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# ECCLESIAL INSTITUTIONS AS MEANS OF GRACE: A WESLEYAN VIEW OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE HOLY CHURCH

by

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The relationship between the “charismatic” and “institutional” aspects of the church is a significant issue in ecclesiological literature.<sup>1</sup> There is general agreement among ecclesialogists that the visible church, as it exists in history, has an institutional aspect, although some see the church’s institutionality in a completely negative light, while others believe it to be divinely ordained, even in its particulars. Likewise, everyone wants to affirm that the church is a creature of the Spirit, and that the life and health of the church depend upon Spirit’s gifts, the charisms, those diverse concrete manifestations of divine grace that are given to persons and bring an obligation to vocational service for the building up of the body of Christ. Thus, all agree that the church has both an institutional and a charismatic aspect, but how should we conceive of the relationship between the two?

This question is of great interest to those who are interested in the theology of reform and renewal, and in particular in the question of how we should understand the place of reform and renewal movements in the life of the church. Discussion of these “movements” is often framed around this question of the relationship between the charismatic and institutional aspects of the church, but there is considerable variation in the way the issue is addressed.<sup>2</sup> I will illustrate the breadth of the discus-

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<sup>1</sup>Portions of this paper are adapted from chapter II.2 of my doctoral dissertation, “A Theology of Ecclesial Charisms, with Special Reference to the Paulist Fathers and The Salvation Army” (Ph.D. diss., Toronto: University of St. Michael’s College, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>In my dissertation I propose a five-fold typology of views on the question of the relationship between the charismatic and the institutional. In addition to the two types I discuss below, I identify the following three: charismatic *more fundamental* than institutional (Boff, von Campenhausen), charismatic *in legitimate tension* with institutional (Rahner), and *charismatic as justification for separate institutions* (Cullmann). See *Ibid.*, chapter II.2.

sion by contrasting the two extreme positions before proposing what I believe to be a Wesleyan solution to the problem, drawing on the concept of “means of grace” as a way of understanding ecclesial institutions.

### Two Extremes on the Spectrum of Views

**Charismatic *Opposed* to Institutional.** The first type of approach to this question is perhaps best encapsulated in Max Weber’s memorable phrase “the iron cage of bureaucracy.”<sup>3</sup> Popular understandings of “charisma” have been heavily influenced by the work of this pioneering sociologist and the very sharp distinction he drew between charismatic and institutional authority. Weber, however, actually took his understanding of charisma from the earlier work of Lutheran legal scholar Rudolph Söhm whose investigation of early Christianity introduced the concept into modern scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Söhm argued that the earliest Christians viewed their communities as drawn together and constituted by the charisms of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Leadership, he claimed, was provided by charismatic figures and was not formalized into offices. Church offices were a later development, and Söhm viewed them as a failure and a retreat from the original charismatic organization of the church.<sup>6</sup>

Söhm’s interpretation of the early church had a profound influence in the early twentieth century, though it was not blindly accepted. Adolf von Harnack, for example, agreed that the primitive church was charismatic, but proposed that there had originally been non-charismatic leadership as well. He identified the charismatic leaders with itinerant preachers and prophets who exercised a universal ministry, and he suggested that local leaders, presbyters, bishops, and deacons, exercised their min-

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<sup>3</sup>On this phrase see Talcott Parsons’s introduction to Max Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2001), xvii–xviii.

<sup>4</sup>Rudolf Söhm, *Kirchenrecht* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1892).

<sup>5</sup>Therefore, he argued, they understood the church to be a spiritual entity which was beyond all human law. The contrast here is between the church constituted by the consent of the members in a democratic “free association” sense and the church as constituted by the charismatic action of the Spirit. Enrique Nardoni, “Charism in the Early Church Since Rudolph Sohm: An Ecumenical Challenge,” *Theological Studies* 53, no. 4 (1992): 647.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*: 648.

istry on the basis of a different kind of charism.<sup>7</sup> In the final analysis, however, Harnack followed the same line of thinking as Söhm in proposing that the emerging institutional church was hostile to the charismatic element, and eventually succeeded in suppressing it.<sup>8</sup>

This type of “oppositional” perspective on institution and charism continues to circulate at a popular level, although it is difficult to find any significant scholarly work today which continues to oppose institution and charism in principle.<sup>9</sup> Vestiges of this view can be seen in the “restorationist” impulse that is present in some evangelical traditions, such as classical Pentecostals who historically resisted the label “denomination,” in part because they were attempting to avoid what they believed to be the corruption of “institutional” churches.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary North American culture is highly sceptical concerning institutions of any kind, and therefore many people in this context, including most Christians (and perhaps *especially* evangelicals), assume that institutions are life-

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<sup>7</sup>Adolf von Harnack, *The Constitution and Law of the Church in the First Two Centuries*, ed. H. D. A. Major, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: Williams & Norgate, 1910), 241–242. However, according to Harnack, these local authorities existed in varying combinations and permutations. See Nardoni, “Charism in the Early Church Since Rudolph Sohm,” 648–649.

<sup>8</sup>This is evident in Harnack’s definition of “Catholicism” as the point in the church’s development when “the apostles, prophets, and charismatic lay teachers ceased and their place was taken by the norm of the apostolic doctrine, the norm of the apostolic canon of Scripture, and subjection to the authority of the apostolic episcopal office.” Harnack, *The Constitution and Law*, 245; Nardoni, “Charism in the Early Church Since Rudolph Sohm,” 648–649. As is well known, Harnack saw the features of Catholicism as he defined it as “foreshadowed as early as the first century and in the writings of the New Testament,” but maintained that “the Catholic elements did not constitute the essence of primitive Christianity,” and he maintained that “Catholicism” did not really take hold until the beginning of the third century. Harnack, *The Constitution and Law*, 253 and n.1.

<sup>9</sup>Even mainstream Pentecostal theology, where one might expect to find such affirmations, has moved beyond an oppositional perspective, as seen in the reports of the Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue. See the overview in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Church as Charismatic Fellowship: Ecclesiological Reflections from the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic Dialogue,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18 (2001): 100–121.

<sup>10</sup>See Wolfgang Vondy, “Pentecostal Ecclesiology: A Historical and Theological Contribution,” in *Denomination: Assessing an Ecclesiological Category*, Ecclesiological Investigations 11 (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 100–116.

draining and oppressive and pose a great threat to the work of the Spirit. The problem with this perspective is that it views the church's institutional character as resulting from a "fall" from a primitive state of charismatic purity. As I will argue shortly, however, the church, if it is to endure through time as a concrete human community, must have an institutional aspect.

**Charismatic and Institutional as Complementary.** At the other end of the spectrum is an approach that proposes that the charismatic and the institutional aspects of the church should be taken as complementary. The teaching on charisms in the documents of Vatican II presents such an approach, speaking of the "hierarchical and charismatic" gifts through which the Spirit directs and equips the church.<sup>11</sup> A fundamental harmony between the charismatic and hierarchical (or institutional) gifts is presupposed in this perspective. The hierarchy, which has the gift of oversight, nevertheless submits to the working of the Spirit by endorsing and approving the charismatic gifts of the people.<sup>12</sup> Shortly after the council, Gabriel Murphy, a Roman Catholic brother, completed a study of the theology of charisms, which included a chapter summarizing the use of the term at Vatican II. His summary of *Lumen Gentium's* teaching on charisms stresses how the church is aided by "two forms of assistance," hierarchical and charismatic gifts, both of which come from the Spirit. The two kinds of gifts cannot be essentially divided or separated, but should rather be conceived of as "overlapping" and permeating each other.<sup>13</sup>

The end result of this approach can be seen in some of Pope Benedict XVI's thinking on this subject. He attempts to *fuse* charism and institution via an argument concerning the sacramentality of the church. Writing as Cardinal Ratzinger, he rejects this institutional versus charismatic discussion altogether, arguing instead that the church's official ministry is based on the sacrament of orders, and therefore, by its very nature,

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<sup>11</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, §4, in Austin P. Flannery, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 352.

<sup>12</sup>*Lumen Gentium* §45, *Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>13</sup>Gabriel Murphy, *Charisms and Church Renewal* (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1965), 123, 125.

transcends the sociological category of “institution.”<sup>14</sup> The church itself, including what others would term its “institutions,” is characterized as a charismatic entity which exists by divine right.<sup>15</sup> This approach therefore overcomes the opposition between charism and institution, but creates another problem by fusing the two together so closely that the distinction between charism and institution is lost.

### **Ecclesial Institutions as Means of Grace**

**The Church is Necessarily Institutional.** Having contrasted these two extreme approaches to this question, I propose what I believe is a Wesleyan solution to the problem, one which avoids the pitfalls of either extreme by drawing on Wesley’s concept of the “means of grace.” I begin with the claim that the church is *necessarily institutional*.

There is no agreed-upon definition of “institution,” either in sociological or theological discourse. The literature on the relationship between the charismatic and the institutional aspects of the church reflects this challenge, with authors often using the terms “institution” and “institutionalization” without offering any definition whatsoever.<sup>16</sup> My position is that an institution is simply a stable pattern of social interaction. Institutions, therefore, are best conceived as existing on a continuum which includes everything from a recurring encounter between two persons to a large organization such as the United Nations. In taking this position I am following the line of argument in Miroslav Volf’s *After Our*

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<sup>14</sup>To speak of the church’s ministry as an institution implies, in Ratzinger’s view, that ministry is something which the church “can dispose of herself” and “can be determined of her own imitative,” views which are clearly inadequate in light of the ministry’s sacramental character. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ecclesial Movements: A Theological Reflection on Their Place in the Church,” in *Movements in the Church: Proceedings of the World Congress of the Ecclesial Movements, Rome, 27-29 May, 1998*, *Laity Today* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1999), 25–26.

<sup>15</sup>He prefers therefore to discuss “movements” in the church, like the Franciscans, under the category of the church’s universal apostolicity. *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>16</sup>For example, the influential work of Rahner, Suenens, and Sullivan on this subject all proceeds on an assumed understanding of “institution.” See Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (Freiburg: Herder, 1964); Léon Joseph Suenens, *A New Pentecost?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); Francis A. Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1982).

*Likeness*, which in turn draws on the sociological theories of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.<sup>17</sup>

Institutions need not be “formal” organizations with explicitly stated objectives, rules, and officers, although such organizations certainly are institutions. Informal patterns of social interaction are also a kind of institution. In any given social relationship, it is inevitable that, over time, stable patterns will develop, and those stable patterns are basic forms of social institutions. This means that there is no non-institutional space in which a human person can exist.<sup>18</sup>

I adopt this approach for two reasons. First, definitions which make such features as formal laws and officers essential to institutionality end up viewing institutions primarily through the lenses of “power” and “control.” That is, that they tend to view all institutions as oppressive bureaucracies which inhibit the freedom of autonomous individuals.<sup>19</sup> Without

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<sup>17</sup>Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 234–245. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967), 47–67. See also the definition provided by James Gustafson: “An institution is a relatively persistent pattern of action or relationships in human society.” *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 30.

<sup>18</sup>Even further, all our experiences are interpreted and understood through the concepts, practices, and symbols we appropriate from our various institutional contexts, including ecclesial institutions. This approach comports well with George Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach to religion, which draws in part on the work of Berger and Luckmann. In Lindbeck’s argument, “inner experience” is derived from a cultural-linguistic framework regarding ultimate concerns (his understanding of a religion), although he further clarifies that a religion (as a cultural-linguistic framework) and religious experience exist in a dialectical relationship. That is, it is not simply that religion shapes experience in a unilateral way. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1984), 32–41. Although Lindbeck does not use “institution” as a primary category in his account, the definition of institutions which I am employing (stable structures of social practice) is broad enough to include everything which Lindbeck includes in his cultural-linguistic category. In other words, a particular religion has an inescapably institutional character.

<sup>19</sup>For example, Hasenhüttl defines institutions as follows: “An institution is a changeable, but permanent product of purposive social role behaviour which subjects the individual to obligations, gives him formal authority and possesses legal sanctions.” Gotthold Hasenhüttl, “The Church as Institution,” in *The Church as Institution, Concilium: Religion in the Seventies* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), 15.

discounting the significant potential for coercion and control which exists in many institutions, I would argue that the tendency to influence by coercion and control is not an essential feature of *all* institutions. For example, a small group that meets in someone's home is a kind of institution, and as such it has a formative influence over its members, though its influence is not achieved through coercion.<sup>20</sup>

The second reason I prefer to define institutions simply as stable patterns of social interaction is because overly formalized understandings of institutions also give support to the idea that "movements" in the church are not institutions because their structures are often informal. When "movements" are considered "non-institutional," the relationship between reform movements and established church structures is framed in an overly oppositional manner. Under the definition I prefer, "movements" in the church are a type of institution. They are less institutionalized than established church structures, but they are not free of institutionalization. In fact, from the perspective of "control," sometimes informal structures can be *more* dangerous than formal structures because a particular personality can exert tremendous influence on people, often without being subject to much oversight and accountability.

If institutions are stable patterns of social interaction, then the church is necessarily institutional because the church exists as a concrete human community which endures through time, and as a community which endures through time it inevitably will develop stable patterns of social interaction. Stable patterns of Christian fellowship, worship, ministry, sacraments, and the proclamation of the Word are all institutions which are the result of our patterned social interaction and yet also confront us as an external reality.<sup>21</sup> To be clear, I am not saying that the

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<sup>20</sup>Volf frames the issue this way: "The members of the church do not stand over against the church as an institution; rather, their own actions and relations are the institution church. Although the institutional church is not their "product," but rather is a "product" of the Spirit, the church does not stand over against them as a kind of objectified, alien entity, but rather is the manner in which they relate and behave toward one another." Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 241. I think Volf's overall direction here is correct, although he understates the objective character of institutions, I believe, in reaction to typical Protestant anti-institutionalism.

<sup>21</sup>This point is brought out well by Lindbeck in his comparison of religion to a cultural-linguistic system: "To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms. A religion is above all an external word, a *verbum externum*, that molds and shapes the self and its world, rather than an expression or thematization of a pre-existing self or of pre-conceptual experience." Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 34.



proclamation of the Word, for example, is *merely* a pattern of social interaction. While it is not *merely* a human institution, it *is* a human institution. It is one of a variety of social institutions that we find in the church, through which the Spirit graciously acts and through which God's people responds to God's gracious presence. I am arguing, in other words, that ecclesial institutions have a sacramental character. However, the Wesleyan understanding of sacraments as "means of grace" enables us to avoid the problem of "fusing" charism and institution, which I identified as problematic in Ratzinger's sacramental understanding of ecclesial institutions.

**The Wesleyan Understanding of "Means of Grace."** John Wesley employed the theological category "means of grace" as his preferred way of talking about the sacraments.<sup>22</sup> It would be fair to say that Wesley viewed the Lord's Supper as the preeminent means of grace, speaking of it as "the grand channel whereby the grace of his Spirit was conveyed to the souls of all the children of God."<sup>23</sup> Wesley's best-known definition of "means of grace" seems particularly well-suited to a discussion of the dominical sacraments:

By "means of grace" I understand 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.<sup>24</sup>

Wesley's understanding of the means of grace, however, was much broader than the two dominical sacraments. In various references throughout his works he lists more than fifteen different means of grace. Although it does not come from Wesley's own hand, the definition of means of grace offered by Henry Knight does justice to Wesley's use of

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<sup>22</sup>He did not invent the term, but borrowed it from earlier Anglican sources. Outler's introduction to Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," notes that the phrase appears in "The General Thanksgiving" (Morning Prayer) in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, and in the BCP *Catechism*: "What do you mean by this word Sacrament? I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given to use by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive this grace, and a pledge to assure us thereof." *The Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: Anglican Book, 1962), 15; 550; Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 377.

<sup>23</sup>Sermon 26, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount – VI," §III.11, in Outler, *Works*, 1:584–585.

<sup>24</sup>Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," §II.1, *Ibid.*, 1:381.

the term: "Means of grace are means through which persons experience and respond to the loving presence of God."<sup>25</sup> While Wesley has not left us with a complete list of the means of grace in one place, following Knight, we can synthesize what Wesley has said in various places and categorize the means of grace under three headings: "general means," "instituted means," and "prudential means."<sup>26</sup>

"General" means are those which ought to characterize every aspect of the Christian life, such as taking up our cross and keeping the commandments. These means can be contrasted with particular means, more specific practices such as prayer and the Lord's Supper.<sup>27</sup> The other two categories, "instituted" and "prudential," are both types of "particular" means. When Wesley speaks of "instituted" means he is referring to those means which have been appointed by God for the church in all times and places, including prayer, the Word of God (read, heard, proclaimed, meditated upon), the Lord's Supper, fasting, and "Christian conference," which is an idea to which I will return in a moment.<sup>28</sup> "Prudential means," on the other hand, are specific means which vary according to time and place, and may develop in response to the particular needs and challenges that the church is facing at any given moment.<sup>29</sup> Prudential means, for Wesley, included such things as particular rules for holy living, the Methodist class and band meetings, prayer meetings and covenant services.<sup>30</sup>

Nearly all of the instituted and prudential means Wesley identifies would be considered "ecclesial institutions," according to my definition.

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<sup>25</sup>Henry H. Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace*, *Pietist and Wesleyan Studies* 3 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>27</sup>"The Doctrinal Minutes, 1749," Conversation the Second, Bristol, August 2, 1745, §50, in Henry D. Rack, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 791; Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 3; Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 257.

<sup>28</sup>"The 'Large' Minutes," June 29, 1744, §§40.1-40.5, in Rack, *The Works of John Wesley*, 10:855-857.

<sup>29</sup>Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 3; Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 266.

<sup>30</sup>"The 'Large' Minutes," June 29, 1744, §§40.6, Rack, *The Works of John Wesley*, 10:858.

Three in particular are quite obviously institutional: “Christian conference,” by which he means rightly ordered conversation among believers, and class and band meetings, which formed the organizational core of the Methodist revival. As a means of grace in general, “Christian conference” could take a wide variety of forms, but within Methodism, “conference” came to take on a particular meaning as an annual gathering of Wesley and selected Methodist leaders during which they would discuss key matters of doctrine, discipline, and practice, dealing with controversial questions and attempting to clarify misunderstandings of their positions.<sup>31</sup> The Annual Conference went on to become the standard ruling body in Methodist polity. What is often forgotten is that such a Conference was envisioned by Wesley not merely as a legislative body, but as a means of grace. Christian believers, gathered in the presence of God, seeking to rightly order their conversation before him, could expect to “experience and respond to the loving presence God.”<sup>32</sup> Thus Conference, a characteristically institutional practice, was conceived as means of grace by Wesley.

The class and band meetings are two further examples of Methodist “institutions” which were considered means of grace by Wesley. Although both types of meeting developed somewhat organically in the context of the revival, once they were established Wesley provided clear structures for their organization and leadership. The class leaders were instructed to maintain contact with their members in order to receive their collection for the poor, inquire after their spiritual state, and offer advice, correction, comfort, or exhortation as appropriate. They were then to report back to the leaders of the Society regarding the collection and informing them of those who were sick and those who refused correction.<sup>33</sup> The smaller and more selective band meetings, organized by age, sex, and marital status, focused on pursuing spiritual progress through mutual accountability.<sup>34</sup> This system of classes and bands is familiar territory to students of Methodism, but what is sometimes overlooked is that Wesley

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<sup>31</sup>On the origins of the Methodist Conference, see the extensive Introduction to *Ibid.*, 10:1–109.

<sup>32</sup>Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 2.

<sup>33</sup>See “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” §3, in Rupert E. Davies, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 70.

<sup>34</sup>“Rules of the Band Societies” (December 25, 1739), and “Directions Given to the Band Societies” (December 25, 1744) in *Ibid.*, 9:77–79.

viewed the classes and bands as prudential means of grace. And yet, as is abundantly clear, these means of grace were highly organized, and, I would say, highly *institutional*. They had structures, rules, formal leaders, and standardized procedures that were to be followed across the Methodist movement.

These institutional structures were greatly used by God not only to bring people to saving faith, but also to cultivate and correct the exercise of spiritual gifts in the context of Christian community. Thus, they were an *institutional means* of *charismatic grace*. That is not to say that Wesley viewed such institutions as being of equal importance to the Lord's Supper. Rather, it is to say that these stable patterns of social interaction (to use my terminology) were used by God as means for his people to experience and respond to his gracious presence. The institution was not the enemy of the Spirit but the instrument of the Spirit.

#### Wesley's View Contrasted with "Enthusiasm" and "Formalism"

Wesley's position is further clarified when we consider it in contrast with his two main theological opponents on this issue: the *enthusiasts* and the *formalists*.<sup>35</sup> An "enthusiast," in the particular eighteenth-century meaning of the term, is a person who believes they have direct, unmediated, and infallible access to the Spirit of God, without recourse to correction by scripture, tradition, or the Christian community.<sup>36</sup> The enthusiast sees the means of grace as unnecessary on the grounds that grace is given to

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<sup>35</sup>For a succinct summary of Wesley's view of the means of grace as distinguished from formalism and enthusiasm, see Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 11–12.

<sup>36</sup>See John Locke's classic description of enthusiasts as those who have "flattered themselves with a persuasion of an immediate intercourse with the Deity, and frequent communications with the divine spirit." *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Thomas Basset, 1690), §IV.19.5 (since this work is available in numerous editions I have simply cited the section number rather than the page number). Wesley himself, of course, was often charged with being an enthusiast, although he denied the charge, most notably in Sermon 37, "The Nature of Enthusiasm," wherein he attempts identify "true enthusiasts" as those who either (a) presume that they are Christians when they are not, (b) presume they have gifts of the Spirit when they do not, or, most relevant to my argument in this paper, (c) presume to attain the ends without the means. See Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 44–60.

the individual believer immediately, apart from all means. Wesley came into direct conflict with a particular brand of enthusiasm in the “quietism” or “stillness” teaching of the English Moravians, some of whom were arguing against the use of *all* means on the ground that Christ himself “is the only means of grace.”<sup>37</sup>

Wesley responded to this enthusiastic perspective by arguing that, although God could, indeed, work outside of any means should he choose to do so, we have no reason to expect that he *will* do so when he has appointed his ordinary channels of grace and made them readily available to us.<sup>38</sup> In his *Cautions and Directions Given to the Greatest Professors in The Methodist Societies* he writes, “One general inlet to enthusiasm is the expecting the end without the means—the expecting knowledge, for instance, without searching the Scripture and consulting the children of God.”<sup>39</sup> Wesley’s concern, of course, is that the enthusiasts are opening themselves to private revelations without the normative correction that comes through the means of grace, especially those means which, as Knight has noted, keep us focused on the particular identity of God—Scripture and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Wesley clearly rejects the enthusiast’s claim that no means are necessary.

On the other side, the formalist is one who sees the means as possessing some sort of inherent power, as if they “distributed” God’s grace simply by the work being done. Such a position would be typical of some of Wesley’s Anglican contemporaries, whose view of sacraments tended in the direction of Roman Catholicism. The distinction between *God’s grace* and the *means* is lost. The formalist runs the risk of presuming upon

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<sup>37</sup>Wesley references this objection in Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” §11.4, and as Outler’s note (n. 36) on this passage indicates, this is very similar to a phrase of the Moravian leader Molther, noted in Wesley’s *Journal*, April 25, 1740. Outler, *Works*, 1:382. Cf. Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 12; Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 110–114.

<sup>38</sup>“God *can* give the end without any means at all; but you have no reason to think he *will*.” Sermon 37, §39, Outler, *Works*, 2:59.

<sup>39</sup>In Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 300. See also Sermon 37, “The Nature of Enthusiasm,” §27, Outler, *Works*, 2:56.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 12.

God's grace rather than seeking the living presence of the sovereign Lord through these means.<sup>41</sup>

While encouraging the constant use of the means of grace, Wesley was careful to offer his people precautions against falling into "formal religion," as can be seen, for example, in the instructions he gives at the end of his sermon "The Means of Grace." First, he suggests that one should "always retain a lively sense that God is above all means."<sup>42</sup> In other words, do not lose the distinction between the means and God, and do not presume upon God's grace. Secondly, when using any of the means, one must always remember that "there is no *power* in this. It is in itself a poor, dead, empty thing: separate from God, it is a dry leaf, a shadow."<sup>43</sup> The means are not effective simply because the work has been done. Thirdly, "in using all the means, seek God alone," and "use all means *as means*," not as if they were an end in themselves.<sup>44</sup> The end of the means of grace is the transformation of the human person by the love of God in Christ, such that, by the Spirit, she is enabled to live a life of holy love for God and neighbour. The means must always be subordinate to that end.

### **Ecclesial Institutions as Means of Grace**

Relating all of this back to the debate about the relationship between the institutional and charismatic dimensions of the church, I suggest that the "charismatic *opposed* to institutional" is a kind of "enthusiasm." Likewise, the "charismatic *complementary* to institutional" view is a kind of "formalism." The enthusiast is one who believes they can have the charismatic life of the Spirit apart from the institutional church, and the formalist is one who fuses charism and institution in such a way that they run the risk of presuming upon God's grace. A Wesleyan solution to this problem of the relationship between "the charismatic and the institutional" aspects of the church is to propose that *ecclesial institutions are means of grace*—they are

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<sup>41</sup>Strangely enough, as Knight notes, this presumption can actually create a sense of distance between the person and God's presence since they might presume that they have communed with God simply by making use of the means, thereby being deluded by "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof" (2 Tim. 3:5). *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>42</sup>Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," §V.4, Outler, *Works*, 1:395.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:§V.4, 396.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

frail instruments, having no power in and of themselves, and yet they are used by God as his means whereby his people can experience and respond to his gracious presence in their midst.

Therefore, against an enthusiastic interpretation, ecclesial institutions are not inherently threatening to spiritual life and freedom. The charismatic and the institutional are not opposed to one another. It is through various stable patterns of social interaction among believers that we encounter the gospel, are nurtured in the faith, fellowship with one another, and act in the world. Through ecclesial institutions we worship the Triune God and receive, cultivate, and exercise the charisms of the Spirit. All of these things take place in a social environment that exists concretely in time and therefore will always be marked by patterns of institutionalization.

It is true church history has often seen conflict between movements of renewal and leaders in established churches. But these are not simply clashes between "the charismatic" and "the institutional," as if those are two opposing forces at work in the church. The tensions which often exist in these situations are tensions *between different kinds of institutions*, both of which are (at least potentially) means of grace. Methodism is a case-in-point. Many people might identify the early Methodist as a "charismatic movement." Yet it was *highly institutional*, as my discussion of conferences, classes, and bands should have demonstrated, and those institutional features were a key aspect of its success.<sup>45</sup>

The Methodists had many conflicts with the established Church of England, which was a very different type of ecclesial institution. Nevertheless, Wesley insisted that his Methodist people could still find the most important means of grace in the established church, and he resisted separation from the Church of England. The conflict between Methodism and the Church of England, therefore, cannot be explained as a conflict between the charismatic and the institutional, but should rather be seen as a conflict between two types of ecclesial institutions.

At the same time, against a formalist view, this Wesleyan solution that I am proposing insists that ecclesial institutions are not automatically effective means of grace. Ecclesial institutions are certainly open to abuse

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<sup>45</sup>As Howard Snyder states, "Without the class meeting, the scattered fires of renewal would have burned out long before the movement was able to make a deep impact on the nation." Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley & Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 57.

and distortion, and much of the conflict that arises between reform movements and established churches is because of abuse and distortion on both sides of the conflict. Therefore, the church cannot presume upon the Spirit's blessing, and my claim that ecclesial institutions are means of grace cannot be taken as a licence for ecclesiastical triumphalism. Just as one might "drink judgment" in the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11), so the Spirit may carry divine judgment through other ecclesial institutions, or indeed, might even abandon a particular ecclesial institution in judgment, as the glory of the Lord departed from the Temple in Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 10-11).

Likewise we must be sure to distinguish between institution and charism, lest we fail to honor the Spirit's sovereignty (1 Cor. 12:11). However, the abuses and distortions found in ecclesial institutions do not indicate that institutions themselves are inherently opposed to the Spirit. The church's institutional character is not indicative of a primitive "fall" from an earlier "charismatic" state, but rather is an essential part of the church's constitution as a human community.<sup>46</sup> Thus, in spite of the frailty of ecclesial institutions, they are the means through which the Spirit graciously acts, and through which God's people experience and respond to his loving presence.

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<sup>46</sup>Some important ecumenical work in the early 1960s on this topic dispelled the myth of a primitive "fall" from charismatic perfection. See Hans Dombois, "The Church as Koinonia and Institution," in *Institutionalism and Church Unity*, ed. Nils Ehrenstrom and Walter G. Muelder (New York: Association Press, 1963), 120; R. P. C. Hanson, "Institutions in the Early Church," in *Institutionalism and Church Unity*, ed. Nils Ehrenstrom and Walter G. Muelder (New York: Association Press, 1963), 96-97; Berndt Gustafson, "Types of Religious Institutionalization," in *Institutionalism and Church Unity*, ed. Nils Ehrenstrom and Walter G. Muelder (New York: Association Press, 1963), 123. Although I take issue with his identification of "Jewish Christianity" with the institutional church and "Gentile Christianity" with the "spiritual" church, J. L. Leuba's earlier work nevertheless affirms the essential institutionality of the church, and stands behind some of the essays noted above. See Jean-Louis Leuba, *New Testament Pattern: An Exegetical Inquiry into the "Catholic" and "Protestant" Dualism*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutter, 1953), 93-126.