

Voices: The Holy Spirit and the means of grace

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Editor's Note: *This is the third article in a series focused on what Baptists can learn from the Wesleyan tradition.*

I came to Asbury Theological Seminary with a Baptist background and an Arminian theological orientation shaped by my upbringing as a Texas Baptist.

I had long valued the Baptist emphasis on Scripture, personal conversion and congregational life. But I hadn't yet grasped how deeply the Christian life could be shaped by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and sustained through consistent spiritual practices.

In the Wesleyan tradition, I've encountered a vision of sanctification—being made holy—that doesn't end at the altar call but extends into every corner of life.

At the center of this vision is a dynamic understanding of grace and a deep openness to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Wesleyans, like Baptists, affirm salvation by grace through faith alone. But they also emphasize that God doesn't stop working once a person is justified. God continues shaping believers through what John Wesley called the "means of grace," practices like Scripture reading, prayer, communion, fasting and Christian fellowship.

These aren't works we perform to earn God's favor; they are time-tested channels through which God pours out his transforming presence.

A holy expectancy

This idea hit home for me when I realized how often Baptists, me included, emphasize spiritual disciplines but tend to frame them mostly as duties, important, yes, but often grounded in obligation or gratitude rather than expectancy. We encourage Bible reading and prayer, but sometimes without the deep theological assumption that God will meet us in those moments—not just to inform, but to transform.

Wesley's understanding of the means of grace helped me recover a sense of holy expectancy. Scripture became not just instruction, but encounter. Prayer became more than petition, it became participation in God's renewing work. And the Lord's Supper became not only a memorial but a real means through which Christ strengthens and sanctifies his people.

Wesleyan theology insists the means of grace are experienced both personally and communally. We meet God in solitude, but also through gathered worship, mutual confession and shared burdens. Fasting and intercession have their private place, but grace is never purely individual; it flows through the body of Christ.

The means of grace create a sacred rhythm, drawing us back again and again to the places where God promises to be present. They remind us that sanctification isn't self-improvement, but surrender. Not isolation, but communion.

The ongoing work of the Spirit

Wesleyans speak boldly and expectantly about the Holy Spirit, not just in the New Testament, but here and now. In many Baptist settings, certainly in my own experience, the Spirit is affirmed in doctrine but not always emphasized in discipleship.

We believe the Spirit inspired Scripture, regenerates the heart and seals salvation. Yet we often grow cautious, even silent about the Spirit's ongoing work of shaping us, empowering us and guiding us into deeper obedience.

Wesleyan spirituality places the Spirit front and center—not as a background presence, but as the active agent of transformation: assuring salvation, convicting of sin, gifting for mission and forming Christ within us. And the Spirit doesn't move only in private. The Spirit inhabits worship, small groups, accountability bands and the vulnerable grace of confession. The Spirit calls the church, not just individuals, into deeper holiness.

Wesley even dared to speak of something he called “entire sanctification,” a term that can sound foreign, even suspect, to Baptist ears. But if we push past the label, the idea itself is deeply scriptural and compelling: that God doesn't merely forgive us but can also set us free. Free from the grip and rule of sin. Free to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Free to love our neighbor not just in word but in action.

Wesley believed that through the ongoing work of the Spirit, believers could be so filled with God's love that it governed their motives, their habits and their relationships. This was not a call to spiritual perfectionism, but to perfect love, a life wholly yielded to God.

The Spirit-empowered life

Do all Wesleyans believe in a single, instantaneous experience of entire sanctification? No. There's a range of perspectives, just as there is among Baptists about spiritual growth and maturity.

What the Wesleyan tradition offers is a hopeful insistence that grace doesn't stop at justification. Salvation is not only about pardon, but also about healing. Grace doesn't merely cover sin; it restores what sin has

broken.

Holiness, in this light, isn't a burdensome list of rules or a badge of honor, it's the fruit of divine love poured into the heart by the Holy Spirit. And that's something all of us, Wesleyans, Baptists and every follower of Christ, can long for with joy and hope.

I now serve at a multi-denominational, evangelical seminary rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, Asbury Theological Seminary, but I haven't left behind my Baptist roots. If anything, I've found them enriched.

I still long for revival. I still treasure baptism. I still believe the church should be a community of disciples on mission. But I've learned to see the Christian life not only as something to believe in or strive toward, but as something God empowers us to live through grace.

Baptists don't need to become Wesleyans to benefit from these emphases. But in a time when many, especially younger Christians, are longing for depth, healing and hope, I believe we'd do well to recover a Spirit-filled vision of transformation.

According to a recent Pew Research report, the decline of Christianity in the United States may have slowed or even leveled off, but younger adults remain significantly less likely to attend church, pray regularly or say religion is very important in their lives.

This moment calls not just for better messaging, but for a deeper reality. People aren't looking for performance, they're looking for power. And the Wesleyan tradition reminds us that God isn't finished with us yet.

He's not just calling us to believe, but to become. And God has given us everything we need to grow: his Spirit, his people and his means of grace.

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