



Exploring the Fullness of Grace: Wesleyan Moves from Charity, Service, and Advocacy to Deep Solidarity

Joerg Rieger

Abstract: This article deepens the Wesleyan understanding of works of mercy as means of grace, arguing that the fullness of a Wesleyan theology of grace can only be explored when we extend the church's imagination beyond the current ecclesial practices of charity, service, and advocacy. More profound encounters of divine grace are emerging when works of mercy are interpreted in terms of what will be called "works of deep solidarity." Engaging in deep solidarity with others and with God, in places where we least expect it and cannot yet fully envision it, has the potential of sparking the next revival.

Keywords: *grace • works of piety • works of mercy • charity • service • advocacy • solidarity*

Introduction

In the Wesleyan traditions, grace is often more powerfully experienced under pressure, in the struggles and pains of everyday life, than on the mountaintops. The means of grace help illustrate this, as the traditional means of grace such as reading the Bible, prayer, and Holy Communion (the so-called works of piety) acquire new depth and fresh meaning when engaged in the troubles of life. The power of grace under pressure is also expressed in John Wesley's often-neglected concern to hold together the so-called works of piety and works of mercy, with works of mercy being not primarily social activism but rather true means of grace because God is working through them for the transformation of the world.

Within this background the present article will focus on the works of mercy, arguing that the fullness of a Wesleyan theology of grace can only be explored when we extend the church's imagination beyond the current ecclesial practices of charity, service, and advocacy. More profound encounters of divine grace emerge when works of mercy are interpreted in terms of what will be called works of deep solidarity¹.

Contextual Considerations

That grace is experienced more profoundly under pressure than on the mountaintops in Wesleyan theology is a point I have made repeatedly over the years.² Even in Wesley's own biography, grace is experienced more existentially

¹ This article is a substantially expanded and developed version of an earlier article published as "Grace under Pressure: Wesleyan Moves from Charity and Advocacy to Deep Solidarity." In: *Methodist Revolutions: Evangelical Engagements of Church and World*, ed. Upolu Vaai and Joerg Rieger. Nashville: Wesley's Foundry Books, 2021. Pp. 97-113. Used by permission.

² See, for instance, Joerg Rieger, *Grace under Pressure: Negotiating the Heart of the Methodist Traditions* (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2011); Portuguese and Spanish translations.

Joerg Rieger is Distinguished Professor of Theology, Cal Turner Chancellor's Chair of Wesleyan Studies, and the Founding Director of the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University. He is the author and editor of 26 books and over 200 articles.

in the struggles of life than in occasional moments of triumph, elation, and ecstasy, including his self-description as “a brand plucked from the fire,” using the words of the prophet Zechariah in reference to an early memory of being rescued as a child from the burning Epworth parsonage. Moreover, without taking existential experiences of grace under pressure into account, both Christian theology and praxis are easily distorted and misled. This problem might explain in part the woes of Christianity in its longstanding attraction to empires in the past and present which have distorted Christian theology for 2000 years.³

In classical Wesleyan theology, grace under pressure is also manifest in the various modes of grace: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. First, prevenient grace helps people understand who they are in relation to God and it is most visibly at work in the midst of the pressures and frustrations of life, including a growing sense of one’s limitations and the reality of sin. Grace under pressure reminds us that sin is not just a personal matter, but is manifest in distorted relationships within communities and is thus ever more difficult to ignore amidst threats to the survival of millions of people and the planet. Next, justifying grace initiates a new relationship with God in the midst of the pressures of life acknowledged under prevenient grace. This new relation with God also manifests itself in renewed relationships with others, addressing the injustices of distorted relationships that take both personal and structural forms. Sanctifying grace, finally, is the grace-infused effort to work through the ongoing pressures of everyday lives, beginning with the most severe forms of suffering experienced in the community where life and death are at stake, with the goal of overcoming sin in all its concrete embodiments, both personal and structural, as well as local and global.

In all these manifestations, grace under pressure engages in struggles against sin and evil at all levels. This process begins with divine grace opening our eyes to the realities of sin and evil for the first time under prevenient grace, continues with the straightening out of relationships in the process of justification, and ushers into an ever-deepening engagement of sin and evil as people move along the never-ending process of sanctification. As a result, grace is always most real when it is engaged in the most profound pressures of the world; by contrast, on the mountaintops grace can make people feel elated and ecstatic but often fails to make much of a difference in the real world.

Means of Grace

A theological reflection on the Wesleyan means of grace helps illustrate these processes, keeping in mind John Wesley’s concern to hold together the so-called works of piety and works of mercy. To recap a case I have made in more detail elsewhere, Wesley defines means of grace, in accordance with the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, as “outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”⁴ In other words, means of grace are channels provided by God through which we experience God’s grace. To put it in more contemporary language, means of grace are special ways in which God connects with us and we connect with God. The purpose of these means of grace is the cultivation of our relationship with God and with others. Grace at its core can, therefore, be defined as a relationship with God and others, and because relationships are always dynamic, Wesleyans believe that people of faith can grow (as well as decline) in grace.

Thinking through the traditional Anglican list of the means of grace, which includes reading of the Bible, prayer, and Holy Communion, with a focus on the growing of relationships would be a fruitful exercise. After all, it is not just that we read the Bible; the Bible also reads us. In praying we not only speak but also listen, and Holy Communion is more about relationship with God and others than about miraculous transactions from the top down.⁵ However, since space is limited, let us move on to the other aspect of Wesley’s theology of the means of grace that has been neglected by the church.

³ See Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

⁴ John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” in *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 381.

⁵ For more detailed reflections, see Rieger, *Grace under Pressure*.

The older Wesley broadens his notion of the means of grace by adding what he calls works of mercy to what has traditionally been called the “works of piety” of reading the Bible, prayer, and Holy Communion. In a sermon titled “On Zeal,” first published later in his life in 1781, Wesley notes that works of mercy are also means of grace, aware that “this is not commonly adverted to.”⁶ Moreover, he gives them a special place above the works of piety: Whenever works of mercy interfere with works of piety, he argues, the former “are to be preferred.” Wesley explains further that “even reading, hearing, prayer, are to be omitted, or to be postponed, ‘at charity’s almighty call’—when we are called to relieve the distress of our neighbour, whether in body or soul.”⁷ Here, grace under pressure enters the picture in full force.

This inclusion of the works of mercy into the means of grace is different from the well-known distinction between the “instituted” and the “prudential” means of grace. Works of mercy cannot be relegated to a secondary list of prudential means of grace that are useful but nonessential.⁸ That works of mercy belong to the essential core of the Wesleyan tradition is also reflected in the central place of Wesley’s General Rules, which in United Methodism belong to the doctrinal standards, which are declared as nonnegotiable by the Book of Discipline. In fact, in the three-part structure of the General Rules, works of piety (“attending upon all the ordinances of God”) are mentioned last, while works of mercy come first (framed in terms of “doing no harm” and “doing good”).⁹

In addition, Wesley explicitly states that Methodists already in his own time have fallen from grace because they were not aware that works of mercy are genuine means of grace.¹⁰ This means that there were Methodists who may have read the Bible every day, prayed even more often, and attended Holy Communion as frequently as possible—good and solid church people that any faith community would welcome with open arms—but who, according to Wesley, still had fallen from grace because they neglected the works of mercy as means of grace. One can only wonder what Wesley would say about contemporary Methodism in this regard. The present conflicts in the United Methodist Church, for instance, which have led to the Global Methodist Church splitting off, do not even touch on this foundational matter, which shows how far Methodism in its various forms has moved away from its roots. Neither conservative “charity” and “service” nor liberal “advocacy”—to use stereotypes which run deep because many Methodists identify with them—convey much of a grasp on what it means to consider works of mercy as means of grace.

In this context, adding works of mercy to the works of piety and making them an essential part of the means of grace has far-reaching implications for reshaping Methodism everywhere, and perhaps the Christian church as a whole, with implications for the meaning of religion. Seeing this link clearly may well be one of Methodism’s most important contributions to Christianity and the world. It all starts with Wesley’s insight that works of mercy are necessary channels of God’s grace and part of grace as a relationship. This means that works of mercy are never merely social outreach but also what I have been calling “inreach,” means by which people of faith are touched by God and by each other, and through which God and others enter our lives. This is the fundamental issue that will be developed further in this article. Moreover, works of mercy serve as yet another reminder of my claim that grace is most powerfully experienced under pressure.

To state it up front: Perhaps the most important result of this interconnectedness of works of mercy and works of piety is that works of mercy and works of piety are able to reshape each other. Simply put, we can see new aspects of works of piety from the perspective of practicing works of mercy, while practicing works of piety can help deepen involvement in works of mercy. As already noted, engaging in works of mercy opens up new encounters with the Bible, transforms how we pray, and reshapes our theology of Holy Communion. Works of mercy as means

⁶ John Wesley, “On Zeal,” in *Bicentennial Edition*, 3:313.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:314.

⁸ For Wesley the works of mercy are not just prudential in the sense that they would be optional means of grace, which may or may not be used according to changing circumstances. Wesley’s distinction between instituted and prudential means of grace does not apply here, because works of mercy are not listed in either category. Cf. John Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and others, from the year 1744, to 1789,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprinted Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 8:323–24 (hereafter cited as *Works*). This is overlooked also by Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace*, *Pietist and Wesleyan Studies* 3 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1992), 5.

⁹ For the General Rules of The United Methodist Church, see <http://www.umc.org/en/content/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church> (Accessed 10th September 2024).

¹⁰ Cf. John Wesley, “On Visiting the Sick,” in *Bicentennial Edition*, 3:385.

of grace also deepen our experience of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Vice versa, reading the Bible, praying, and Holy Communion inform how we engage in works of mercy. These dynamic interactions, which will be developed in what follows, are what is missing not only from most conservative and liberal schemes but also from self-declared centrist approaches to Methodist theology that have, somewhat deceptively, claimed to maintain balance in the church.¹¹

Charity, Service, and Advocacy

What are the deeper implications of considering works of mercy as means of grace? At the most basic level, works of mercy can be understood in terms of charity. Charity—taking care of others and supporting them—is a time-honored way for Christians to respond to the pressures of the world, and Methodists since the days of John Wesley have been engaged in it. In the newly-minted vision statement of the Global Methodist Church, which displays the tendencies of much of conservative Christianity, the call for charity is expressed in the call to service for others.¹² Arguably, charitable giving and service are how many people of faith today believe they are called to make a difference in the world. Many take it for granted that these are the most faithful responses to the pressures of life and the most appropriate ways to support what the Global Methodist Church calls the “most vulnerable.”¹³

No doubt, charity and service have done some good, providing relief for hunger, homelessness, poverty, and many other pressures that people face. Yet charity and service are not the only and perhaps not even the most helpful responses to experiences of pressure or vulnerability. Grace under pressure pushes further. To put it bluntly: Jesus preached good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed rather than charity or service (Matt. 11:5, Luke 4:18). What is good news to impoverished and oppressed people? Is it merely to be recipients of service and handouts—which is of course better than being ignored altogether? Or is the good news that they will no longer be poor, oppressed, and vulnerable?

When understood in terms of the means of grace, our conception of charity and service as works of mercy deepens, because these actions will have to be reconceived as two-way streets. As noted above, means of grace are channels of God's grace, and in this framework charity, service, and works of mercy are not merely about what Methodists do for others but also what comes back to them. Such two-way streets are essential if grace is indeed a relationship. What comes back here, of course, is twofold: an encounter with the other person who is the recipient of a work of mercy and an encounter with God.

Encounters with others and with God open our eyes both for grace as well as for sin. In other words, such encounters are both affirmation and challenge because they help us see more clearly where the pressures are, what makes people vulnerable, and what the underlying problems might be. For Wesley and the early Methodists, for instance, engaging with the working poor enabled them to understand some of the problems of early capitalism, such as its intrinsic structures of exploitation and the realities of sharply increasing inequality.¹⁴ Charity and service, therefore, are at their best when they begin to push beyond the customary one-way streets. When the eyes of those who engage in charity and service are opened to what causes poverty, oppression, and vulnerability, we move one step closer to the experience of grace under pressure. That this is a step in the right direction is often confirmed by pushback. As Dom Hélder Câmara, a former Roman Catholic bishop from Brazil, put it: “When I give food to the

¹¹ The work of legendary Methodist theologian Albert C. Outler may serve as an example for such a centrist approach, picked up by Scott Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002). Jones, of course, joined the conservative Global Methodist Church as soon as he retired as a United Methodist Bishop, where he was elected as a self-declared centrist and where he appears to be collecting his pension. This raises broader questions about whether centrist approaches are even feasible, especially when the flow of power is considered, which cannot be addressed here. Outler's plan, as one of the architects of Perkins School of Theology, SMU, in Texas, was the development of a center-right coalition. This term is used in one of Outler's letters to Ed Robb, reproduced in Riley B. Case, *Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 220.

¹² Global Methodist Church Vision Statement, available at <https://globalmethodist.org/about/#about-mission-section> (Accessed September 10th 2024).

¹³ The Global Methodist Church's vision statement talks about its “focus on those who are most vulnerable.” Ibid.

¹⁴ See the account of Ted Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.”¹⁵ Even seemingly harmless acts of charitable giving and service have the potential to open our eyes.

When the one-way streets of charity and service begin to open up to two-way streets, people of faith are being led into deeper understandings of the pressures of life, and a deeper search for experiences of grace under pressure begins. Advocacy is often the next step after charity. By advocacy I mean speaking out against injustices that produce pressures and vulnerability, and thereby challenging them. In mainline United Methodism, such advocacy is embedded in the most recent versions of the Social Principles as well as in many carefully crafted statements in the *Book of Resolutions*. It may come as a surprise to most Christians and even to some Methodists, but advocacy can be understood as a more faithful approach to sin and evil than charity and service, as it deepens the experience of grace under pressure and provides more genuine responses. Advocacy acknowledges the pressures of life in more profound ways than charity, and it is solidly grounded in many well-established religious traditions. Many of the Jewish prophets, for instance, speak out against injustice in the name of God, challenging those who “trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain” (Amos 5:11), and many voices in the New Testament concur in their condemnation of wealth gained in unjust ways (see, for instance, James 5:1-6, which seems to assume that injustice is how riches are generated in the first place).

Mary, the mother of Jesus, speaks of God’s advocacy when she proclaims that the God who lifts up the lowly pushes the powerful from their thrones and fills the hungry with good things while sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:52–53). Her inspiration is Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 2:1–10), recognized not only by Christians but also by Jews and Muslims. Jesus, following along these lines, blesses the hungry and the poor and challenges the rich and the full (Luke 6:20–25). To be sure, not only the lowly but also the powerful, not only the hungry but also the “rich oppressors” (this is the headline of James 5:1-6 in the NRSV), are experiencing grace under pressure here, albeit in very different ways: those who are crushed by the pressures of life imposed on them experience liberation; those who impose pressures and contribute to them are called out, challenged, and prodded to change their ways. Grace under pressure is not “one size fits all”; it remains thoroughly relational.

Standing in this tradition, Wesley proclaims that the majority of people in his time were poor not by their own fault but because they were pushed off their lands by wealthy landowners and then exploited in the factories of emerging capitalism.¹⁶ Wesley’s categorical opposition to slavery and his support for enslaved people provides another example for the prominent place of advocacy in the Methodist traditions. This kind of advocacy is closely linked with an understanding of the works of mercy as means of grace under pressure: advocacy for others grows out of a deepening concern for those for whom one advocates, a clearer view of understanding of what causes the pressures they experience, and a deeper engagement with the roots of these pressures—all with an eye to how God’s grace is already at work under pressure. Advocacy, thus, grows out of a recognition that the typical one-way streets of charity and service are not enough—a recognition shared by Wesley in many cases, as will become clearer below.

Advocacy, therefore, brings us one step closer to the experience of grace under pressure and good news to the poor. Instead of works of mercy, therefore, it might be more appropriate to talk about works of justice. Even though that terminology cannot be found in Wesley’s writings, it is clear that he was engaged in works of justice himself, as his engagement cannot be confined to charity, service, or the giving of alms. Nevertheless, even advocacy remains limited and does not yet fully embody the insight developed here - that works of mercy are indeed means of grace.

While a two-way street begins to emerge with advocacy, and while relationships between self, other, and God gain in importance when compared to charity and service, the relationships between those who advocate and those for whom they advocate are often still limited. Advocates, even if only unconsciously, tend to perceive themselves as somehow standing above those for whom they advocate, even if they use the language of “ministry with” instead of “ministry for.” This is expressed, for instance, in widespread assumptions that advocates have to be the voice for others who presumably have no voice at all. It can even find expressions in some contemporary efforts to “center”

¹⁵ “Quando dou comida aos pobres, chamam-me de santo. Quando pergunto por que eles são pobres, chamam-me de comunista.” Quoted in Zildo Rocha, *Helder, O Dom: uma vida que marcou os rumos da Igreja no Brasil* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000), 53.

¹⁶ In his “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions” of 1772 (*Works*, 11:56–57), Wesley talks about various causes of poverty, including the monopolizing of farms by the “gentlemen farmers” and the luxury of the wealthy.

others and certain forms of allyship, where those with more privilege claim to step back in favor of those with less privilege, a move which fails to take into account deeper mutualities.¹⁷ This limits not only the effectiveness of advocacy and relationships with other people but also the depth of relationships with God, which is at the heart of the means of grace tradition.

Advocacy and works of justice that fail to fully embrace the means of grace tradition can lead to a typical pitfall of advocates overestimating their own power. The result is a neglect of both the contributions of others and of God. It is not surprising, therefore, that many advocates tend to act in patronizing fashion, assuming that they are somehow able to solve the problems of others, whether as protesters “speaking truth to power” or as allies. In this way, advocacy can lead to the diminishment of the community support necessary to bring change and thereby in various ways stifle the initiative of those for whom advocates advocate. In the end, advocates without community support often burn out and walk away, or they lower their expectations and return to models of charity and service, never really experiencing the benefits of the full potential of grace under pressure. This sums up many of the problems of what is currently called activism as well.¹⁸

While charity and service tend to shore up the status quo, often without being aware of it, advocacy is more likely to seek reforms of the status quo. Yet, for the most part, neither aims at the reconstruction of the deepest problems of the current situation. In this way, charity, service, and advocacy miss crucial opportunities that might not only revive or revitalize but revolutionize both the church and the world. Unfortunately, charity, service, and advocacy are the only models of which most people of faith are aware in many places, with the former two and the latter tracking closely with the culture wars in the United States between conservatives and liberals respectively.

Deep Solidarity

Works of mercy as means of grace cannot be limited to charity, service, and advocacy. This brings us to what I have been calling “deep solidarity.”¹⁹ To be sure, deep solidarity can include charity, service, and advocacy, but it always pushes beyond these approaches. The witness of Amos, Mary, Jesus, James, and even of John Wesley can also be interpreted in this way. In what follows, it will become clear that talking about works of solidarity can capture the deeper theological layers of the Wesleyan concept of works of mercy as means of grace.

To begin with, deep solidarity is more profoundly relational than either charity, service, or advocacy. Unlike charity, service, and advocacy, deep solidarity is not a matter of the more privileged supporting the less privileged; neither is it about speaking for others or solving the problems of other people. Even common notions of solidarity do not go deep enough when they assume that solidarity is a matter of some putting themselves on the side of others out of benevolence or moral concern, which once again points to the limitations of fashionable notions of allyship. Solidarity is deepened when it becomes a matter of realizing intrinsic and deep connectedness with others and with God—that the pressures that affect others might eventually affect all of us in some ways, and that nothing will change unless we are facing the pressures of the world together and we account for our experiences of grace under pressure together. Theologically speaking, this requires a more profound doctrine of sin and a more profound doctrine of grace than many of our theologies have to offer, including both the typical conservative and liberal approaches that either elevate sin and grace to abstract metaphysical categories or downplay them as metaphorical tropes. A more profound doctrine of sin and of grace will need to investigate what it is that destroys people and the planet and what might prevent destruction and support flourishing.²⁰

¹⁷ For a critique of allyship see Joerg Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 144, 173.

¹⁸ In April of 2024, a quick Google search for “activist burnout” resulted in over one million hits.

¹⁹ For a more extensive discussion of the term *deep solidarity*, see Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Harrisburg, PA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012). See also Joerg Rieger and Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger, *Unified We Are a Force: How Faith and Labor Can Overcome America's Inequalities* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2016), and Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene*, Chapter 4.

²⁰ For the theological background of the relation of sin and salvation in Methodist theology, see Joerg Rieger, ed., *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville: United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministries, 2018).

Those who are experiencing the pressures of our time most severely—like for instance the many children whose families (including minority and nontraditional families and single parent families) have trouble making ends meet even in the United States²¹—can help us see how sin is affecting all of our lives. Sin, in its most basic agreed-upon theological meaning, is the destruction of relationships with God and with others. This destruction affects not only the poorest of the poor, although they are the ones feeling its effects most keenly. Expanding this basic notion of sin in light of the works of solidarity, we are beginning to realize that even many in the so-called middle class are increasingly pulled into this destruction of relationships and forced to endure the precariousness of existence and the pressures of the present in new and challenging ways: jobs are downgraded as the gig economy is normalized, health care and retirement move further out of reach, and the American Dream is mostly out of reach for current and future generations.²² In addition to all of this, climate change is already creating unprecedented damage that in some way or another will affect all but the wealthiest few who are busy preparing their escapes.²³ What is new is the insight that these are not merely social issues but deeply theological problems.

As we deepen our relationships with others and with God under pressure and expand our theologies, we find that our stories are often connected. What is happening at work may serve as an example: “mean and lean production” is practiced today not only in blue-collar factories but also in white-collar settings and increasingly in universities and even in churches. Likewise, low-wage work anywhere depresses wages everywhere, and widespread reductions of benefits and violations of worker rights are creeping into virtually all job sectors. Not surprisingly, even doctors, lawyers, judges, and professors are beginning to unionize. Pressures on the 99 percent that have to work for a living are rising, and they are further compounded by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and varied ability.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, pushes beyond service and advocacy and provides an example of deep solidarity in the Christian tradition. Instead of merely caring and speaking for the lowly ones of the world, she acknowledges the fact that she is one of them. Moreover, she explicitly takes sides (as liberation theologians realized decades ago, even the poor need to make an option for the poor). In so doing, she finds a deeper relation to God, who raises up the lowly and—this is the harder part unacknowledged by Methodists of virtually all couleur—pushes the powerful from their thrones (Luke 1:52). Likewise, Jesus, unlike many of his Methodist followers throughout the ages back to the days of John Wesley,²⁴ remains conscious of his lowly beginnings as a construction worker born in a barn, and he never renounces his roots or tries to “move up and out.” His ministry takes place among people under pressure, in deep solidarity with them and in deep solidarity with God (“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” [John 17:21]).

The prophet Amos, a shepherd, likewise does not hesitate to side openly with all those who are getting a raw deal in his time—and his concern is not merely the fracturing of human relationships initiated by exploitation but also the relationship with God (“For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek me and live” [Amos 5:4–5]). In their own ways, Mary, Jesus, and Amos embody deep solidarity in situations of tremendous pressure, and they realize, with the Apostle Paul, that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). The experience of grace under pressure, therefore, is deeply rooted in our theological traditions and requires not only works of mercy, understood as charity and service, and works of justice understood as advocacy, but works of solidarity as means of grace. As I will show, Wesley himself is ultimately after deep solidarity, although he does not use this terminology.

Even more ancient traditions of the embodiment of deep solidarity can be found in the stories of Moses, whom all three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) hold in high esteem. Raised as an Egyptian prince, Moses wakes up one day when he finds himself in a situation of pressure, observing Hebrew slaves being abused by their Egyptian taskmasters. Later, having joined the workforce as a shepherd in forced exile, he accepts the call

²¹ Twenty-one percent of all children in the US are living below the poverty line, with 43 percent in low-income families that often have trouble making ends meet. See the National Center for Children in Poverty, available at <http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html> (Accessed 10th September 2024).

²² For a reflection on what is now called the “precariat,” see Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

²³ Hannah Kuchler, “Super-Rich Fortify against Climate Change and Health Risks,” *Financial Times*, November 13, 2020. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/79781c20-051d-41c4-bd2c-31ceffb763e8> (Accessed 10th September 2024).

²⁴ Already John Wesley complained about the problem that many Methodists of his day moved up and out, never looking back. See his sermon “Of God’s Vineyard,” *The Bicentennial Edition* 3, 515.

to join the solidarity movement of God and the Hebrew slaves, working for collective liberation (Exod. 3:1–12). This might be the real miracle of the Burning Bush story: both Moses and God enter into deep solidarity with people under pressure (observing, listening, and thereby experiencing it). The other miracle of a bush that burns and is not consumed, which is usually emphasized by interpreters, pales in comparison. As a result, grace is experienced under pressure, good news is brought to the poor and the oppressed, foreshadowing the good news of the Jesus movement, and relationships are restored.

In his own ways, John Wesley was involved in deep solidarity in various ways as well. As a young man he traveled to the United States as a missionary, interested in learning “the true sense of the Gospel of Christ by preaching it to the Heathen.” This included a desire for learning from the Natives how to simplify his own life and to learn the practice of the community of goods as described in the book of Acts.²⁵ While some of this reflects romantic (and what might be called soft colonial) ideas that Wesley maintained even after he returned to England never having had the opportunity to engage with Native Americans, his attitude also reflects the beginnings of the genuine two-way streets that are characteristic of the works of solidarity as means of grace. Even if only in rudimentary form, Wesley begins to note potential challenges posed by others and he never ceases to call for conversion of the self, reflected for instance in his reflections on slavery and his concern for the lessons that Europeans would need to learn from Africans. At one point he clearly states that the latter are more advanced in practicing “justice, mercy, and truth!”²⁶ Imagine the implications for global Methodism and Christianity as a whole if such statements were taken seriously.

Wesley’s sense that true religion does not go from the greatest to the least but from the least to the greatest²⁷ is yet another example of deep solidarity, manifest in his willingness to learn from those under pressure who are pushed to the margins by dominant power. Not surprisingly, in his “Plain Account of Christian Perfection” he reminds those going on to perfection that they need to continue to be taught not only by people like himself “but by the weakest Preacher in London; yea, by all men,” adding that it is a mistake “to imagine none can teach you, but those who are themselves saved from sin.”²⁸ In light of these considerations, it would be worthwhile to investigate the deep solidarity emerging in Wesley’s many ministries to people under pressure, including his visits in prisons, his engagements for people’s health, and even field preaching, which turns on its head common church practice to meet behind closed doors and its concomitant narcissistic tendencies.²⁹

In all of this, works of deep solidarity—i.e., works of mercy as means of grace—are closely related to works of piety, and putting them together makes all the difference in the world, reshaping at deeper levels the reading of the Bible, prayer, and Holy Communion. Those who engage and are being engaged at this level are enabled to read the Bible with fresh eyes, to pray in more profound ways, and to deepen their experiences of God and others in Holy Communion. Those who read the Bible in this context can be expected to realize its deep concerns for poverty and justice. How is it possible that so many Christians, Methodists included, consistently overlook the thousands of passages that speak about this while emphasizing the primacy of Scripture?³⁰ Regarding prayer, those who pray in this broader framework can be expected to deepen their relationships with God and others and are therefore less likely to engage in pious monologues. In this spirit, Methodists should pray with their eyes open rather than closed, as prayer is as much about paying attention and listening rather than speaking. Finally, in terms of Holy Communion, the Methodist tradition of the Open Table makes profound theological sense, because it defeats the

²⁵ John Wesley, “Letter to a Friend” (1735), *Works*, 12:38.

²⁶ John Wesley, “Thoughts upon Slavery,” *Works*, 11:64–65.

²⁷ In a journal entry of May 21, 1764, Wesley stated that “religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men.” Wesley, *Works* 3:178. Almost two decades later, Wesley expressed this insight the other way around in a sermon in the year 1783: “They shall all know *me*,’ saith the Lord, not from the greatest to the least (this is that wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God) but ‘from the least to the greatest,’ that the praise may not be of men, but of God.” John Wesley, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” in *Bicentennial Edition*, 2:494. The biblical references are to Heb. 8:11 and Rom. 2:29.

²⁸ John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” *Works*, 11:428. For an intriguing story Wesley tells about the liberative effect of listening to a strange woman whom others declare “mad,” see “A Remarkable Providence,” *Works*, 11:497–98.

²⁹ For an instructive investigation of field preaching in terms of its generative power for the masses see Filipe Maia, “The Rise of the Commons: Spiritual Revival and Political Revolution in the Methodist Movement,” in Joerg Rieger and Upolu Luma Vaai, *Methodist Revolutions: Evangelical Engagements of Church and World* (Nashville: Wesley’s Foundry Books, 2021).

³⁰ See the impressive editions of the *Poverty and Justice Bible*, where all of these passages are highlighted. This is one of the more painful oversights in the split of Methodism, where the adherents of the conservative Global Methodist Church charge the mainline with insufficient attention for Bible and tradition while hardly doing a better job.

narcissism that is so pervasive when it comes to this sacrament. According to the liturgy, invited are not just the pious few but all “who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.” This broadens the circle but it does not mean that the Open Table is a free-for-all; rather, Holy Communion is a primary place for restoring relationship and engaging in deep solidarity. Ultimately, Holy Communion is where everything comes together and where relationships are developed further: between the self, others, and God, informed by readings of the Bible and prayer. In sum, deep solidarity with others and with God is what discipleship is all about—in opening up to others we learn to open up to God, and in opening up to God we learn to open up to others. The ultimate goal is, therefore, not just personal salvation but the salvation of the world as a whole.

Reform vs. Revolution

Where does that leave charitable giving, service, and advocacy? If charity, service, and advocacy lead to reform at best, deep solidarity of necessity leads to something closer to revolution: nothing will be the same, as all relationships are being transformed—those with others, those with God, and even those with the planet.³¹ Understood in the context of the means of grace, works of deep solidarity (which is what works of mercy as means of grace ultimately are) serve as the strongest possible clue that we are not talking about works righteousness but about the exact opposite: works of deep solidarity (as works of mercy) are not done in order to earn one’s salvation but in order to open oneself up to God’s grace and to become more open to God and to others. The same is true for the works of piety: reading the Bible, praying, and even participating in Holy Communion are not done to earn salvation but to open oneself up to God’s grace and to become open to God and to others. The point is that transformation is put in motion by the grace of God under pressure, the experience of which moves us into action together. Charity, service, and advocacy, by contrast, often leave us with the impression that transformation is put in motion by what Methodist churches do.

Deep solidarity places us in relation with others and with God, helping us realize that we share some important concerns (recall that solidarity grows out of experiences of pressure that point to some common experience of sin and evil), making us ready for deeper experiences of grace under pressure that might surprise us. Transformation happens not because Methodists are optimistic about our ability to reform the pressures we encounter; transformation happens because we learn to take these pressures more seriously than we ever have and, for this reason, welcome God’s revolution and join it, as only the revolution of grace under pressure in deep solidarity can move us forward.

The ever-growing pressures of our time and the increasing need for charity, service, and advocacy can, in their best forms, help make us more aware of the seriousness of the situation and the frustrating but necessary awareness that there can be no easy fix. The theological challenge of Anselm of Canterbury still stands and applies to contemporary Methodism as well: “You have not yet considered the gravity of sin.”³² As we begin to address the gravity of sin and the pressures we experience together, our differences do not fade away but can be put to use more productively. In the process, our relationship with God deepens—experiencing and valuing differences among humans can open us up to experiencing and valuing the difference of God—and even our engagement with the works of piety is transformed.

The point of works of deep solidarity (mercy) as means of grace is, therefore, not to make everyone look alike or to march in lockstep. The point of deep solidarity is to realize the pressures that are upon us and then to employ our differences—as well as our limited privileges—for the common good.³³ Note also that those who endure the greatest pressures in their own bodies need to be the guides in everyone else’s quest for grace under pressure and the deepening of our the understanding of sin: they help the rest of us become aware of how severely the pressures of our time destroy lives and communities, how they increasingly affect all, and how they put everyone on a search

³¹ For examples of Methodist reflections on relationships to the planet see, for instance, the work of Upolu Lumā Vaai (Fiji) and Simanga Kumalo (South Africa).

³² Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, trans. Janet Fairweather, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 305.

³³ For a more constructive way to engage unearned privilege, based on a distinction of privilege and power, see Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene*.

for the root causes. Wesley seems to have known this instinctively, as do most people who dare to pay attention to the deepest pressures of life, where life and death is at stake.

As we deepen our relationships and our sense of solidarity, those of us who enjoy unearned privileges can put these privileges to use for meaningful transformation and thereby deconstruct them: rather than supporting systemic racism, for instance, white people can use their white privilege in solidarity with racial minorities to bring down oppressive structures. In the process, white privilege is being transformed, if only because white people using their privilege in solidarity with non-white people will be considered traitors. The same is true for male privilege, ethnic privilege, and even for heterosexual privilege and the privilege of ability. Wesley and the early Methodists, following the General Rules of avoiding “softness and needless self-indulgence” and “being in every kind merciful after their power,” seem to have understood some of these dynamics in ways that escape many of us today.³⁴

Deep solidarity reminds us that the traumatic pressures experienced by racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities are somehow linked to the pressures experienced by the majority of the 99 percent, who may have some privilege but surprisingly little power in the world of neoliberal capitalism, even if this has not sunk in yet for many people. What if the divisions of racism and sexism, for example, serve mostly the elites (the proverbial 1 percent)? When white and black, male and female, gay and straight, able and differently able people, Latinx and Anglo working people are played off against each other, who ultimately benefits? Deep solidarity helps us resist this fracturing of relationships that is a result of sin, linked closely to the divide-and-conquer tactics used by the power brokers, and deep solidarity allows us to form new relationships that link people, planet, and the divine with both the power and the energy to make real differences.

Note that this goes in the face not only of those who currently exclude those who are sexually other from leadership in the church, as in the Global Methodist Church; it also goes in the face of those who assume that all we need is a sort of inclusion that merely brings others into the dominant status quo, as is the case in many quarters of the mainline United Methodist Church and even in the official statement of the “Liberation Methodist Connexion,” that proclaims “inclusion”—“regardless.”³⁵ From the thoroughly relational perspective of grace under pressure, difference is not something to be excluded or included, neither is difference something to be lamented, tolerated, or celebrated; difference is a generative part of the relationships that are at the heart of deep solidarity.

Grace under pressure is experienced most profoundly, therefore, when we know what we are up against, realizing that we need each other because even white American cis-gendered males of the middle-class, including pastors and professors, are not as powerful as we are led to believe. Such a realization can start to deepen our various relationships with each other and with God. Working in solidarity with our sisters, brothers, siblings, communities, the planet, and the divine calls for taking sides. Even the 1 percent are not excluded; rather, they are invited to take the side of those who are struggling in the midst of the most severe pressures of life.³⁶ If our Methodist and our Abrahamic religions traditions are right, and if the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ teach us anything, God does so as well.

Concluding Remarks: Revival

When all is said and done, Christians know that revival is the work of God. That is, of course, the point of the means of grace as well: works of piety and works of deep solidarity (mercy) acquire whatever power they have from a deepening relationship with God. In this way they are the opposite of what is often suspected as works righteousness or moral perfectionism, efforts that invariably lead to frustration and burnout. This synergy of human and divine action, initiated by God, is what Methodist theologians are calling grace.

³⁴ The General Rules of the Methodist Church.

³⁵ The Liberation Methodist Connexion claims “We are a grassroots connexion of former, current, and non-Methodist faith leaders working on the unfolding of the kin-dom of God, inviting the full-inclusion of individuals regardless of: gender expressions and sexual identity, etc.” See <https://www.thelmx.org> (Accessed 10th September 2024).

³⁶ Everyone knows, of course, that “rich people have problems, too.” But we need to start with the pressures that endanger the survival of millions of people and the earth and work our way up from there. Grace under pressure demands no less.

Of the three models engaging the pressures of life—charity/service, advocacy, and deep solidarity—it is deep solidarity that displays the greatest potential of experiencing and collaborating with God at work in grace under pressure. Deep solidarity reminds us that none of us are ultimately in control, that we need mutual relationships with others and God in order to become aware of sin and deepen our experiences of grace, and that we can do nothing without cooperating with others and with God. This insight is also at the heart of the so-called Solidarity Circles spearheaded by the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, which I direct.³⁷ While these circles are not exclusive to Wesleyans or even to Christians—if God is at work in many ways, participation is possible in ways that none of us can fully imagine—they embody some of the genius of Wesleyan Methodism that reflects the genius of something bigger than us.

As a result, what might spark the next revival is neither the limited social engagement and activism of mainline liberal Methodists and other Christians, nor is it the mountaintop religion of many conservative Methodists and their many Christian allies—although both forms may be contributing something. What might spark the next revival—and what may ultimately lead beyond reform to revolution—is engaging in deep solidarity with others and with God, experiencing grace under pressure in places where we least expect it and cannot yet fully envision it.

³⁷ For a description and a theological assessment of these Solidarity Circles see Joerg Rieger and Priscila Silva, "Liberation Theologies and the Future: Rethinking Categories and Popular Participation in Liberation." *Religions* 14 (2023), Special Issue: *The Future of Liberation Theologies*. Edited by Peter Admirand and Thia Cooper, see especially 2.3. "Experiences of Liberation in Daily Life: Organizing Solidarity Circles in the United States". Available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/7/925> (Accessed 10th September 2024).