting concern for Wesley, seeing it as a concept with a multivalent significance related to the nature of God's grace and human response in the reality of salvation. Maddox's employment of these concepts finds its full development in *Responsible Grace* (Maddox, 1994).

¹¹ While made in a somewhat different context than a discussion of the means of grace, Wesley's definition of prudence in his "Advice to the Clergy" (1756) as "an habitual consideration of all the circumstances of a thing" seems relevant here (Wesley, 1958a:485).

¹² In addition to Knight's description, that of Kenneth J. Collins on the prudential means of grace is helpful: "the prudential means of grace provide the structure, the parameters, through which the greatest advances in grace can be realized in Christian practice. In other words, prudential means are those which are considered prudent by an enlightened reason and by informed experience and which direct and guide the spiritual life as it continues to encounter the rich grace of God both in and through these particular practices" (Collins, 1986:27). This apt description serves to point both to the great potential of the prudential means as well as the flexible sense in which they are conceived through Christian experience.

¹³ Cf. Ted Campbell's identification of the prudential means of grace as limited to "distinctively Methodist practices" (Campbell, 2009:282), a claim that seems far too narrow given the diverse articulation of the prudential means of grace by Wesley that we have cited in this section.

¹⁴ Wesley emphasizes this point about the context-dependent nature of the prudential means of grace in relation to bands meeting in the city of Bristol early in the revival (see Wesley, 1990:46-47). Much later he makes a similar point in relation to the works of mercy (see Wesley, 1986:385).

¹⁵ Wesley's sermon, "Self-denial" (1760), represents an extended argument about this point specifically in relation to self-denial and taking up one's cross (two of the general means of grace). See Wesley, 1985:241-245.

¹⁶ I utilize the term "sacramental grammar" to illuminate the logic of the means of grace in Wesley's theology in my recent dissertation. I find that it captures the broadly sacramental character of the means of grace generally in Wesley's soteriology and in the practical theology of early Methodist discipleship (see Thompson, 2012:9-10, 38, and 246-247).

¹⁷ At times those who have written on the means of grace have hinted at a connection between the prudential means of grace and the General Rules, but the

point has remained undeveloped. Borgen in his study of Wesley's sacramental theology cites the 17 November 1731, letter to Samuel Wesley, Jr., in connection with the prudential means of grace but does not go on to connect it with the General Rules (see Borgen, 1986:105). Knight in his analysis of the means of grace in Wesley's theology places the General Rules' first two rules under the heading of the prudential means of grace in an outline of Wesley's typology of the means of grace but does so without significant explanation (see Knight, 1992:5). Cf. Knight's later examination of the substructures of Methodist societies under the heading of the prudential means of grace, a section which includes some discussion of the General Rules but without any of the historical connection that I have made here (Knight, 1992: 95-116).

¹⁸ While I have not included the general means of grace along with the instituted and prudential means of grace at this point in my analysis, it is fairly clear that Wesley understood the general means to be included in the second rule, which refers to self-denial and taking up one's cross as aspects of doing good.

¹⁹ As with some of the previously cited instances in this essay (e.g., the second rule), Wesley folds in a number of the general means of grace to this larger consideration also. Here, he mentions specifically denying oneself and taking up the cross.

²⁰ Brockwell's comments on the General Rules at this point come in the context of a larger consideration of the shift of Methodist discipline from a *regula vitae* to a body of canon law mostly useful for ecclesiastical administration. On Brockwell's account, the original intent of Wesleyan spiritual discipline embodied in the General Rules and other forms of discipleship had been entirely lost by at least the mid-20th century.

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