

The means of grace and the desire(s) of the heart

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“O for a heart to praise my God.” This phrase by Charles Wesley, in his poetic reflection on Ps. 51.10, has come to be a sustaining trope in my own spiritual life even as it remains an unachieved goal and an unfilled desire. That it should be a goal or desire is a very Methodist claim. As John Wesley makes clear in several sermons, including “The Means of Grace,” “Circumcision of the Heart,” as well as others, “a heart to praise my God” was the very purpose and end of the means of grace, and especially of the three chief means of grace—prayer, searching the scriptures, and the Lord’s supper. What the Wesleys were after was not simply a feeling (“the strangely warmed heart”) but a persisting form of life, sometimes called the affections or, more frequently, holy tempers, in relationship to the Triune God.¹ For them, holiness is “the heart perfected in love;” the means toward such perfection is the right use of the means of grace. And yet, Henry Knight’s assertion some years ago remains relevant today: “it is our neglect of the full range of these means of grace, or of their interrelationship, which accounts for superficial or partial realizations of the Christian life in this age.”² Daniel Benedict echoed this sentiment in his own claim that “espousing the mission of making Christian disciples [for the transformation of the world, as in the current United Methodist mission statement] will remain a vague platitude in congregational life until spiritual leaders order and shape congregational life around the means of grace.”³ Benedict went on to wonder how often people “settle for church (organizational) membership because congregational life fails to focus on the Christian life and the identity and presence of God to be known and experienced through the means of grace.”⁴ What both Knight and Benedict imply is that renewal of the church comes not by slogans, programs, and church renewal conferences, but by renewal of the habits and desires of human hearts, renewal accomplished through sustained attention to the chief means of grace as formative practices of the church.

It is toward this end—the renewal of the church—and within the context of The United Methodist Church in the United States that I will explore the formative character of these three graceful (and grace-filled) practices and the ways in which their regular, disciplined practice enables God in Christ through the Spirit to transform our hearts. In particular I will consider how they enable us to practice the language of the kingdom (communal prayer), learn a Christian

¹ See Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 69, 179, 201.

² Henry H. Knight, III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 86. Unfortunately, Bishop Rueben Job’s “translation” of the third general rule of the Methodist societies, “attending upon all the ordinance of God,” in his little book *Three Simple Rules* as “staying in love with God” through some general sense of “essential spiritual disciplines” conceals the centrality of the chief means of grace in Wesley’s system. While Wesley often expanded his list of the ordinary means, including fasting and abstinence as well as Christian conferencing, the three chief means of grace, prayer, searching the scriptures, and the Lord’s Supper, remained a constant part of the general rules. [See Rueben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 53.] What Job does accurately describe, however, is the purpose of the means of grace, as practices through which we “learn of God’s love for us” and “where our love for God is nurtured and sustained” (Job, *Three Simple Rules*, 55.)

³ Daniel T. Benedict, “Ordering Congregational Life Around the Means of Grace” in *Worship Matters*, vol. 1, ed. E. Byron Anderson (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), 44.

⁴ Benedict, “Ordering Congregational Life,” 45.

“social imaginary” (searching the scriptures), and order our desires and relationships toward social holiness (the Lord’s Supper). I acknowledge, on the one hand, that such a separation of ends is artificial, as the three practices are not only intertwined in and enable each other, but also seek the same end—holiness of hearts. I also want to acknowledge, on the other hand, Wesley’s caution about the use of the means of grace for ends other than that of holiness, that the right use of the means of grace requires their “subservience to the end of religion...to the knowledge and love of God.”⁵ Yet, what we can again discover is that by creating communities in which these means of grace are practiced and sustained, and where individuals are accountable for their practice—practice and accountability also key components of the Wesleys’ reforms, we create contexts that contribute to the renewal of the church and of the world.

I noted earlier my concern about the popularity of Bishop Job’s restatement of “attending on the ordinances of God” as “staying in love with God” through spiritual disciplines that may or may not include these chief means of grace. While Wesley makes a case for the centrality of these means of grace in Christian life as the “ordinary channels” of God’s grace, several recent authors provide additional perspective on why we would focus on these practices in particular. They do so in a way that I think is consistent with Wesley’s own understanding. Reinhold Hütter talks about them as “core practices” of the church. While noting that these practices can be distorted and misused (for example, pastoral prayers that are actually sermons directed to the congregation, or “self-serve” communion events), they “imply a normative standard, a *regula fidei*.”⁶ They are “core practices” because they are “constitutive for the mode of enactment of the Holy Spirit’s economic mission and thus for the church itself.”⁷ Through them the Holy Spirit is actively working in the person, contributing to a lifelong process of sanctification. Developing his argument primarily from a conversation with Luther’s works, Hütter is careful to keep the emphasis on God’s work in us through the Spirit, an emphasis also found in the Wesleys. As Hütter notes, the practices may appear to be our work, but “the human being remains the one who *through* these works of the Holy Spirit is qualified and receives a new ‘form,’ the one who is thus modeled through the Spirit of Christ, the *forma fidei*.”⁸

Another perspective is provided by North American philosopher Albert Borgmann, who describes what he calls “focal things” and “focal practices” in a similar way.⁹ For Borgmann, focal things, like book, font, and table, scripture, baptism and Eucharist, operate both internally, gathering together sets of relationships of meaning (as do all symbols), and outwardly, informing what surrounds the focal thing. A table, including the Lord’s table, is simultaneously a place for holy action, a place for a meal, a place of hospitality, and a place for the gathering of a

⁵ John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 381.

⁶ Reinhold Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1997), 133. See also Reinhold Hütter, “Hospitality and Truth: The Disclosure of Practices in Worship and Doctrine” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2002), 221.

⁷ Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 132.

⁸ Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 132.

⁹ I develop a more extended conversation with Borgmann’s work in E. Byron Anderson, “Eucharist and Prayer,” in *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist*, ed. Jason Vickers (Nashville: Foundry Books, 2016), 253-272, and E. Byron Anderson, “Stop, look, listen: Contemplative teaching and learning,” *Journal of Christian Education* 10.2 (Fall 2013): 392-406. The following paragraphs draw on “Eucharist and Prayer,” 259-264.

community. It reflects outwardly to inform the character of other tables and of meals, especially at home, that serve in similar ways, helping us to see those ordinary tables and meals as places and practices where the Lord is also present.

But focal things do not, as Wesley might say, have any power in themselves. They require “focal practice,” regular use in order to maintain both meaning and influence. Without focal practice, the focal thing would no longer have “centering and orienting force.”¹⁰ From Borgmann’s perspective, focal practices are ways of “keeping the faith”—both in reference to the faith we profess and in relationship to the focal thing itself. Through focal practice, the focal thing is saved “for an opening in our lives.”¹¹ This may make it seem like little more than a kind of practical bookmark or placeholder, but the purpose of focal practice is to keep us continually engaged with the focal thing and to keep it at the center of our attention. As Borgmann describes it, such practice “sponsors discipline and skill which are exercised in a unity of achievement and enjoyment, of mind, body, and the world, of myself and others, and in a social union.”¹² More, he writes, “focal practices...bring us closer to that intensity of experience where the world engages one painfully in hunger, disease, and confinement. A focal practice also discloses fellow human beings more fully and may make us more sensitive to the plight of those persons whose integrity is violated or suppressed.”¹³ Focal practices, he seems to suggest, intensify the reality of the world in which we live, drawing attention to that reality by means of focusing our attention through the thing and its practice. Where a focal thing says, “pay attention here,” a focal practice is our work of repeatedly paying attention, perhaps even a practice of “constant communion.”

As we know all too well, the things we choose to pay attention to have formative power in our lives, whether it is scripture, the Lord’s Table, our Facebook page, or our cellphones. As James Smith argues “we are shaped by material bodily practices that aim or point our love,” our hearts, and our desires toward particular social imaginaries.¹⁴ The question, he implies, is whether those material bodily practices will aim us toward ultimate visions of human flourishing—to particular configurations of what “the kingdom” should look like—or toward social configurations that work against that flourishing. Greg Clapper offers a similar claim, making explicit a connection to Wesley’s theology. In Clapper’s reading, Wesley seems to make clear that “whatever is the object of our attention will determine the form of our heart, the posture of our soul, the nature of our affections.”¹⁵ Here, too, we are confronted by the awareness that those things which have formative power in our lives, those things which become the focus of our attention, are often not representations of *God’s kingdom* but of the “principalities and powers” of the world, resulting in a kind of “distemper” and disordered affection that leads away from spiritual renewal.

Borgmann is conscious of the fact that because repetition often leads to ritualization, a focal practice is always at risk of degenerating “into an empty and perhaps deadening ritual.”¹⁶

¹⁰ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), 207.

¹¹ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 209.

¹² Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 219.

¹³ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 225.

¹⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 131.

¹⁵ Gregory Clapper, “*Orthokardia: The Practical Theology of John Wesley’s Heart Religion*,” *Quarterly Review* 10.1 (Spring 1990): 52.

¹⁶ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 209.

At that point, the practice seems to collapse in upon itself. Correction to empty ritual comes, Borgmann argues, not by avoiding focal practices, as often has been the case for many protestants who have argued that frequency of practice diminishes the importance of the practice, but by allowing the focal thing “to re-emerge in all its splendor,”¹⁷ to engage the practice in its fullest form rather than as some memorial token. By doing so, the practice enables our attention to “radiate out” from the eucharistic meal to other meals, from this community to a larger community, from this action of God to God’s saving work in the world. The aim is not ritual for religion’s sake, but focal practice for the transformation of our hearts. The aim, as Daniel Benedict claims, “is to ensure that people are consistently and reliably formed in the practice of the presence and identity of God, and in faithful living and loving in the world.”¹⁸

I have situated this discussion of the means of grace in contemporary discussions of “core” and “focal” practices because the contemporary context in the United States, characterized increasingly by persons who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” seems to reflect something of a similar tension, though with different theological sources, that John Wesley experienced in the “stillness controversy” that prompted his sermon “On the Means of Grace.” I have also provided this discussion to enable an exploration of what we might call the “secondary” ends of these practices, the things these means of grace enable on the way to and in support of holiness of heart. If we do reclaim these “chief means of grace” as core or focal practices, what and how do they contribute to the renewal of the human heart and the renewal of the church?

1. Scripture: shaping the social imaginary

Rather than considering how scripture serves as a doctrinal or theological source, I want to consider how our “searching the scriptures” through hearing, reading, and meditating (as Wesley suggests in his sermon “The Means of Grace”) shapes and forms a particular imaginative narrative framework through which we learn to read the world and our lives. That is, I want to briefly consider how regular and repeated encounter with scripture shapes what Charles Taylor calls a “social imaginary.”

Taylor’s work is important because he shows us how social moral orders, including our understanding of the place of religion in those orders, develop and change over time. He uses the phrase “social imaginary” to describe the ways in which “people imagine their social existence” come to be expressed in “images, stories, and legends” rather than in theoretical terms. The social imaginary is “shared by large groups of people” rather than a limited few and is a “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”¹⁹ It has a communal and public character. The social imaginary is both “factual and normative,” providing a sense of “how things usually go” and “how they ought to go.”²⁰ He also claims that “it can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature.”²¹ At the same time, Taylor recognizes that while the social imaginary can be “full of self-serving fiction and suppression,” leading to practices that are more

¹⁷ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 209.

¹⁸ Benedict, “Ordering Congregational Life,” 46.

¹⁹ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

²⁰ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 24.

²¹ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 25.

death-giving than life-supporting, “it is also an essential constituent of the real,” shaping, conditioning, and organizing the way we live together and understand our world.²²

How do we get from “social imaginary” to scripture? James Smith’s discussion of Taylor’s work in *Desiring the Kingdom* helps make the connection explicit. Smith writes, “the *Scriptures* function as the script of the worshiping community, the story that narrates the identity of the people of God, the constitution of this baptismal city, and the fuel of the Christian imagination.”²³ While Christian people, at least in the US and Europe, are constantly confronted by the counter-narratives of modern individualism and global capitalism, scripture provides what should be the fundamental narrative framework of our social imaginary. It “narrates the *telos* of creation, the shape of the kingdom we’re looking for, thus filling in the *telos* of our own action.”²⁴ Henry Knight, in his extended discussion of Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace, makes similar connections. As the “heart of the Christian life,” he writes, scripture gives it “a form and shape based on and in response to the character of God.”²⁵ More, “scripture is an ongoing context within which the Christian life is lived, an environment which nourishes and sustains that life.”²⁶

Jim Fodor, in a brief essay connecting the reading and hearing of scripture in the context of public worship with ethical formation, develops these points in helpful ways. He sounds perhaps a bit idealistic in his claims and assumes the regular, repeated, and comprehensive reading of scripture as provided by something like the Revised Common Lectionary, but his points are worth considering. First, the regular repeated liturgical reading of scripture enables the “gathered faithful [to] begin to acquire a peculiar kind of scriptural competence, which is but another way of describing ‘faithful living.’”²⁷ That competency “amounts to an ability to follow ‘the entire rhythm of [Scripture’s] argument and the detail of its imagery’.”²⁸

Second, such reading and hearing “serves to accentuate the central motifs of faith, reinforce its principal themes, and rehearse its characteristic movements. At the same time, crucial dissonances and disharmonies are awakened, identified and, in certain instances, even accentuated.”²⁹ This is true whether we are following the *lectio selecta* principle at play during the festal part of the church year or the *lectio continua* offered in the seasons of Ordinary time as these are set out in the Revised Common Lectionary. We come to hear particular narratives as they are tied to occasions in the life of God’s people, in Israel and in the church, and are invited to insert our own lives into those narratives. For example, what do we begin to hear in the Sundays following the Epiphany (in each of the three years of the Revised Common Lectionary)

²² Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 183.

²³ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 195.

²⁴ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 196.

²⁵ Henry H. Knight, III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 149.

²⁶ Knight, *The Presence of God*, 151.

²⁷ Jim Fodor, “Reading the Scriptures: Rehearsing Identity, Practicing Character” in *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 147.

²⁸ Fodor, “Reading the Scriptures,” 148.

²⁹ Fodor, “Reading the Scriptures,” 146. Having said this, Michael Jagessar and Stephen Burns, in *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2011), provide a helpful critical perspective, reminding us that we need to give more attention to the *contrapuntality* of the readings as they “interject, disrupt, upset, and contest” with each other, helping to overturn discourses of domination and privilege (77).

as we move steadily over several weeks from Jesus' baptism to the calling of the disciples and the call to discipleship? Or, what do we begin to learn about ourselves as a community of faith as we launch into a reading of 1 Corinthians, with its emphasis on our call to be saints, the affirmation of our giftedness in the Spirit, and the appeal to be of one mind and purpose?

Third, Fodor claims, through the regular repeated liturgical reading of scripture "God's people discover that their imaginations are fired, their hopes enlivened, their vision expanded, their sensibilities reformed and refashioned."³⁰ He returns to this claim toward the end of essay, writing "through continual repetition, reading Scripture works to convert, transform the reader, by providing 'a broad imaginative territory' in which readers allow themselves to be 'defined afresh.'³¹ In these two comments Fodor is pointing us more directly to the formation of a social imaginary. But their truth is difficult to realize in contexts where scripture has been relegated to little more than a supporting role to the preacher's topic or where it is used to continue practices of discrimination and oppression. Part of what Fodor is pointing to is the power of hearing not just a word but God's Word *in common*, as a community of belief and practice. (We sometimes forget the importance John Wesley gave to the scriptures he read or heard read in Morning Prayer each day, readings designated by the lectionary of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.)

A final point in Fodor's essay points to the prophetic and transformative character of the public reading and hearing of scripture: such reading "means permitting oneself to be cross-examined, challenged, and remade by the Scripture. Reading the Bible *for* oneself and for one's community also means reading it *over against* oneself and one's community."³² What then is the community to make of its readings from Isaiah through the four Sundays of Advent (year A), when the first reading of the liturgical year not only tells us "out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" but also that God's people shall beat their "swords into plowshares" (Is. 2.3-4), or the following week that the poor will be judged with righteousness and the meek with equity (Is. 11.4), or the following week when the blind are promised sight, the deaf hearing, the lame the ability to leap like deer (Is. 35.5)? All of these texts from Isaiah, like the readings from 1 Corinthians, are a challenge to what we assume about the ways of the world and a re-imagining of the world as we know it. They provide the narrative framework in which we, as communities of faith, redefine what is or should be "normal" in our broken world order. They reshape the desires of our hearts away from an understanding of religion as a form of personal comfort and toward a vision of holiness that is committed to human flourishing in and as a community. But, we learn this story, this narrative, this vision "by heart" and in our hearts only if it is regularly read, heard, meditated on and, especially, practiced.

2. Communal Prayer: practicing language of the kingdom

It may seem odd to consider prayer as the means for practicing a language much less for learning it, but in moving this direction I want to suggest that it is through (perhaps especially) our listening to and speaking with God that we learn to articulate a social imaginary that includes God's love for humanity and all of creation, for those we consider friends as well as those we name enemies, for the Church and the churches. Shaped by the scriptures our prayer enables us to move from imagining what might be to naming what should be, often by lamenting what is not

³⁰ Fodor, "Reading the Scriptures," 141.

³¹ Fodor, "Reading the Scriptures," 148.

³² Fodor, "Reading the Scriptures," 149.

yet. It leads us not only to more fully “hunger for the kingdom” but also “makes us a people who refuse to settle for appearances.”³³ It is in prayer, James Smith argues, that “we are given words to articulate the vision of justice that is at the heart of the biblical vision of *shalom*.”³⁴ Prayer, then, becomes a practice of giving voice to rightly ordered desires and a rightly ordered heart, attending “to the desires of God” and making “those desires our desires,” practicing hourly, daily, weekly the “language of the kingdom.”³⁵ Through prayer, Smith suggests, we enact “an entire ontology and construal of the God-world relationship.”³⁶

While these claims can be made of individual prayer as well as communal prayer, I focus here on communal prayer because the holiness of heart we seek, while individually experienced, cannot be sought alone; it is a “social holiness” that we practice and which we seek. Just as scripture needs to be heard and interpreted in the midst of community, prayer is and must be offered in and with a community, whether that community is a class meeting, a society, or the gathered church.³⁷ It is such, Steve Manskar suggests, not because it is concerned with social justice (though it is) but because we are not called to a “solitary” (or private) expression of religion. Our holiness is and must be “social because God is social. [God] created human beings in [God’s] image to be relational creatures. We become fully human when we share in the relationships God initiates with us through the people [God] places in our way. Social holiness is the practice of obeying Jesus’ commandments to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, loving your neighbor as yourself, and loving one another one another (fellow members of your local congregation) as Christ loves.”³⁸ There is no “true” Christianity, for Wesley and the Methodist movement, that does not involve us in a community, a communion, of believers, as we see well in his organizational structures for the Methodist movement. And, while we are called by the gospel to pray “in secret” (Mt 6.5-6), we are also called to pray in and as a community of faith (Acts 2.42). Smith puts it this way: “practices are communal or social. There are no ‘private’ practices; rather, practices find expression and articulation in concrete sites and institutions—which is how and why they actually shape embodied persons. There are no practices without institutions.”³⁹ Perhaps to the larger point of this essay, we could add as corollaries to Smith’s claim that, first, there are no institutions without practices to sustain them and, second, that turning away from those practices contributes to the death of the institution.

Communal prayer as language of the kingdom begins in trustful pleading on behalf of a broken world, lament for its disorder, and hope for its repair and restoration, rather than in the unrelenting praise that has come to characterize so much “contemporary” worship in the United

³³ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 193.

³⁴ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 194.

³⁵ Philip Kenneson, “Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, 2nd ed. (Blackwell Publishing, 2011), *Blackwell Reference Online*, http://www.blackwellreference.com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9781444331349_chunk_g97814443313497 (accessed 17 June 2015).

³⁶ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 193.

³⁷ I find it helpful to remember that anchorites or hermits did/do not go into the “desert” of the hermitage unless and until they have been shaped and tested by life in community—see the descriptions of the different kinds of monks in *RB 1980: The Rule of Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 169, and John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. and annot. Boniface Ramsey, OP (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 637.

³⁸ Steven Manskar, “No holiness but social holiness,” <https://blog.umcdiscipleship.org/no-holiness-but-social-holiness/> (accessed 5 June 2018).

³⁹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 62.

States. As language of the kingdom, communal prayer is concerned less with “remember *me*, O Lord” (though it will always have this concern at some level) and more with “God, come to *our* assistance, make haste to help *us*” (Ps. 70.1). As Don Saliers suggests, such prayer is “the rule-keeping activity of the language of the heart...The activity of praying in which beliefs and emotions are fused in the heart ties together what is spoken about the world consistently with the correction of that human being’s own life.”⁴⁰ As Saliers develops this argument, he claims that “learning to pray is opening oneself to a new way of being; to be formed in a language which shapes and expresses the deep emotions we are never quite prepared for, and which we would never sustain by our own powers.”⁴¹ Through the practice of such prayer, we in turn are “practicing ourselves” as participants in the order, the imaginary, of God’s kingdom. Our hopes, our desires, our expectations for and understandings of the world are re-imagined, re-ordered, and re-scripted.

On several occasions Wesley was put in the position of defending his continued use of the “formal” prayers of the *Book of Common Prayer* as well as his openness to extemporaneous prayer. The importance of the formal (and generally corporate) prayers of the prayer book was based in Wesley’s conviction that the formal prayers of the church’s liturgy provided an “‘objective’ interrogation of our motivations and prejudices that is so crucial for continuing responsible growth in grace.”⁴² Wesley’s retention of the Cranmerian collects in his *Sunday Service* revisions of the prayer book was further grounded in a belief that these prayers were “especially suited to convey the identity of God and of the Christian life” through their “scriptural descriptions of God and petitions warranted by those descriptions.” Through such, the prayers could “evoke and shape affections, inform Christian practice, and provide language and direction for extemporaneous prayer.” The importance of the formative character of formal written prayers was also reflected in Wesley’s several edited collections of prayers intended for personal and family devotion.⁴³

Of course, even we as we acknowledge the importance of communal prayer as a means for practicing the “language of the kingdom,” we have to acknowledge that such communal prayer can also go awry. On the one hand, as Marjorie Procter-Smith so helpfully makes clear from a feminist perspective and as Michael Jagessar and Stephen Burns do from a postcolonial perspective, our common prayer can become a way in which the church insists on or requires “uniform thinking” and conformity to one particular model or image of God, one form of address to God, at the “cost of suppression of difference” or which reinforces problematic understandings of the human community or its relationship to God.⁴⁴ Formation in and for holiness becomes more a rigid practice of sectarian indoctrination (in the most negative sense) rather than freeing the heart for love of God and neighbor. On the other hand, communal prayer that is crafted by one person, perhaps the pastor of a congregation, is often at risk of becoming an extension of the pastor’s own desires and sometimes limited vision or of putting what is clearly an individual and

⁴⁰ Don E. Saliers, *The Soul in Paraphrase: Prayer and the Religious Affections* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 34.

⁴¹ Saliers, *Soul in Paraphrase*, 35.

⁴² Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon / Kingswood, 1994), 207.

⁴³ Knight, *The Presence of God*, 162.

⁴⁴ Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Praying with Our Eyes Open* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 27; Jagessar and Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives*, 40-50.

personal prayer on the lips of the congregation (corporate prayers of confession seeming to be the most common place where such occurs).

If our aim is holiness of heart and perfection in love, and if individually-written prayers of confession are often a risk to the corporate prayer of the church, then it seems appropriate to briefly consider one corporate prayer of confession as an example. Here is the standard prayer as found in *The United Methodist Hymnal* and *Book of Worship*:

Merciful God, we confess that have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have failed to be an obedient church.
We have not done your will,
we have broken your law,
we have rebelled against your love,
we have not loved our neighbors,
and we have not heard the cry of the needy.
Forgive us, we pray, and free us for joyful obedience,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁴⁵

At the outset, we might say that this prayer clearly sets out a Wesleyan balance between the piety and mercy expected from our obedience to the commandments to love God and our neighbors. Second, it makes clear that our confession is corporate confession—we have failed—and names our failure to be fully the church God calls us to be. Thus, the confession is not only corporate but also ecclesial. Third, it understands confession as a matter of the heart and attends to our imperfect love for God and neighbor. Fourth, its lack of specificity about our failures provides a kind of “open space” in which we as particular communities and individual members of those communities can begin to identify and reflect on our own specific failures (a space also provided but the silence that is expected to follow the prayer prior to the absolution). What we may not immediately experience in the prayer, but which we discover through repeated practice, is the way in which it practices the language of the kingdom—here described as love of God and obedience to God’s will and desire for all of creation, as a place in which neighbors are loved, and special attention is given to the poor and needy. Week by week (at least in some liturgically ideal world, where this prayer is actually used), we are called to self-examination as church, to a review of our life together in community, and to discern our responsibility to the wider community around us.⁴⁶

3. The Lord’s Supper: ordering desire

My earlier reference to the table as a “focal thing” and the meal as a “focal practice” (pp. 2-3 above) has set the stage for our consideration of the Lord’s Supper here. We move from shaping our imagination of the kingdom through reading and hearing scripture, to practicing the language of the kingdom through corporate and personal prayer, to embodying the desires, tempers, and affections in our practices at the Lord’s Table and in the Lord’s Supper. Whether we turn to recent studies in educational theory, ritual studies, or neuro-biology, we discover that we learn, we are formed, we are transformed, by the things we do with and in our bodies.

⁴⁵ *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 8, and *United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 35. (Hereafter *UMH* and *UMBOW*.)

⁴⁶ See also Smith’s discussion of confession and forgiveness in *Desiring the Kingdom*, 176-182.

Holiness of heart is, at its most elemental, a renewal of our bodily ways of engaging the world; it is not simply a change in or of one's mind. And what is more connected to our bodily desire than eating? To consider, then, the Lord's Supper as a means for the ordering of our desires—for God's help, for God's blessing, for "holiness on earth and everlasting glory in heaven"⁴⁷—is to consider the central ways in which this practice contributes to the ordering and re-ordering of these desires.

What we have seen and heard in scripture, what we have said and practiced with our lips in prayer, we embody in table practice with our sisters and brothers in Christ. Paul Chilcote has put it this way: "Formation through eucharistic practice entails both the interior life of believers—their attitudes and deepest qualities of character—and the way in which they live in relation to others—their exterior life. Personal formation through participation in the Meal (who one is) connects intimately with the shaping of behavior (what one does) through the sign-act of Eucharist."⁴⁸ If, as the Wesleys claim in several of their *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, the eucharist "our every want supplies" and provides a means through which our "every base and vain desire" is "crucified," then, as Chilcote argues, "the Holy Meal forms a true self-understanding in the hearts and minds of God's people who recognize their need and have the assurance of God's provision in Christ."⁴⁹

Chilcote suggests that the eucharist provides a context for a true self-understanding. More, as I suggest in my essay "Eucharist and Prayer,"⁵⁰ it not only provides a focal thing and practice for the church, it also serves paradigmatically and canonically for the church's life in the world. Perhaps all of this is to say that, as an ordinary and instituted means of grace, the eucharist is normative for the church's self-understanding and life, normative for shaping our wants and desires. James Smith describes its normative character this way: "by showing us a foretaste of how things ought to be, the practice of the Lord's Supper carries norms in it, and these norms constitute both a basis of critique for the present order, as well as hints as to how the

⁴⁷ John Wesley, "The Duty of Constant Communion" in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 432.

⁴⁸ Paul Chilcote, "Eucharist and Formation" in *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist*, ed. Jason Vickers (Nashville: Foundry Books, 2016), 188.

⁴⁹ Chilcote, "Eucharist and Formation," 189. Hymn quotes from John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (Bristol: Farley, 1745), hymns 4.2 and 141.6, modernized version, http://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cswt/27_Hymns_on_the_Lord%27s_Supper_%28145%29_mod.pdf (accessed 13 June 2018). Chilcote provides a helpful analysis of these themes in conversation with the texts of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* in his article. With a broader review of these hymns, we begin to see how frequently the Wesleys link the Lord's Supper to the satisfying of our wants and desires. The wants and desires expressed in these hymns include forgiveness, blessing, the image of God, comfort, and love: "Never will we hence depart, / Till thou our wants relieve, / Write forgiveness on our heart, And all thine image give" (*HLS* 20.4); "And lest we in the desert faint, / We find our spirit's every want / By constant miracle supplied" (*HLS* 44.3); "Son of God, thy blessing grant, / Still supply my every want" (*HLS* 49.1); "He shall all their sorrows chase, / All their wants at once remove, / Wipe the tears from every face, / Fill up every soul with love" (*HLS* 106.4). Two additional hymns speak directly to the re-ordering of desire. In *HLS* 55.1, the Wesleys write "Tis not a dead external sign / Which here my hopes require, / The living power of love divine / In Jesus I desire." As the Wesleys are clear in all of their references to the means of grace, the means of grace are rightly practiced only when our aim is rightly oriented—toward God's grace in Christ. Finally, in *HLS* 141.5-6, the Wesleys point to the ways in which "this ordinance divine" provides a means through which "We cast our sins into that fire / Which did thy sacrifice consume, / And every base and vain desire / To daily crucifixion doom." All hymns texts from the above source.

⁵⁰ Anderson, "Eucharist and Prayer".

church should order itself as a *polis* that is itself a foretaste of the coming community.”⁵¹ As a practice of how things “ought to be,” the eucharist confronts us with the stark reality of how things are—the “really real” rather than “reality TV,” confronting us with broken relationships, misguided desires, and a disordered world. But, reducing our eucharistic practice to “occasional services” of the church, or relegating it to separate chapel services for those “who like such things,” or ignoring the normative character of the eucharistic prayers themselves, betrays the claims this practice intends to make upon our lives and diminishes its potential transformative power. It becomes merely one more option among a large menu of “services” offered to religious consumers, confirming rather than resisting and challenging the ways in which our cultures have formed us in “liturgies” of consumption and consumerism, as if an encounter with God can be manufactured and offered for sale.⁵²

Given my concern for the physical embodiment of desire expressed through eating and drinking at the Lord’s table, the examples I want to briefly explore here may seem an unlikely direction to go. Yet, as I have already explored some of the issues I have raised here and in my earlier essay “Eucharist and Prayer,” I want to expand that exploration to three texts and practices that surround, perhaps even “bookend,” the eucharistic liturgy of The United Methodist Church. Since I have already used the corporate prayer of confession as an example, I return to the invitation that precedes it.

Christ our Lord invites to his table
all who love him,
earnestly repent of their sin
and seek to live in peace with one another.⁵³

This invitation, which leads first to corporate confession, then to the exchange of peace, and finally to our sacrifice of praise in the eucharistic prayer, sets the table of desire, so to speak, for what we are about to receive through the sharing of the bread and cup. Interestingly, the invitation is not an invitation to confession itself, which is given as an exhortation or command—“Let us therefore...”—but an invitation to the Lord’s Table. What does this invitation say about desire and religious affection? First, unlike a trip to the shopping mall, our journey to the table comes not at our own initiative or at our personal convenience. Rather, our journey comes at God’s initiative in Christ—“Christ our Lord invites to his table.” Second, while it has become unpopular to suggest that there are any limits to who is invited to this table, the invitation makes clear that those invited are those with specific desires—those “who love God, earnestly repent of their sin, and seek to live in peace with one another”—and we assume that those who respond in faith do so with these desires. As with the prayer of confession, this invitation calls us to an examination of our identity, our relationships and our desires. What do I desire? Do I love God, or seek to love God? Am I willing to confess my own brokenness in sin? And what about my neighbors? What does such peace look like? Do I actually desire such peace? How do I share it? Of course, many of these questions are answered in our reading and hearing of scripture and in the practice of prayer. Yet, how many in our congregations recognize that this sentence and the actions that follow from it are, in word and deed, an enactment of the

⁵¹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 200.

⁵² See Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 103, 126.

⁵³ UMH 7-8 and UMBOW 35.

gospel itself (Mt 5.23-24)? Third, it draws us into the unity of piety and mercy that characterize holiness of heart as a “social holiness.” We are invited to God’s love *with* one another; we are invited by God’s love for us *to* love one another.

A second example seems little more than a formal ritual text, one we recite with little thought or consequence for our lives: “Lift up your hearts. *We lift them up to the Lord.*” Like the confession, this begins as an exhortation. “Lift up your hearts” is not offered as an option, as something akin to “Please stand as you are able,” but as a command to direct our hearts and minds, wants and desires, toward a particular end—“to the Lord.” It may seem to be only an instruction about an “attitude of prayer,” which in a way it is, a command to stand for prayer. But, it is also an exhortation that calls us to a particular embodiment as a community in time and space in relationship to God. In the understanding of the early churches, this exhortation brought order to the disorder of a congregation, strengthened the congregation to withstand temptation from the “evil one,” and served “as a summons to heaven and a call to be heavenly minded.”⁵⁴ This exhortation both answers the question of where we are to focus the attention of our hearts if our goal is holiness of heart and life and communion with God in Christ and, when we stand in response to it, embodies that attention.

As a final example, I turn to the post-communion prayer in which we give thanks for God’s self-giving through the mystery of the meal and pray that we now be empowered by the Spirit to go into the world to give ourselves for others:

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery
in which you have given yourself to us.
Grant that we may go in to the world
in the strength of your Spirit
to give ourselves for others,
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.⁵⁵

Perhaps we need only say that through this prayer we affirm, through thanksgiving, what we have received, God’s very self and God’s grace. And, while we can only receive these gifts individually, we do not primarily practice them on our own; we practice them in and with a community of faith. We simply cannot do this on our own. *We receive, we give thanks, we are sent into the world.* More, what we have received has been for the good of all, neither solely nor primarily for our own benefit. Holiness of heart, as Wesley argues, is manifested in humility, faith, hope and love (or charity), in love for God and love for one another. When and where the desire of our hearts is of and for God, through whom we receive “all things needful,” the fruits of

⁵⁴ Jack Kineer, “Calvin’s Use of the *Sursum Corda*,” in *Roots of Reformed Worship*, no. 6 (November 1998), <https://centralpresworship.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/roots-of-reformed-worship-6-calvin-and-sursum-corda.pdf> (accessed 14 June 2018). Also see Jason Darrell Foster, *Sursum Corda: ritual and meaning of the liturgical command in the first five centuries of the Church* (PhD dissertation, Durham University, 2014), 4-20, 52-54, <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/10707/> (accessed 14 June 2018).

⁵⁵ UMH 11 and UMBOW 39.

that desire will be made evident in the love of our neighbors, in our “hungering and thirsting to do good, in every possible kind, to all [people].”⁵⁶

Conclusion

Whether we consider the hearing and reading of scripture, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper as core practices, focal things and practices, or normative and paradigmatic practices, it becomes clear that for the Methodist movement these three means of grace were central to the renewing of hearts and minds, to reawakening a desire for holiness, and to the consequent renewal of the church. That Wesley ordered his published sermons to lead us from the means of grace to circumcision of the heart to the marks of the new birth seems to confirm this trajectory. As James Smith has argued, “*provided that* the practices of Christian worship intentionally carry, embody, enact, and rehearse the normative shape of the Christian story,” our perceptions, our desires, our affections will be re-directed toward their rightful end in God.⁵⁷ Wesley would supplement this by further insisting “provided that these practices seek nothing but God and God’s love.”

Strangely missing from much current discussion about church renewal, institutional reorganization, redeployment of resources, and diminishing financial support—as if such concerns somehow define the church and its mission—is focused attention on these central practices that intend the very renewal we seek. As I suggested in my opening paragraph, we seem to have “settled” (in Daniel Benedict’s words) for “programmatic” responses that reflect the “cultural liturgies” in which we live rather than committing ourselves to a set of contrasting practices intended to re-order our desires. It is as if we were confronted with nothing more than a temporary institutional need. In contrast, what we see in our own tradition is a response that returns us as church to the central practices of the Christian life as the center of Christian formation. The Wesleys sought to renew the church through focused attention on the renewal of Christian life by reorienting personal and communal life around these central practices, around the “ordinary means of grace.” They gave their primary attention to creating communities in which the means of grace were practiced and sustained, to whom individuals could be accountable for their practice, and which had as their end holiness of heart and life. If we are honest about our longing for church renewal, perhaps it is time for us to reconsider the same.

⁵⁶ John Wesley, “The Marks of the New Birth” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 425, 426, 427, respectively. See also John Wesley, “Circumcision of the Heart,” *Works*, vol. 1, 407-409.

⁵⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 163.