



Communal Holiness in the Liberation and Methodist Movements

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Abstract: In this article, aspects of the Methodism tradition are put in dialogue with characteristics of Latin American liberation theology to explore communal holiness. The article focuses primarily on the words of John Wesley and Gustavo Gutiérrez, considered founders of these movements. The Wesleyan 'means of grace' by 'works of mercy' is a similar concept to Liberation's 'encountering God in the poor and oppressed.' Traits of liberation spirituality are compared to Methodism. The concluding section asserts that in order to be sanctified (made holy), Christians must do it together. This holiness can be activated through works of mercy with the poor and oppressed.

Keywords: *Methodism • Liberation • communal holiness • grace • mercy • sanctification*

Introduction

The Liberation theology movement remains relevant today not only because different marginalised and oppressed groups around the world have realised God's instrumentality and preferential option through their experiences, but also because through it, older movements such as Methodism can be galvanised in their understanding and practice of holiness. Today's global economic and political conditions warrant a closer look at how a focus on communal holiness would benefit the greater Church and society. In this, I intend to put aspects of Methodism in dialogue with characteristics of Latin American liberation theology, resulting in, I hope, a better understanding of communal holiness for both. When viewed together, these two Christian movements offer symbiotic insights into ways Christians may enact spiritual practices of liberative mercy today. The Methodist tradition can learn from liberation theology about the active spirituality of 'encountering God in the poor,' while liberation theology may see in Methodism the value of disciplines and practices that activate this spirituality in the privileged, those who are not poor or oppressed. Liberative theologies are fundamentally about encountering God (specifically Christ himself) in the poor and oppressed, a perpetual historical experience that needs to be addressed by the Christian Church and the polis at large. As Jesus sadly notes, the poor are always with us (Mark 14:7), and perhaps he was hopeful they would always be centrally located and cared for in all his communities.

I will primarily focus on the words of John Wesley and Gustavo Gutiérrez, two of the most influential initiators of their respective movements: Methodism and Latin American liberation. While there are many respected theologians in both traditions, the words that inspired the original movements will provide the dialogue here. There are many

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liberation theologies that have developed worldwide for various oppressed groups in their own contexts.¹ This essay's focus will limit itself to some of the broader theological touchstones. I acknowledge also that some of those who have written about liberation theology have been influenced by Methodism in some way, but they have not deliberately put the two in a dialogue on communal holiness as I do here.

With the above in mind, in the first section of this piece I will first assert that the Wesleyan 'means of grace' by 'works of mercy' is a similar concept to 'encountering God in the poor and oppressed.' Works of mercy are often-overlooked Methodist disciplines of encountering God. Next, I will focus on traits of liberation spirituality as it has emerged in Latin America, with an emphasis on the poor, with comparisons to Methodism. The concluding section attempts to answer the question that emerges from the intersection of the two traditions: How do I practice this grace, especially if I am not poor? 'Encountering God in the poor' as a Wesleyan 'means of grace' requires disciplines, methods, or practices for the privileged in society to further God's reign here on earth. This conclusion seeks to highlight insights for the universal Christian Church with political and economic implications on the potential for communal holiness.

Means of Grace

As a Methodist, I view the encounter with the poor as one of God's 'means of grace.' John Wesley understood the means of grace to be 'outward signs, words, or actions' that are 'ordinary channels' by which God works to convey grace.² For Wesley, these means are established by Jesus Christ, as demonstrated in Scripture, who then ordained them to be practiced by the church.³ John Wesley specifically listed many of the means of grace, such as: prayer, the sacraments (for example, Eucharist), fasting, searching the Scriptures, and Christian conferencing.⁴ All of them have a communal component that allows an individual and their community to grow towards perfection in holiness, a process called sanctification.⁵ Leading 20th century Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez also emphasises God's grace, as he states, 'a great number of Latin American Christians have been graced by God, and they have been transformed into grace for others.'⁶ Gutiérrez recognises the liberation spirituality as a 'grace' of God.⁷ He says, 'everything is grace' since God's love is 'gratuitous' as a gift we receive (Romans 5:15).⁸ Similar to 'means of grace,' Gutiérrez states, 'the experience of gratuitousness is the space of encounter with the Lord,' and he expounds that good works cannot be effective if not done in the climate of grace.⁹ John Wesley offered a similar assessment, but grouped those good works into something he called 'works of mercy.'

Works of Mercy

The Wesleyan 'means of grace' listed above are works of piety (personal and corporate disciplines directed primarily toward loving God), but the 'means of grace' also include works of mercy (personal and corporate disciplines directed primarily toward loving neighbours). Gutiérrez insists that the experience of God's gratuitous love is an inseparable 'twofold movement' of our relationship with God and of true communion with the other, both through Jesus Christ.¹⁰ As in Wesley's works of piety, Gutiérrez also lists prayer and rites (including Eucharist) as a necessary 'language

¹ See a few examples in the bibliography (in no particular order): James Cone (African American theology), Rosemary Radford Reuther (feminist theology), Kelly Brown Douglas (womanist theology), Peter Cheng (queer theology), John Mbiti (African theology), Mercy Amba Oduyoye (African women's theology), Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz (Mujerista theology), Kwok Pui-Lan (Asian feminist theology), David Kwang sun Suh (Korean Minjung theology), and there are many more.

² J. Wesley, *The means of grace. A sermon on Malachi iii.7* (Bristol: Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, Cambridge University Library, 1768), 6-7.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 6-15.

⁵ J. Wesley, 'On the Spiritual Way of Salvation,' in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, (Online, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1771), 451-53.

⁶ J. Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 69.

⁷ G. Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003) 109-112.

⁸ Ibid., 109-110; see also M. Griffin and J. W. Block, eds., *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations between Dr. Paul Farmer and Father Gustavo Gutiérrez*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 70-71.

⁹ Ibid., 109-112.

¹⁰ Gutiérrez *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 112.

of gratuitous love.¹¹ Wesley proclaimed, 'surely there are works of mercy, as well as works of piety, which are real means of grace [...] and those that neglect them, do not receive the grace which otherwise they might. Yea, and they lose, by a continued neglect, the grace which they had received. Is it not hence that many who were once strong in faith are now weak and feeble-minded?'¹² For Wesley, works of mercy included caring for the sick, the poor, the imprisoned (Matthew 25:37-40). Both Wesley and Gutiérrez recognise how God's grace is materialised through works of piety, but more importantly, through works of mercy towards our fellow humans to perfect ourselves in holiness.

Perfect Holiness

For John Wesley, the end purpose of practicing God's ways of sanctifying grace was to achieve perfect holiness, an unmitigated love for God and neighbor.¹³ This love sits on the throne at the centre of a Christian heart, surrounded by the mind of Christ, then works of mercy, then works of piety, and finally surrounded by a united fellowship of believers.¹⁴ It seems a deliberate ordering to have put 'works of mercy' closer to the mind of Christ and the Christian heart than 'works of piety.' For its part, liberation spirituality is simply Christian holiness (being like Jesus), and the practices of liberation spirituality are the journey towards being 'perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48).¹⁵ For liberation theologians like Gutiérrez, the development of holiness in the Christian life, including political life, is not just about having clear beliefs, but about practices. In this, practicing holiness in the political sphere bears witness today to the holiness of God in incarnate form, and it is a necessary effort to remain and grow in love, perfecting holiness.¹⁶

Wesleyan 'means of grace' are a way to know the identity and presence of God and allow Christians to become sanctified or perfected in holiness to further the reign of God.¹⁷ Provided by God, these Methodist 'means' require human cooperation with the Holy Spirit to have an effect. While much has been written in Methodist and general Christian theologies on methods for the 'works of piety,' such as how to pray, how to conduct sacraments or how to search scriptures, there seems to much less written on methods for works of mercy. It seems the Methodist focus has been on the 'means of grace' that relate more to personal devotion in loving the transcendent God (such as seeing God's presence in the sacraments), and not the means of grace in loving our neighbor, found especially in the immanent Christ (that is, seeing God's presence in the poor). In contrast, and perhaps in lesson, this has been a primary focus in liberation theology.

Encountering God in the Poor and Oppressed

Twentieth-century liberation theologians such as Gutiérrez have called for renewed emphasis and attention to the way God conveys presence through the poor and oppressed. God's preferential option for the poor is a major liberation tenet, based on scripture such as Luke 4:16-20 and Matthew 25:35-6.¹⁸ Wesley's primary list of the 'works of mercy' stem from this same passage in Matthew 25.¹⁹ Gutiérrez informs us this passage of scripture means we encounter the Lord Jesus in the face of the poor, since Jesus said 'I' was hungry, naked, and you cared for 'me.'²⁰ Liberation practice and theory are initiated, rooted and sustained by a spiritual experience of encounter with the Lord in the poor. As such, in order to conduct liberative theological reflection on any spiritual experience, we are required to relate this experience to God's historic revelations found primarily in Scripture.

Using multiple scriptures in the Old and New Testaments (mainly from the Exodus story, the prophets, and the Gospels), liberation theologians have shown God's preference and presence in working justice and mercy on behalf of the oppressed and poor. Liberation theologians note that the major theme running through the whole Bible is

¹¹ Ibid., 111.

¹² Wesley, 'On Visiting the Sick' in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 931.

¹³ Ibid., 'On Perfection,' 745-747.

¹⁴ Ibid., 'On Zeal,' 885.

¹⁵ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 136-137.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83-85.

¹⁷ Wesley, 'On working out our Salvation' in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 824-825.

¹⁸ G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 156, 160.

¹⁹ Wesley, 'On Visiting the Sick,' 931-932.

²⁰ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 103-104.

God's self-revelation in the context of conflict, with God always siding with the subjugated; and, that this revelation finds expression today in the religious life of oppressed peoples who are seeking their liberation.²¹ Liberative interpretations of Gospel accounts legitimate the rupturing of established social, economic, and political boundaries for the sake of Christ's new creation of inclusivity for the poor, outcast, and socially marginalised.²² Wesley relies on scripture in all his writings as a primary source of reflection, but did not focus as much as liberation theologians have on scriptural support for 'works of mercy.' Both Wesley and Gutiérrez agree on the process of living out these practices to perfect holiness, although contrastingly Gutiérrez calls it 'spirituality,' while Wesley calls it 'sanctification.'

Spirituality Is Sanctification

According to Gutiérrez, 'spirituality is a concrete manner, inspired by the Spirit, of the living Gospel; it is a definite way of living "before the Lord," in solidarity with all human beings, "with the Lord," and before humanity.'²³ This idea of spirituality aligns itself with Wesley's process of sanctification, living and working out God's grace to perfect holiness.²⁴ Ched Myers reflects that the two most important contributions of liberation readings are the stress put on the historical practice of Jesus (social, economic, and political), and the emphasis on discipleship as liberating praxis.²⁵ Wesley's practices for the means of grace, to include works of mercy, is a form of discipleship in itself in the process of sanctification and growing closer to God, becoming more like Jesus. The practices of liberation theology similarly actualise their faith to allow closer contact to God. This process of spirituality or sanctification for both movements means walking with those who are poor or oppressed.

With Them

Latin American liberation theology depends on the awareness of poor Christian communities, that their deadly impoverishment is incompatible with their life-giving Christian faith.²⁶ Gutiérrez claims that the poor affect their own betterment; and it is not a revolution *for* poor and oppressed people but *of* these people who take part in their own liberation.²⁷ Several liberation theologians observed many poor giving their lives that others may live, imitating what Jesus did for them, and therefore, seeing the cross as the ultimate expression of love and hope.²⁸ Jesus' life on earth in the Gospels exemplified practices of self-sacrifice and suffering. This differs from the way Methodists have traditionally approached 'works of mercy.' Methodists have often provided for the poor through charities – a praxis of doing things *for* them and not *with* them, perhaps. John Wesley's sermon 'On Visiting the Sick' is probably the closest he got to this liberation concept, as he addresses why it is better to be with the poor (to help them), and not just send help.²⁹ Wesley's views on suffering seemed to change over the years, but he was never explicit about encountering God in it, or that suffering with the poor as a work of mercy could unleash God's grace.³⁰ Should Christians willingly suffer with others who are suffering? Neither Gutiérrez nor Wesley is clear on this, as it is left to the individual's circumstances, although according to Gutiérrez, suffering with the neighbour, if it occurs, is a way to be drawn closer to God.³¹ John of the Cross states, 'the suffering for the neighbor grows the more a soul unites itself through love with God.'³² How then can people of privilege (those who society benefits through current systems and structures) encounter God in the poor and oppressed?

Concluding Implications

Since God defends the life of the poor, Christians participating in this defence of those being slowly and violently crucified by their poverty would surely be a holy thing. Kinship or solidarity in accompanying the poor is holy

²¹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 72-9. See also E. Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connel, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 1-2. Tamez is a Methodist.

²² C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) 439.

²³ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 245.

²⁴ Wesley, 'On the Scriptural Way of Salvation,' 451.

²⁵ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 463.

²⁶ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Introduction, E-book.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

²⁸ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 20-22, 114 ff. (chapter 8, Joy: Victory over Suffering).

²⁹ Wesley, 'On Visiting the Sick,' 932-935.

³⁰ Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 160.

³¹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 114. The chapter is entitled: 'Joy: Victory over Suffering.'

³² *Ibid.*, 140.

because God resides in the poor, and the poor bring Jesus closer to the privileged.³³ This transformation of the advantaged would fit into a broader framework of John Wesley's 'means of grace,' to perfect holiness in loving God and neighbor, through more active communal participation in works of mercy.

Acts of Solidarity (Mercy) as Means of Grace

As a means of grace, God allows the privileged in society an encounter with the divine through actions of solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Christians can participate in God's reign of love and be sanctified through works of mercy with the poor. For liberation theologians, the Bible and the church are interpreted as historical and political, envisioning the end goal as the full Reign of God.³⁴ To move towards the reign revealed in Jesus Christ, Christians must go beyond private matters, to politics that shape human life in society, disarming systems and structures of sin and oppression. According to Gutiérrez, liberation theology is at its core a theology of protest against unjust social orders, and supportive of social transformation leading to greater justice for all.³⁵ For Methodists this means moving beyond charitable actions of mercy for the poor (by just giving money), towards working with the poor in freeing them from social, economic, and political harms. Gutiérrez calls it a 'freedom to love' by serving God and others as a work of solidarity with the poor.³⁶

Freedom to Love as God Loves

Liberation, as a work of mercy, is not a case for class warfare or human rights, but a recognition that Jesus wants everyone to be free to love, including oppressors.³⁷ Acts of mercy for the poor are not just about freedom *from* oppression and poverty, but they allow freedom *to* love as God loves. Freedom to love is about putting yourself in the service of others, working with them, being close to them (Galatians 5:13).³⁸ Expressing this love is an aim of Wesley's sanctification as well as of liberation theology. Encountering God in the poor as a work of mercy and solidarity is a means of grace to grow in discipleship and transform communities. Many privileged people fail to understand that they resist this loving freedom in order to maintain their own worldly status and rich lifestyle. These things imprison them, rather than free them. There are Christians who do not agree that God's salvation includes liberation from oppressive socioeconomic structures and marginalisation. However, Ched Myers states, 'to be captive to the way things are, to resist criticism and change, to brutally suppress efforts at humanisation—is to be bypassed by the grace of God.'³⁹ The privileged must be converted to seeing God's grace in communal action for the poor and oppressed.

Begin with Conversion

Many of today's Christians seem to be more closely connected to state authorities that cause oppression, and many local churches do not seem to appreciate social liberation for the lives of all members.⁴⁰ Gutiérrez acknowledges that the privileged first need to be 'converted' to the poor, a process defined by breaking with the past that has brought them to the present. It is this 'conversion' that is needed to have solidarity with the oppressed.⁴¹ Conversion, as the starting point for any spiritual journey, is an act of childlike humility and spiritual poverty, being freed to love.⁴² When one encounters God in the face of the poor, there is not just a change to the interior life with testimonies and witnesses, but also a change to our reality, an unmasking of harmful social mechanisms.⁴³ My own conversion to the poor was in Guatemala. I sat by a campfire on the site of a mass grave of tortured indigenous people, and I heard a distinct call to be a voice for the voiceless, to speak up with the oppressed. I realised that I had spent most of my adult life as a part of a government that supported this oppressive regime. These people were not able to speak to the ones causing their oppression, yet I could. If I had taken Wesley's means of grace more

³³ Ibid., 111.

³⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 28-33. See also P. Casaldaliga and J. M. Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation*, trans. P. Burns and F. McDonagh, (Tunbridge Wells, Kent, UK: Burns & Oates, 1994), 205.

³⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 70.

³⁶ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 90-92.

³⁷ Ibid., 82.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 166.

⁴⁰ This is my own opinion, as some churches are part of the state institutionally (in northern Europe), and some denominations are recognised as 'state religions' (e.g., Roman Catholicism in some Latin American countries). The United States, which is constitutionally obligated to not establish a state religion, is nevertheless heavily influenced by Christians (e.g., the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court decision concerning abortion).

⁴¹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 95-96; Sobrino, 111.

⁴² Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 122-127.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 97-98.

seriously, I would have been with the poor and oppressed, encountering God in them, with them, and having the freedom to love my neighbours, not hurt them. The privileged, like myself, can be transformed by communal acts of grace (mercy) with the poor.

Privileged in Works of Mercy

The privileged in society can be transformed by encountering God in the poor, by serving with the poor and participating in their struggle. Liberation theologians claim poverty equals death; it is a physical death because of the lack of food, housing, healthcare, employment, and education, as well as a cultural death from a lack of respect for human dignity and unjust sociopolitical constraints.⁴⁴ Being poor necessitates participation in a struggle for justice and peace, fighting for the lives of those in the community and trying to affect political structures hurting its welfare.⁴⁵ The privileged benefit from many of these same structures, but as compatriots of the poor they can protest injustices, work for political advocacy and change systems of oppression to systems that promote life. However, to do this, they must be present, as the incarnate Christ.

Being There

John Wesley notes that 'one reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them [...] many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorance an excuse for their hardness of heart.'⁴⁶ True works of mercy cannot be achieved purely through donation, but also being present, physically and spiritually, beside the oppressed and poor. Pope Francis has emphasised that many professionals, communications media, and centres of power are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems and focused away from how the world can be changed for them.⁴⁷ The poor should always be in the midst of any Christian effort. Being there necessitates active participation in community.

Active Participation in Community

This is not a private enterprise, as encountering God in the poor is social, resulting in personal and communal holiness. John Wesley proclaimed 'the Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.'⁴⁸ Wesley did not directly say much more on social holiness, but it is a logical progression from the communal means of grace, which he does write and speak on frequently. His claim about social holiness is that to be faithfully progressing towards sanctification, active participation in community is required. Gutiérrez similarly states, 'community life cultivates receptivity for God's reign and also proclaims it.'⁴⁹ Gutiérrez also insists that social praxis validates perceptions of shared experience, works out members' life of faith, and confirms theology in reality.⁵⁰ This form of social enterprise by its nature has political and economic implications for the privileged and poor alike. Those in this former category, like myself, should stand with the poor and oppressed even against our own political and economic interests, and instead for the holiness of the community, the sanctification of us all, together.

Conclusion

The focus of communal holiness for perfection of *others* is a slight expansion of the Wesleyan framework for sanctification. The Methodist emphasis seems to have been on practicing works of piety for their own benefit and minimal works of mercy for others as the means of God's grace, in order to advance *personal* holiness. Encountering God in the poor however requires being with them in their struggle for life and in their suffering godlessness, which is not a work of mercy that comfortable Christians may be minded to do. Perfecting holiness by loving God and others entirely requires both communal and personal activation of the means of grace. It requires both works of piety and works of mercy. Liberation theology can help Methodists understand and practice

⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 19, 135, 162-170.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 162-170.

⁴⁶ Wesley, 'On Visiting the Sick,' 933.

⁴⁷ Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2015), 27.

⁴⁸ J. Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems, Published by John Wesley and Charles Wesley*, (Bristol, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, Cambridge University Library, 1739), Preface, viii.

⁴⁹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, 133.

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 32, 57, 73.

communal works of mercy for the poor and oppressed, furthering the sanctification of the community, communal holiness.

This article has focused on two architects of their respective movements, Gustavo Gutiérrez for liberation theology and John Wesley for Methodism. Using differing language, I have attempted to show they were often very similar in their views of the 'means of grace,' 'works of mercy,' 'perfecting holiness,' and 'encountering God in the poor and oppressed.' Holiness is social, it is communal. If Christians are to perfect the love of God and love of others in order to be sanctified (made holy), they must do it together. This holiness can be activated through works of mercy for the poor and oppressed. For both Methodists and liberation advocates, communal holiness requires active participation by the privileged for the welfare of those economically, politically, and socially deprived. Methodists have offered valuable contributions towards creating methods, practices, and habits for personal holiness and works of piety. Now is the time for Methodists to be more deliberate in the focus on works of mercy and communal holiness. As global economic situations grow more dire, a focus on the poor can only help all of us.

Liberation theology, in the Latin American context, remains relevant today, to challenge and reveal a significant area of growth for Methodists in their way of faith. The words of liberation theologians will have major social and political implications for any community that exercises active participation in holiness of others as a means of grace. There is much more to explore, as many theologians on liberation theology and Methodism have written about their respective spiritualities, and some have noticed the similarities.⁵¹ Future research, with a Wesleyan focus, should develop more concrete measures for the privileged to participate in this grace of God, possibly assisting Methodists, liberation theologians, the Church, and the polis on our journey together in communal holiness.

⁵¹ For example, James Cone, another architect of liberation theology, had a Methodist background.

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