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THE RICHEST LEGACY: RECOVERING THE LORD'S SUPPER AS  
A MEANS OF GRACE IN THE FREE METHODIST CHURCH USA

by

Jarad L. Bivins

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As every denomination seeks to grow and develop over its life, one of the constant necessities is for a denomination to consider its fidelity to a particular tradition. While growth calls for any tradition to maintain a healthy rate of change, as stewards of a particular heritage, they need to thoughtfully consider whether or not they are being faithful to that identity. For the Free Methodist Church USA<sup>1</sup>, that heritage finds itself drawing from a number of traditions that influence how the Free Methodist Church views aspects of faith both theologically and within the expression of church communities. Specifically, the FMCUSA acknowledges that,

The Methodist heritage is shown in theological, ecclesiastical, and social concerns articulated by the Reverend John Wesley and his associates in the eighteenth century and reaffirmed through the holiness movement of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

When considering the Wesleyan heritage that the FMC draws from, there are many areas that can be explored. One such areas is the contribution that John Wesley and the early Methodists made in the way of discipleship. Through the use of what John Wesley called the “means of grace,” the early Methodists had a systemic approach or “method” in which to pursue becoming more Christ-like. Participating in means of grace such as prayer, searching the scriptures, attending

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the following designations: Free Methodist, Free Methodist Church, Free Methodist Church USA, FMC, FMCUSA, refer to the historical heritage as expressed in the Free Methodist Church – USA as seen today unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> David W. Kendall et al., *2011 Book of Discipline: Free Methodist Church* (Indianapolis: The Free Methodist Publishing House Light and Life Communications, 2012), 11.

class meetings, participating in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and others, were ways in which Christians could connect to God's "preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."<sup>3</sup> It is this heritage of the "means of grace" that that the Free Methodist Church still draws from today.

Specifically when referring to the role of the sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) within the church, the *2011 Book of Discipline of the Free Methodist Church – USA* states: "They are means of grace through faith, tokens of our profession of Christian faith, and signs of God's gracious ministry towards us. By them, He works within us to quicken, strengthen and confirm our faith."<sup>4</sup> Through this statement, by referring to the sacraments as a means of grace, the FMCUSA seeks to confirm an important Wesleyan definition of the sacraments. However, the *Book of Discipline* never comes back to expand on what exactly is meant by the idea of a "means of grace." When speaking about the Lord's Supper in particular, the *Discipline* never addresses how the sacrament of the Lord's Supper works to "quicken, strengthen and confirm our faith."

Without this further explanation, the question arises as to whether or not the Free Methodist Church is remaining faithful in their claim that the sacrament of Holy Communion is a means of grace. Does the Free Methodist Church's

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<sup>3</sup>John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 160.

<sup>4</sup> Kendal et al, *Book of Discipline*, 23.

treatment of the Lord's Supper actually reflect a heritage "shown in theological, ecclesiastical, and social concerns articulated by the Reverend John Wesley?"<sup>5</sup>

This thesis explores the current FMCUSA relationship to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in order to determine its connection with the Wesleyan understanding of a means of grace. In order to accomplish this, the thesis is organized into three sections. The first section considers some of the major doctrinal documents of the FMCUSA in order to understand the relationship between the Free Methodist Church and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The second section explores the writings of John and Charles Wesley in order to better define the early Methodist understanding of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, as well as the role it played in the development of the Methodist movement. This section also identifies some of the influences that helped to change the early Methodist understanding of the Lord's Supper to what is seen within the FMCUSA today. Finally, the third section, by exploring the weaknesses found in the current FMCUSA's understanding of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, seeks to show how the Free Methodist Church can be strengthened in both their Wesleyan heritage and their pursuit of holiness through recovering a robust understanding of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace.

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<sup>5</sup> Kendall et al, *Book of Discipline*, 11.

## The Free Methodist Landscape

While commenting on the Free Methodist view of the Lord's Supper, Howard Snyder begins by pointing out that "the Lord's Supper has not in itself been a prominent issue of concern for the Free Methodist denomination, either theologically or in practice."<sup>6</sup> When exploring the various writings within the FMC, whether it be the *Book of Discipline, Pastors and Church Leaders Manual*, or various membership teaching materials, it is not hard to draw the same conclusion as Snyder. The fact of the matter is that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper does not receive a lot of space when it comes to theologically understanding the sacrament or the role it plays within the church.

The limited time spent discussing the subject of the Lord's Supper, particularly as a means of grace, does not automatically indicate a lack of relationship between the FMCUSA and the Lord's Supper. An explanation is that this silence could mean that the FMC has always felt that they were carrying on the orthodox understanding of the Lord's Supper, as well as faithfully representing the Wesleyan heritage. If the Free Methodist Church possesses an orthodox Wesleyan understanding of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, why bother ever discussing the subject?

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<sup>6</sup> Howard A. Snyder, "The Lord's Supper in the Free Methodist Tradition," in *The Lord's Supper Believers Church Perspectives*, ed. Dale R. Stoffer (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1997), 213.

When considering how the FMC has come to define the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and its role in the life of the church, a couple of conclusions can be drawn about how the FMCUSA understands and practices the Lord's Supper. Three areas of consideration include: the tension between freedom and form, the role of the sacrament in relation to the ministry of preaching, and the nature of Christ's presence within the sacrament.

### *Freedom vs. Form*

There is a tension between freedom and form in the FMCUSA's understanding of the role of the sacrament within the life of Free Methodist churches. When speaking of the historical heritage found within the Free Methodist identity, the 2011 *Book of Discipline* explains:

The Catholic-Anglican heritage appears in their [FMCUSA] concern for church order and appreciation for liturgical form. Their emphasis on the essentials of the faith allows for their openness towards differing views on such subjects as modes of baptism and the millennium.<sup>7</sup>

The *Discipline* goes on to state that "their worship is characterized by simplicity and freedom of the Spirit, untrammelled by elaborate ritual."<sup>8</sup> This tension between freedom and form can be found throughout the FMC tradition as it seeks to

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<sup>7</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 14.

balance the various historical traditions that influence Free Methodist identity.<sup>9</sup> This tension can even be seen in the name of the denomination, as “Free Methodist” speaks both to the freedom and form (method) within our tradition.

When it comes to the practice of the Lord’s Supper, once again this tension is played out. In tracing the ritual handed down from John Wesley in his book of worship, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, to the original ritual presented in *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Free Methodist Church* of 1860, and finally to what is present in the *2011 Book of Discipline*, there seems to be minimal changes to the tradition.<sup>10</sup> Yet, even with a grounded historical ritual, Free Methodist Bishop Emeritus Donald Bastian feels that many young pastors “struggle over the use of rituals, especially the ritual for Holy Communion. Their struggle may arise from an aversion to rituals because they seem dull and lifeless.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Howard A. Snyder, "Seven Keys to Free Methodist Renewal," in *Soul-Searching the Church: Free Methodism at 150 Years*, ed. Gerald E. Bates, & Howard A. Snyder (Indianapolis: Light and Life Communications, 2007), 142. Snyder speaks of the influences from Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical, Charismatic, and Anabaptist traditions all coming to together to form a “Free Methodist Synthesis.”

<sup>10</sup> Francis Dean Mercer, "The Liturgical and Sacramental Development of the Free Methodist of Canada, with Special Attention to the Rituals of Baptism and the Lord's Supper" (D.Th diss., University of Toronto, 1991). Mercer shows that while there were a number of physical and theological influences on the development of the Lord’s Supper within Free Methodism, the FMC has not experience major liturgical reform when it comes to the sacrament ritual.

<sup>11</sup> Donald N. Bastian, *The Pastor’s First Love* (New York: BPS Books, 2013), 194.



In his important work on the development of the Free Methodist Church, Bishop Leslie Marston spoke of this tension within freedom and form when it comes to Holy Communion. Bishop Marston recounted the attempt both at the denominational level and the local church to make changes to the hallowed rite. Marston explains,

In recent years, serving in the pews has tended in places to disrupt this solemn Methodist tradition of a communion group surrounding the Lord's table, and sometimes a visitor might conclude he had entered the service of a congregational or independent group. The mangling of a beautiful service by borrowing from other traditions or attempting innovations on one's own hand has been unfortunate. Members of an earlier generation who sturdily stood for their freedom in the Spirit in an ordinary service, would be deeply disturbed today by what to them would appear violence to a hallowed rite in which their turbulence of spirit was quieted by His presence as they partook of the emblems of His broken body and shed blood.<sup>12</sup>

While Marston fully supported the Free Methodist Church embracing its heritage of "freedom in the Spirit" when it came to worship, he believed that this freedom should be sought in regular worship not necessarily during the observance of Holy Communion. Rather, when it came to the Lord's Supper, Marston states, "let it be the solemnity of His passion and the deep unutterable joy of His salvation into which His free Spirit leads the communicants."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Leslie Ray Marston, *From Age to Age: A Living Witness* (Indianapolis: Light and Life Communications, 1960), 340.

<sup>13</sup> Marston, *Age to Age*, 340.

Although the observance of Holy Communion has held a minor place within the worship tradition of the Free Methodist Church, Marston concludes that the Lord's Supper is part of the "special occasions when ritual is the order that have made contribution of value to the stability and the spiritual depth of the congregation."<sup>14</sup> Due to the tension that exists between freedom and form, when it comes to the Lord's Supper, it would appear that the FMC seeks to balance its various historical influences even though at times that picture is not always clear.

#### *Pulpit vs. Table*

A second defining element of the FMCUSA's understanding of the Lord's Supper is the lack of clarity about what is the central act in worship. The Free Methodist Church USA's *Pastors and Church Leaders Manual* suggests that "the church at its best has given priority to preaching, whether during the apostolic era, the Reformation period or in modern times."<sup>15</sup> The manual expands this idea by defining "preaching" within the scope of delivering a sermon. First, the priority of preaching is "based for one thing in the ministry of Jesus. According to the Gospels, Jesus came preaching."<sup>16</sup> Secondly, the Wesleyan heritage is defined as a

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<sup>14</sup> Marston, *Age to Age*, 339.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie L. Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders Manual: Resources for Leading Local Churches* (Indianapolis: Light and Life Communications, 2006), 48.

<sup>16</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 48.

“Methodist revival involved a revival of preaching.”<sup>17</sup> One can conclude that the ministry of preaching through the exhortation of a sermon, holds a significance place when it comes to defining ministry within the Free Methodist Church.

However, when discussing the role of the pastor as one who leads in public worship, the *Manual* goes on to state that “in obedience to Jesus’ own words, ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ (Luke 22:19, NIV), the early church made the Lord’s Supper central in its worship” and that “increasingly today in Free Methodist Churches, the central character of this sacrament is being recognized again.”<sup>18</sup> This ambiguity between what is the focus of worship, the priority of preaching or central character of the Lord’s Supper, creates tension between the two ministries.

*Belonging! Adventures in Church Membership* by Donald Bastian, first produced in 1978, became the main source of membership training within the Free Methodist Church for years. In his chapter entitled, “Practices that Nurture,” Bastian identifies four means of grace as being: the Bible, prayer, Christian fellowship, and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>19</sup> For Bastian, the means of grace used within the context of faith, provide continuance and development in the faith through God’s appropriated grace.<sup>20</sup> While being the shortest section by far in the chapter,

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<sup>17</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> Donald N. Bastian, *Belonging: Adventures in Church Membership* (Indianapolis: Light and Life Communications, 1996), 166.

<sup>20</sup> Bastian, *Belonging*, 166.

the discussion of the Lord's Supper is largely based on what Holy Communion does not do rather than how it is actually a means of grace within the life of the church. Bastian never explains how the Christian can "effectively" use the Lord's Supper as a means of grace where "God's grace is appropriated to his life."<sup>21</sup> Instead of addressing how the Lord's Supper can be used to strengthen the church, Bastian defines the sacrament as being in tension with the ministry of preaching.

In *Belonging*, Bastian suggests that the minister should plan on preaching a shorter homily in place of a full sermon because of the time constraint that serving the Lord's Supper places on the service. While this suggestion allows Holy Communion to be observed in a reverent manner without the time constraint, Bastian makes sure to point out that "such a procedure does not minimize the central place of preaching in our services."<sup>22</sup> Although the FMC hold the Lord's Supper in high regard as a sacrament observed in obedience to the command of Christ, it cannot seem to escape the tension created when competing with the preached Word through the sermon. This imbalance suggests that weekly observance of the Lord's Supper would not be considered a normal practice in the Free Methodist Church.

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<sup>21</sup> Bastian, *Belonging*, 166.

<sup>22</sup> Bastian, *Belonging*, 185.

The glaring issue within the tension between the ministry of the pulpit versus the ministry of the Table, is the lack of recognition that preaching of the Word takes place within the observance of the Lord's Supper. Through the prayers and retelling of the story of God within the observance of the ritual of the Lord's Supper, the Gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ is preached to the community. While the ritual does not necessarily give room for commentary through a longer sermon, if the gospel message is shared within the sermon to begin with, the observance of the Lord's Supper should work to enhance the sermon. By not defining the Communion ritual as a form of preaching the Word, the FMCUSA inadvertently sets the ritual up to be viewed as a competing element within worship rather than complementing the sermon.

Despite the tension between the pulpit and the table, both ministries are presented as roles within the ordained office. The Free Methodist Church in one sense holds a very high view of the sacraments and this can be seen within the context of the office of ordained Elder. When describing the calling of ordained ministry, the *Book of Discipline* states that,

Ordained ministers commit themselves to equipping the whole body of believers to these ends. Biblically and historically, they are set apart for the study and proclamation of the Word of God, intercessory prayer, the winning of persons to Christ, the administration of the sacraments and the defense of the gospel.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 126.

Furthermore, during the ritual for the ordination of Elders, each future Elder is asked, “will you then faithfully give diligence always so to minister the doctrines and sacraments and disciplines of Christ, as the Lord has commanded?”<sup>24</sup> Finally, the new elders are charged to “take authority to minister the Word of God. Faithfully proclaim His Word, declare His forgiveness, celebrate the sacraments, shepherd His people.”<sup>25</sup> Within the office of Elder is a multi-faceted role that includes both the faithful ministering of the Word through preaching sermons and administering the sacraments.

Despite an affirmation of both preaching and celebrating the sacraments as responsibilities of the ordained office, in practice within the Free Methodist tradition, preaching through sermons tends to hold more of a priority in worship. The priority given to preaching can seem ironic as the FMC does not require one to be ordained in order to deliver a sermon but does require ordination for those who would preside over the sacraments. Although there are exceptions to the rule regarding those who can preside over Holy Communion<sup>26</sup>, there is still a stricter

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<sup>24</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 221.

<sup>25</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 222.

<sup>26</sup> Although the administration of the sacraments are a function of the ordained office, the FMC does make exceptions. For example, Local Ministerial Candidates (LMC) and Conference Ministerial Candidates (CMC) may administer the sacrament if appointed as the pastoral authority of a church. Appointed Elders (ordained ministers) may authorize LMCs, CMCs, and consecrated Deacons to administer the sacrament within that Elder’s congregation; Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 130, 141, 172, 174.

set of guidelines when it comes to presiding over the Lord's Supper then when it comes to delivering a sermon.

While the solution would not be to diminish the role of the ordained Elder in administering the sacraments, it is helpful to see once again the tension between freedom (less restrictions on preaching requirements) and the form (more restrictions on administering the sacraments) that exists within the Free Methodist Church. While the FMC upholds both roles of the ordained Elder as important to the life of a healthy congregation, the importance of this balance is not embraced consistently throughout the church.<sup>27</sup>

### *A Matter of Presence*

Although there seems to be a lack of discourse when it comes to the theology used to describe the sacrament of the Lord's Supper within the Free Methodist Church USA, there is no mistaking where the FMCUSA stands on the theology of the presence of Christ within the observance of the sacrament. The question of what happens during the sacrament when one partakes of the bread and cup in relation to the body and blood of Christ dominates the theological discourse. Given the amount space dedicated to the issue of Christ's presence

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<sup>27</sup> Later this paper will look at the balance of these two ministries within the early Wesleyan understanding and the influences that caused the separation (and tension) between the pulpit and the Table.

within the sacrament, one can conclude that this issue constitutes a very important theological distinction for the FMCUSA when it comes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.<sup>28</sup>

In 1989, the Study Commission on Doctrine (SCOD) for the Free Methodist Church released their General Conference report, which included a section on the Lord's Supper.<sup>29</sup> While the report was to specifically address the expressed desire for alternative Communion rituals (as expressed in the 1985 General Conference), the SCOD felt it was necessary to include a general statement on the Free Methodist view when it comes to the Lord's Supper and how the sacrament is understood in the Methodist perspective.<sup>30</sup>

The statement begins, "there has developed, over the course of church history, a variety of ways in which to understand the Lord's Supper."<sup>31</sup> Although this statement alludes to the possibly of multiple ways to understand the sacrament, the report narrows the focus to the theological issue of the presence of Christ within the sacrament. While the issue of Christ presence is important, it is

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<sup>28</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 23-4; Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 64-5; Bastian, *Belonging*, 184-5.

<sup>29</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 81. The *Book of Discipline 2011* states that: "A Study Commission on Doctrine (SCOD) shall serve the General Conference by studying theological and social issues facing the church, and make recommendations to the General Conference."

<sup>30</sup> Donald N. Bastian, "The Lord's Supper," in *Report of the Study Commission on Doctrine* (paper presented at the General Conference for the Free Methodist Church of North America, Seattle, Washington, August 3-13, 1989), 1-3.

<sup>31</sup> Bastian, "The Lord's Supper," 1.



interesting that the SCOD choose to define “variety of ways” as meaning a variety of views on one topic, within all of Eucharistic theology. Eucharistic theology now becomes defined by the issue of presence and nothing else.

The theological issue of the presence of Christ within the sacrament of Holy Communion has created tension within the Christian Church for centuries. One understanding has been that Christ is “really present” within the ritual and graciously gives His grace to those that are participating. Even among the denominations that recognize the real presence of Christ in Communion, there is not unity on what it means to say that Christ is really present in the sacrament.<sup>32</sup>

Whether you come from a tradition that believes in transubstantiation<sup>33</sup> or consubstantiation<sup>34</sup>, the basic belief is that Christ manifests himself in some way as individuals partake of the sacrament. While the Methodist tradition recognizes the “real presence” of Christ within the elements, they concentrate more on the spiritual aspect of Christ’s presence rather than focusing on the metaphysical changes within the bread and cup. At the end of the day, all those traditions that

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<sup>32</sup> Bastian, “The Lord’s Supper,” 1.

<sup>33</sup> Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 286. “In Roman Catholic theology at the consecration in the Mass, the changing of the substance of bread and wine, by God’s power, into the substance of Jesus Christ’s body and blood, which become present while the ‘species’ (bread and wine) remain.”

<sup>34</sup> McKim, *Dictionary*, 60. “A late medieval view of the Lord’s Supper. While the ‘substance’ of the bread and wine are not changed into the body and blood of Christ, they coexist or are conjoined in union with each other: bread with body and wine with blood.”

recognize the “real presence” of Christ affirm that the Lord’s Supper is “a sacrament through which Christ gives grace by giving himself.”<sup>35</sup>

The other major view within the FMC when it comes to the Lord’s Supper, the “memorial” view, tends not to accept the sacramental character of the ritual but rather focuses on the story that is represented within the ritual. In obedience to Christ’s command of “Do this in remembrance of me,” (Luke 22:19, NIV) the Lord’s Supper is taken in a manner which acknowledges the spiritual benefit of remembering the story of Christ’s death and resurrection but it is not seen as having unique, grace-giving power. While one may be challenged by encountering the story anew through the observance of the ritual, it is through the process of remembering (hence the designation “memorial” view) what Christ did and commanded, that the church finds its basis for continuing to observe the ritual.

The FMCUSA finds itself trying to balance their view on the issue of presence due to various influences within its heritage. On one hand, the Anglo-Catholic influence creates pastors and churches that tend to observe the Lord’s Supper as a sacrament of God’s grace in which the real presence of Christ is experienced. On the other hand, the Anabaptist influence produces some churches that understand Holy Communion as just a memorial. As a memorial they

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<sup>35</sup> Bastian, “The Lord’s Supper,” 2.

recognize the benefit of remembering and therefore experiencing the story of Christ anew.

The Study Commission on Doctrine report seeks a balance by recognizing that this tension exists within the Free Methodist Church and therefore affirms the freedom for Free Methodists to choose one of the two major options. The Commission concludes,

Not all people, of course, who belong to a denomination necessarily understand the Lord's Supper in agreement with their historical tradition. There are many in the Free Methodist Church, for example, who see Communion more as a "memorial" than a participation in the 'real presence' of Christ. They may, in fact, believe that their view is the historic Methodist one. This suggests that there is a great deal of crossing of the lines. In any case, the two views we have described, the "real presence" and the "memorial" views, represent the basic options that are possible, whatever refinements are made.<sup>36</sup>

In the end, the Commission does not provide a lot of clarity on the issue of the Lord's Supper. By using phrases such as "crossing of lines," "basic options," and "whatever refinements are made," one is left wondering where the FMCUSA actually stands.

No matter what side of the issue one comes down on, this particular theological issue tends to dominate the FMCUSA landscape when it comes to understanding the sacrament of Holy Communion. Within the FMCUSA, the official Articles of Religion statement on the Lord's Supper devotes more than half

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<sup>36</sup> Bastian, "The Lord's Supper," 3.

of its words to the theological issue of the presence of Christ.<sup>37</sup> In the *Pastors and Church Leaders Manual*, one-third of the section on worship and the Lord's Supper, is a reprint of the official statement given by the 1989 SCOD report that was discussed earlier.<sup>38</sup>

Even in Donald Bastian's *Belonging: Adventures in Church Membership*, when presenting the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, the only theological issue discussed is making clear that the FMC does not adhere to the Roman Catholic view when it comes to real presence (the rest of the section is devoted to discussing how to serve communion in church).<sup>39</sup> Noticeably absent from Bastian's treatment of the Lord's Supper is a discussion on how the sacrament is actually considered as a means of grace. Rather than discussing topics usually associated with the means of grace such as the theology of sanctification or the Holy Spirit, the conversation remains limited. Due to this limited discussion found within the documents of the FMCUSA when it comes to the Lord's Supper and due to the consistent reference to the issue of Christ's presence in the ritual, one could conclude that the issue of presence is the only theological issue a Free Methodist needs to understand when it comes to the sacrament.

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<sup>37</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 23-4.

<sup>38</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 64.

<sup>39</sup> Bastian, *Belonging*, 184.

### *Moving Forward By Looking Back*

As Howard Snyder concluded when looking at the history of the Free Methodist Church, the issue of the Lord's Supper has not played much of a role in the discussions surrounding the development of the FMC. While the *2011 Book of Discipline* claims that the Free Methodist Church – USA views the sacrament as a means of grace, there seems to be no further discussion of what this actually means for the church. Instead, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is presented with limited theology and encountered with multiple areas in tension. The following section will seek to explore how the early Methodists came to interact with the sacrament of Holy Communion under the influence of John and Charles Wesley and what influences may have led to the Free Methodist understanding encountered today.

### **The Heritage of Grace**

As stated at the outset of this thesis, drawing from their Wesleyan heritage, the FMCUSA describes the sacraments as being “means of grace through faith, tokens of our profession of Christian faith, and signs of God's gracious ministry towards us. By them, He works within us to quicken, strengthen and confirm our faith.”<sup>40</sup> Although the idea of the sacraments being a means of grace is presented

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<sup>40</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 23.

as a foundation for the FMC statement on the sacraments, the *Book of Discipline* fails to provide further explanation as to what that concept means for the life of the church. When it comes to the role of the Lord's Supper within the FMC, the lack of discussion begs the question as to whether or not our understanding of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, remains faithful to the Wesleyan heritage it is built on.

In this section, I will further define the Lord's Supper as a means of grace within the Wesleyan tradition by examining John Wesley's view and practice of the sacrament within the life of the church. I will then explore some of the factors that influenced the development the Lord's Supper as a means of grace in the Wesleyan heritage to what is observed within the FMCUSA today.

### *Outward Signs of Inward Grace*

In order to understand John Wesley's vision of salvation, one cannot separate the pursuit of salvation from participation in what Wesley referred to as the "means of grace."<sup>41</sup> The connection between salvation and the means of grace is laid out in Wesley's sermon "The Means of Grace." For Wesley, the means of grace include "outward signs, words, or actions ordained by God, and appointed

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<sup>41</sup> Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 202.

for this end – to be ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”<sup>42</sup> According to Wesley, God has ordained certain actions within the Christian faith as a means of receiving God’s grace more fully in one’s life for the sake of transforming one’s life along the path of holiness. This pursuit of holiness was essential for working out one’s salvation.

In *Responsible Grace*, Randy Maddox contends that “Wesley considered present human salvation to be fundamentally a gradual therapeutic process that grows out of our responsive participation in God’s forgiving and empowering grace.”<sup>43</sup> As humanity seeks to be healed from the brokenness of sin in their lives through a relationship with God, it is a process of give and take. God extends healing grace to humanity and humanity must seek to participate in that healing process. For Wesley, by partaking in the means of grace, one puts themselves in a position to better receive God’s grace. While participating in a means of grace is not salvific in itself without the recognition of and response to God’s grace, it is through participating in the means of grace that our “response-ability is progressively nurtured by this very grace.”<sup>44</sup> Wesley insisted that one should not

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<sup>42</sup>John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," 160.

<sup>43</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 192.

<sup>44</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 196.

expect to grow in holiness and faith without participating in those means in which God has chosen to convey his grace.<sup>45</sup>

Although Wesley's understanding of the means of grace developed throughout his life, he was consistent by including both universal church traditions (fasting, prayer, searching the scriptures, and the Lord's Supper) and practices found within the Methodist revival (class meetings, love feasts, and special rules for holy living). In Wesley, one finds a synthesis of tradition and freedom. As he sought to be grounded in his Anglican heritage, his theology and practice continued to expand through his personal experience.

On one hand, Wesley recognized the authority of the Anglican Church and saw the value in the traditions it handed down. On the other hand, although the Anglican Church did not include love feasts or class meetings as part of their official practices, Wesley saw God's grace moving through these means in powerful ways. Maddox points out that:

Wesley was convinced of the effective communication of God's grace through the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, and through means like liturgy and formal prayers that had come to be emphasized in Anglicanism. Yet, like the Reformers (and Eastern Christianity), he refused to confine the grace to such official channels. Indeed, one of the central features of the Methodist revival was Wesley's expectation that his people would avail themselves of both the traditional means of grace present in Anglican worship and

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<sup>45</sup> John Wesley, *The Nature of Enthusiasm*. Vol. 5, in *The Works of John Wesley*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 475-6.



such distinctive means as class meetings, love feasts, and covenant services.<sup>46</sup>

Within Wesley's understanding is a concern that people experience not only the empowering presence of God but also seek the identity or character of God as a pattern for their lives.<sup>47</sup>

### *Exceeding in Blessing*

Although John Wesley never truly expressed a hierarchy when it comes to the means of grace, he did identify various means that he thought possessed greater potential for grace.<sup>48</sup> In his sermon "The Means of Grace," Wesley identifies the chief means of grace as being prayer, searching the Scriptures, and participating in the Lord's Supper.<sup>49</sup> Out of those chief means, he maintained a special relationship with the sacrament of Holy Communion. When writing the introduction for the collection of Eucharistic hymns, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*,

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<sup>46</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 194.

<sup>47</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 194.

<sup>48</sup> John Wesley, *Minutes on Several Conversations*. Vol. 8, in *The Works of John Wesley*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 322-3; Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 257-66. Wesley separates the means of grace into two main categories: instituted (prayer, searching Scripture, Lord's Supper, fasting, attending Christian conference) and prudential (various rules or arts for holy living). While the instituted means are grounded in Scripture and church tradition and therefore essential for Christians to be participating in, the prudential means may vary depending on what the individual may need in order to pursue holiness in their lives. Collins points out that the "instituted" forms is what most people are referring to when it comes to the means of grace. They are also widely known in the Methodist tradition as "works of piety."

<sup>49</sup> Wesley, "The Means of Grace," 160.

Wesley included an extract from Daniel Brevint's work, *The Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice*. Within this introduction Wesley maintained the idea that:

Of these Blessings Christ from above is pleased to bestow sometimes more, sometimes less, in the several Ordinances of his Church, which as the Stars of Heaven, differ from each other in Glory. Fasting, Prayer, Hearing his Word, are all good Vessels, to draw Water from this Well of Salvation. But they are not all equal. The Holy Communion when well used, exceeds as much in Blessing, as it exceeds in danger of a Curse, when wickedly and irreverently taken.<sup>50</sup>

This reiteration of the Lord's Supper as being an act of great blessing comes from John's understanding of the sacrament itself. Although John Wesley is known for his extensive writings such as his journals and sermons, within these traditional forms Wesley does not spend much time devoted to the issue of the Lord's Supper. This could cause one to question whether or not the Lord's Supper was an important issue for Wesley. However, it is by looking to the great Methodist hymns that the breadth and depth of the Wesleyan understanding of the Lord's Supper plays out.

In producing their joint work, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, John and Charles Wesley lay out their most extensive and important sacramental doctrine and spirituality when it comes to the Lord's Supper. The Wesleys touch on topics including sacrifice (both our sacrifice and Christ's), mystery, memorial, blessings,

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Wesley and John Wesley, *Hymns on the Lord Supper* (Madison, New Jersey: The Charles Wesley Society, 1995), 15.

means of grace, eschatology, etc., all within the framework of the Lord's Supper. Daniel Stevick argues that "in the broad literature of Christian devotion, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* might be placed in nomination as the most spiritually profound and stylistically vigorous manual of eucharistic devotion ever written in English."<sup>51</sup> Ole Borgen claims that it is "the greatest treasure of sacramental hymnody that any church ever possessed."<sup>52</sup>

This collection of hymns became the principal statement for early Wesleyan thought on the subject of the Lord's Supper. *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* was published more than any other volume of Charles Wesley's hymns (nine editions during his lifetime) and the volume itself only experienced unimportant changes (minor editing but no major theological shifts).<sup>53</sup> Stevick concludes:

The hymns and their reception are evidence that for the early Methodists Holy Communion was a focus of the intense personal relation between Christ and the believer. The Supper was a celebration for converts as well as an invitation to conversion. These *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* articulated and informed the faith of the Methodists, providing sacramental doctrine that could be sung.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Daniel B. Stevick, *The Altar's Fire: Charles Wesley's Hymns on the Lord's Supper, 1745 Introduction and Exposition* (Werrington, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>52</sup>Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Definitive Study of John Wesley's Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1972), 17.

<sup>53</sup> Stevick, *Altar's Fire*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Stevick, *Altar's Fire*, 5.

*Acknowledging the Spirit*

One of the main sacramental doctrines that the Wesleys provided with their collection of hymns on the Lord's Supper, is a focus on the work of the Holy Spirit when it comes to grace. Maddox points out that although Wesley acknowledged that Christ is "the meritorious cause of grace being provided to humanity" through the Lord's Supper, Christ is not necessarily the most efficient cause through which grace is conveyed. Instead the most efficient power of grace comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>55</sup> This emphasis of the Spirit comes out of John's own experience at Aldersgate. While Wesley was thoroughly Anglican in his views of the sacraments, the experience at Aldersgate took it to a whole new level.

Aldersgate opened up a life with God that Wesley had never experienced before in faith, as he was convinced of the assurance of salvation through the activity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>56</sup> John Wesley could have taken this new found intimate relationship with God and traded away his sacramental understanding of the means of grace by trusting only the Holy Spirit working within him. However, the experience served to deepen his view of the sacrament as he now looked to the

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<sup>55</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 193.

<sup>56</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 125.

Lord's Supper as nourishment for his new life guided by the living power of the Spirit.<sup>57</sup>

By invoking the Holy Spirit onto the elements (*epiclesis*) as part of the Eucharistic prayers, the Wesleys acknowledged both the presence and the power of the Spirit working through grace. Charles Wesley writes:

Come, Thou everlasting Spirit,  
 Bring to every thankful Mind  
 All the Saviour's dying Merit  
 All his Suffering for Mankind:  
 True Recorder of his Passion,  
 Now the living Faith impart,  
 Now reveal his great Salvation,  
 Preach his Gospel to our Heart.

Come, Thou Witness of his Dying,  
 Come, Remembrancer Divine,  
 Let us feel thy Power applying  
 Christ to every Soul and mine;  
 Let us groan thine inward Groaning,  
 Look on Him we pierc'd and grieve,  
 All receive the Grace Atoning,  
 All the Sprinkled Blood receive.<sup>58</sup>

This focus on the role of the Spirit within the sacrament of Holy Communion aligns with John Wesley's understanding of sanctification. As the salvation process involves a life-long pursuit of healing in sin-distorted lives, there is the continual need for renewing that transformational power within those lives.

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<sup>57</sup> Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1980), 102.

<sup>58</sup> Wesley and Wesley, *Hymns*, no. 16.

According to Wesley, through one's participation in the Lord's Supper (where the presence, power, and grace of the Holy Spirit is invoked) the process of continual healing can take place. Wesley believed that the Lord's Supper gives one the "strength to perform our duty and leads us on to perfection."<sup>59</sup> If one desired the pardon of their sins and wished for "strength to believe, to love and obey God," then they should never neglect an opportunity of receiving the Lord's Supper.<sup>60</sup>

It is also within this focus on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit that Wesley's understanding of the purpose of the sacrament develops. Wesley actually parted ways with Daniel Brevint when it came to the idea of "fencing the table." For Brevint there seemed to be two types of people that came to the communion table: those who come faithfully to receive Christ and those who are faithless (and therefore abuse Christ).<sup>61</sup> For John Wesley, however, the grace found in the power of the Spirit has the potential of extending to those who do not fully believe and, in fact, may become the very catalyst of one's conversion to Christ.

Charles Wesley writes:

Sinner, with awe draw near,  
And find thy Saviour here,  
In His ordinances still,  
          Touch His sacramental clothes;  
Present in His power to heal,

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<sup>59</sup> John Wesley, "The Duty of Constant Communion," in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 336.

<sup>60</sup> Wesley, "Constant Communion", 336.

<sup>61</sup> Stevick, *Altar's Fire*, 34.

Virtue from His body flows.<sup>62</sup>

And again:

Come, to the supper come,  
 Sinners, there still is room;  
 Every soul may be His guest,  
     Jesus gives the general word;  
 Share the monumental feast,  
     Eat the supper of our Lord.<sup>63</sup>

John Wesley saw Holy Communion as a means of grace that met people in their present condition (or “walk of life”). If someone had been a Christian for a long time and needed “refreshing” for their soul, Wesley could encourage this Christian to come to the table.<sup>64</sup> If one’s faith had waned and one were struggling in faith, again come to the feast to be strengthened. If someone didn’t believe but was in church because they had some small draw towards God, run to the table and experience the grace and power of the Lord! Wesley believed the process of healing our brokenness needed to be a life-long pursuit and no matter where one was on the journey, grace was available. By participating in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, believers could find “in each new meal a fresh and deeper encounter with God’s empowering love.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Wesley and Wesley, *Hymns*, no. 39.

<sup>63</sup> Wesley and Wesley, *Hymns*, no. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Wesley, “Constant Communion,” 335.

<sup>65</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 204; Wesley, “Constant Communion,” 336.

When John Wesley encouraged Christians to participate in the means of grace, it was not in order to blindly obey the commands of God or strive to create holy virtues in their lives. The means of grace were not for their own sakes but rather for the “renewal of your soul in righteousness and true holiness.”<sup>66</sup> By participating in the means of grace, such as the Lord’s Supper, “we receive through them the forgiving and empowering Presence of God’s grace” and they work to “nourish the grace given to us.”<sup>67</sup>

#### *A Forgotten Narrative*

The understanding the Wesleys had when it came to the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace was not just a theological endeavor. The grace that John Wesley taught, that could be experienced through the means of grace, is very much a part of the Wesleyan historical narrative as it is a part of Wesleyan theology.

When looking at the Methodist revival, one of the most significant aspects that people focus on is the evangelistic revival brought about through the renewal of Scripture. Through the dynamic preaching ministry of John and others, stories of how thousands came to listen to preachers in the field tend to dominate the landscape. While this renewal of Scripture through preaching plays an important

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<sup>66</sup> Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” 170.

<sup>67</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 201



role in Methodist identity (as shown earlier in the FMC's view of the Methodist preaching heritage)<sup>68</sup>, many miss out on the significance that the Lord's Supper played in the revival as well. Paul Chilcote remarks that, "the full, rich and joyous eucharistic life of early Methodism is one of the best-kept secrets of the tradition."<sup>69</sup> In fact, the relationship between the Lord's Supper and the Wesley led revival can be seen at the creation of the Methodist moniker.

Charles Wesley, during his second year in Oxford, had dedicated himself to taking his faith more seriously. In describing a renewed pursuit of holiness to Dr. Thomas Bradbury Chandler later in life, Charles revealed that:

I went to the weekly sacrament, and persuaded two or three young scholars to accompany me, and to observe the method of study prescribed by the statutes of the university. This gained me the harmless nickname of Methodist.<sup>70</sup>

Charles' passion for holy living went hand in hand with increased participation in the Lord's Supper. As he encouraged others to join him, this methodical dedication to the sacrament seemed to stand out among his peers as they sought to poke fun at his sacramental practice.

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<sup>68</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Leaders Manual*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Wesley Chilcote, *Recapturing the Wesley's Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2004), 84.

<sup>70</sup> Reprinted in John R. Tyson, ed. *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 59.

Charles' weekly observance of the Lord's Supper tended to break with the common practice within the Anglican Church at that time. The general pattern seemed to be for churches to observe communion three to four times a year at various festivals.<sup>71</sup> The zeal of Charles and his friends for the sacrament seemed a bit out of place in Oxford. Daniel Stevick points out that the sacramental doctrine and practice of the Wesleys when it came to the Lord's Supper was most likely regarded with suspicion due to "rational religion" in a skeptical age. Anyone with "intimations of mystery or expressions of strong conviction risked being dismissed as 'enthusiasm,' which meant fanaticism."<sup>72</sup>

The next major development in the Wesleys' relationship with the Lord's Supper comes out of John Wesley's dispute with the Fetter Lane Society. During Wesley's ministry to Georgia, he had been heavily influenced by the Moravians he had encountered. Upon returning to England, Wesley met with Peter Böhler (a Lutheran minister who would become ordained by the Moravians) and the groundwork for the Methodist movement began. Out of this partnership, like

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<sup>71</sup> Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (3rd. London: Epworth Press, 2002), 19. Rack explains that the reality is never quite as simple. While there were certainly churches that observed the Lord's Supper more frequently, the standard seemed to be three to four times a year. This is similar to what is seen in the FMCUSA today as individual churches establish their own pattern of observance based on the recommendation of observing the Lord's Supper at least once a quarter.

<sup>72</sup> Stevick, *Altar's Fire*, 25.

minded individuals were soon meeting together prompting Wesley and Böhler to organize the group into what would become known as the Fetter Lane Society.

As the ministry and theology of Wesley continued to develop, controversy soon arose within Fetter Lane. In 1739 when visiting London, Wesley discovered that the Fetter Lane Society had begun to be heavily influenced by Philip Henry Molther (a Moravian recently arrived from Germany). Molther was convinced that many in the society did not have true religion and therefore they needed to remain “still” before the Lord.<sup>73</sup>

Based on Psalm 46:10 (NRSV), which states, “Be still, and know that I am God,” a radical interpretation was posited that maintained that one needed to discontinue all means of grace and works of piety in order to hear God through stillness<sup>74</sup>. Molther believed that until someone had true faith in Christ, this person should not participate in the means of grace, especially the Lord’s Supper.<sup>75</sup> Rather, all the grace they needed came from a mysterious action of God’s Spirit bearing witness to one’s own spirit. For Wesley, this ran counter to everything that he had come to believe, experience, and to teach. The tension created by this “stillness” controversy challenged Wesley to clarify his understanding of true religion.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 106.

<sup>74</sup> Stevick, *Altar’s Fire*, 12.

<sup>75</sup> Heitzenrater, *People Called Methodists*, 106.

<sup>76</sup> Heitzenrater, *People Called Methodists*, 106.

In subsequent years, Wesley would have to continually address this issue as groups within the Methodist movement tended to see the means of grace as unnecessary. In 1745 John and Charles came out with the first edition of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* in which a number of hymns sought to address the Moravian controversy of stillness.<sup>77</sup> For the Wesleys, the push back began with the simple question that if the Lord ordained the sacrament to be observed, why would it work against true faith?<sup>78</sup> Charles Wesley lays out the common question in the first stanza of Hymn 54:

Why did my dying LORD ordain  
     This dear Memorial of his Love!  
 Might we not all by Faith obtain,  
     By Faith the Mountain-sin remove,  
 Enjoy the Sence of Sins forgiven,  
 And Holiness the Taste of Heaven?

Charles continues with a response by writing:

It seem'd to my Redeemer good  
     That Faith should here his Coming wait,  
 Should here receive Immortal Food,  
     Grow up in Him divinely great,  
 And fill'd with Holy Violence seize  
 The Glorious Crown of Righteousness.

Saviour, Thou didst the Mystery give  
     That I thy Nature might partake.  
 Thou bidst me outward Signs receive.  
     One with Thyself my Soul to make,

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<sup>77</sup> Wesley and Wesley, *Hymns*. The hymns generally attributed to the themes of "stillness" are hymns 54, 86, and 90-92.

<sup>78</sup> Stevick, *Altar's Fire*, 110.

My body, Soul and Spirit to join  
Inseparably one with Thine.<sup>79</sup>

If Christ had ordained the sacrament of Holy Communion for our sake, we wait with faith within that sacrament for God's grace. It seemed irrational to the Wesleys to expect greater faith while ignoring that which Christ set out for his followers. John Wesley claimed, "if we wish for strength to believe, to love and obey God...then we must never turn our back on the feast which our Lord has prepared for us."<sup>80</sup>

Participation in the means of grace, especially the Lord's Supper, is not just found in the words of John and Charles Wesley, but it is a practice that they sought to live out. For John, the observance of the Lord's Supper seemed to average every four to five days with some seasons seeing daily observance.<sup>81</sup> This practice started for the Wesleys during their time at Oxford and they continued to follow it throughout the rest of their lives.<sup>82</sup>

Towards the end of his life, John Wesley released to the public a copy of his sermon "The Duty of Constant Communion." Originally written in 1732 while he was still at Oxford, Wesley states in the preface:

The following discourse was written above five-and-fifty years ago, for the use of my pupils at Oxford. I have added very little, but

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<sup>79</sup> Wesley and Wesley, *Hymns*, no. 54.

<sup>80</sup> Wesley, "Constant Communion," 336.

<sup>81</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 202.

<sup>82</sup> Stevick, *Altar's Fire*, 4.

retrenched much; as I then used more words than I do now. But, I thank God, I have not yet seen cause to alter my sentiments in any point which is therein delivered.<sup>83</sup>

John used the sermon to argue what he believes is “the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord’s Supper as often as he can” as well as to address some common objections to the practice of constant communion.<sup>84</sup> Constant communion was a foundation stone that Wesley continued to promote within the Methodist revival and model in his own life.

#### *A Vision Yet Achieved*

The issue of constant participation in the Lord’s Supper is one of the areas that kept the Methodist movement grounded in the Anglican Church. As the Methodists joined together to hear preaching and participate in various forms of community, it was still an expectation that they continue to attend their local Anglican parish to receive access to the sacrament. Albert Outler points out that Wesley “deliberately designed the Methodist preaching services so that they would not be taken as substitutes for Holy Communion in the parish church.”<sup>85</sup> John Wesley did not see his efforts as those seeking to start a new tradition but rather he saw the Methodist movement as a revival within the Anglican Church.

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<sup>83</sup> Wesley, “Constant Communion,” 334.

<sup>84</sup> Wesley, “Constant Communion,” 335.

<sup>85</sup> Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 332.

Although Wesley sought to partake of the Lord's Supper as frequently as possible and encourage his followers to do likewise, unfortunately, there does not seem to be a clear picture of this teaching becoming widespread within the Methodist movement.

Henry Rack points out that the actual participation in constant communion for the majority of Methodists may have been difficult to achieve.<sup>86</sup> Even though John Wesley had tried to create a model where Methodists still attended their local parish for access to the sacraments, they were still subject to the practices of those local parishes.<sup>87</sup> While some parishes may have celebrated communion more frequently, the standard was still typically three to four times a year, usually around the major Christian festivals. Also, due to the unfavorable reputation that the Methodists received, preachers like John Wesley soon found themselves being barred from Anglican churches.<sup>88</sup> Wesley's desire to keep the Methodist movement within the Anglican Church meant that Methodists were largely dependent on Anglican practices for access to communion.

In order to achieve the desired practice of constant communion among the Methodists, John Wesley would have needed to arrange a mass ordination of Methodist ministers so that they would be able to serve the sacrament. Since

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<sup>86</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 416-9.

<sup>87</sup> Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 417.

<sup>88</sup> Stevick, *Altar's Fire*, 3.

Wesley saw the Methodist movement as a revival within the Anglican Church, and the Anglican Church required ordination for those presiding over Holy Communion, this was not a road he wanted to go down. However, during the times when ordained clergy were present at Methodist meetings and therefore could provide the sacraments, these observances tended to be very well attended.<sup>89</sup>

Although this desire for constant communion among the Methodists was never realized, this did not stop Wesley from continuing to push the standard. As the political (and ecclesiastical) landscape between England and America became more complex, Wesley produced his own version of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* to help guide the Methodists in America in their worshipping communities. In *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, Wesley advised the elders to “administer the supper of the Lord on every Lord’s day.”<sup>90</sup> James White concluded that when looking closely at the instructions included in the service liturgy, one can find indications that Wesley assumed the standard would be weekly observance of communion.<sup>91</sup> While this may have been Wesley’s desire, once again, that desire did not necessarily become a reality.

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<sup>89</sup> Chilcote, *Recapturing*, 85.

<sup>90</sup> James F. White, *John Wesley’s Prayer Book: The Sunday Service of the Methodists* (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 1991), 34.

<sup>91</sup> White, *Sunday Service*, 20.



*The American Influence*

Wesley's vision of the Methodist movement as being incomplete outside of its relationship to the Anglican Church met considerable strain as the call for revolution picked up steam in America. Just as in England, Methodists in America were expected to seek out the local Anglican parish priest in order to participate in the sacraments. As the Revolution became stronger, however, few Americans found this arrangement workable.<sup>92</sup> In 1779, an Annual Conference was convened in Fluvanna, Virginia where the preachers voted to form a presbytery to ordain one another for the sake of administering the sacraments.<sup>93</sup> This vote represented a major break from the teaching of Wesley and the vision to see the Methodist movement as part of the Anglican Church.

Due to the constraints of the American War of Independence, many of the Methodist preachers from the northern colonies were not able to attend the Fluvanna conference, including Francis Asbury (one of the superintendents Wesley appointed to oversee the movement in America). Those not present at the ordinations at Fluvanna reacted negatively to the news calling for the Methodists to no longer recognize the southern preachers. As a last effort to avoid schism, Asbury was able to convince the southern preachers to suspend exercising the

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<sup>92</sup> John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>93</sup> Wigger, *Taking Heaven*, 23.

privileges of their ordinations and hold off making any decisions on the matter for at least a year.<sup>94</sup> The tension between attempting to maintain a high view of the sacrament that is grounded in tradition and the experience of freedom brought about by the evangelical spirit was starting to be experienced in Methodism in America.

Wesley's vision of constant communion among the Methodists in America also had to contend with the fact that the movement grew up on the frontier. While the Methodist movement saw an unprecedented growth in America from 1770 to 1820, this growth was built largely on the back of itinerant preachers.<sup>95</sup> The lack of ordained clergy and the infrequency that a congregation saw an ordained minister presented further obstacles to Wesley's ideal of constant communion. The ability to maintain a high view of the sacrament while observing it on a constant basis became nearly impossible. When it came to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Methodist movement in America soon found themselves operating similar to the Anglican Church Wesley grew up in (communion three to four times a year) rather than the vision Wesley desired to instill.

When it came to John and Charles Wesley there was a balance that was sought between seeking to reform and still being grounded within the Anglican

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<sup>94</sup> Wigger, *Taking Heaven*, 24.

<sup>95</sup> Wigger, *Taking Heaven*, 3.

tradition. How John and Charles understood, taught, and applied the means of grace was built on this connectedness to a larger tradition. Unlike the context in which the Wesleys ministered, by the time the Methodist movement in America reached the height of its growth, the majority of the preachers within the movement probably never stepped foot within an Anglican church.

Despite the absence of this grounding relationship, the American Methodists still maintained a high view of the Lord's Supper. It was precisely the desire to have better access to the sacraments that prompted the decision to ordain at Fluvanna. Although John Wesley sought to maintain the Methodist movement as part of the Anglican Church, due to the geographical and political separation between North America and England, steps needed to be taken. In the end, Wesley chose to ordain a number of individuals in order to administer the sacraments in America, believing that, "I violate no order and invade no man's right, by appointing and sending labourers into the harvest."<sup>96</sup>

However, while the American Methodists continued to hold the Lord's Supper in high regard and refer to it as a means of grace, the Wesleyan understanding of the sacrament as being an integral part of the sanctification process began to diminish. Due to the factors such as the infrequent access to ordained clergy and lack of connectedness to the Anglican tradition, the view of

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<sup>96</sup> White, *Sunday Service*, ii.

the Lord's Supper as being an important means of grace within the life of the believer no longer found itself as an important expression of Wesleyan theology and practice. As Methodists in America moved further away from the Anglican Church and formed their own denomination, new observances found their way into the identity of Methodist worship.

### *An Altar for a Table*

From 1784 to the creation of the Free Methodist Church in 1860, the Methodist movement in America not only saw tremendous growth but it also found itself discovering its identity in a land that was rapidly expanding into new territory. This was a time of great spiritual awakenings, giants of revivalism like Charles Finney, and the establishment of the camp meetings.<sup>97</sup> The excitement of revival fire matched the spirit of the new nation.

Paul Sanders points out that the new church began to shed most of the structure that John Wesley had tried to maintain. While Wesley had created a preaching movement that was surrounded and supported by an established ecclesial system, the movement in America continued operating as a missionary movement drifting further from its Anglican identity. Without realizing it, the

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<sup>97</sup> Paul S. Sanders, "The Sacraments in Early American Methodism," *Church History* 26, no. 4 (1957): 362.

Methodist Church in America came to understand its ecclesiology from its own context and “proceeded to evaluate doctrine, worship and discipline in terms derived from its own parochial understanding of Christian experience.”<sup>98</sup>

Another issue for American Methodists was that the *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* was never produced and distributed in America. Outside of a few eucharistic hymns surviving in new hymnbooks, the Methodist church grew up in America without one of the most significant Wesleyan resources that provided a theology of the Lord’s Supper. Although the sacrament continued to be held in high regard when celebrated at significant points throughout the year (like camp meetings), the Methodist sacramental understanding had lost its wide range of theological expression as promoted by the Wesleys.

Within the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the Wesleys came to emphasize both theologies of justification and sanctification. The sacrament recognized both the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the grace continually given for the pursuit of holiness. However, among the American Methodists, there developed an overemphasis on the theology of justification. With the rise (and success) of revivalism in America, Protestant churches sought to duplicate the revival expression within their weekly worship. Instead of focusing on the means of grace (such as the Lord’s Supper) as means in which to encourage growth

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<sup>98</sup> Sanders, “Early American Methodism,” 362.

within the church, ministers now found themselves guiding worshippers to an altar call.<sup>99</sup>

With the narrative of the Sunday service leading to the altar call, the understanding of the Lord's Supper in worship became even murkier. John Wesley believed that one seeking forgiveness for their sins could be brought into the Kingdom and gain assurance by actively participating in the means of grace (i.e. the converting ordinance). Through actively pursuing the available grace, the process of sanctification would continue to strengthen one to assurance. The problem with the altar call is that it took the Wesleyan understanding of a process of sanctification and truncated it to a single crisis experience.<sup>100</sup> Francis Dean Mercer argues:

The logical consequence is that every time the experience [at the altar call] is repeated, whether it be an experience of conversion or sanctification, all that has gone before must be disclaimed. The past must be rejected repeatedly as part of the old life...everything in a member's religious formation prior to the most recent experience of conversion or sanctification is continually being dismissed as part of the old life.<sup>101</sup>

The vision of the Methodist movement, as articulated by John Wesley, sought to balance evangelical passion with a constant participation in the means

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<sup>99</sup> William L. De Arteaga, *Forgotten Power: The Significance of the Lord's Supper in Revival* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 204.

<sup>100</sup> De Arteaga, *Forgotten Power*, 205.

<sup>101</sup> Mercer, "Liturgical and Sacramental Development," 61.

of grace. Without the means of grace, such as the Lord's Supper, to constantly call believers along the path of holiness, faith becomes just about "getting saved" instead of also seeking to live a sanctified life.<sup>102</sup> As Sanders maintains:

As evangelical doctrine became stereotyped within the narrow confines of a particular anthropology and soteriology, so the Eucharist would appear to have lost its fullness of meaning. If the whole significance of justification could be thought to be satisfactorily expressed in the phrase 'saved by the blood'; if the whole meaning of sanctification could be thought to be summed up in a moralistic legalism; if the richly varied theology of Wesley could be acceptably reduced to the one word 'Aldersgate'; then the Eucharist could presumably be satisfactorily characterized as a memorial rite."<sup>103</sup>

No longer did the Methodists need to concern themselves with a pursuit of constant communion. Instead of the Lord's Supper being a means of grace integral to the process of sanctification, it could just be celebrated at special times as a reminder of the sacrifice that leads to conversion.

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<sup>102</sup> John Wesley. "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 372-4. Wesley defines salvation as: "It is not a blessing which lies on the other side death; or, as we usually speak, in the other world. The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question: 'Ye are saved.' It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing; a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of. Nay, the words may be rendered, and that with equal propriety, 'Ye have been saved': so that the salvation which is here spoken of might be extended to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory." Wesley goes on to state that salvation has "two general parts, justification and sanctification. Justification is another word for pardon. It is the forgiveness of all our sins, and (what is necessarily implied therein) our acceptance with God...and at the same time that we are justified, yea, in that very moment sanctification begins...from the time of our being 'born again' the gradual work of sanctification takes place...as we are more and more dead to sin, we are more and more alive to God."

<sup>103</sup> Sanders, "Early American Methodism," 369.

*A Disconnected Church*

The Free Methodist Church found itself being born out of a tradition already disconnected from the heritage it claimed. While seeking to be loyal to their Wesleyan heritage the FMC was born into a tradition where, “the church was clearly more concerned with evangelism than with sacramentalism.”<sup>104</sup> For John Wesley, the balance of the Methodist revival found its expression through holding together an evangelistic spirit with a steady practice of the means of grace. By failing to maintain this balance, the Wesleyan understanding of Lord’s Supper as a means of grace began to suffer.

Due to the fact that the Free Methodist Church USA has never made the theology or practice of the Lord’s Supper a prominent concern, one could conclude that the FMCUSA does not have an adequately Wesleyan understanding of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace. The final section of this thesis will explore how the FMCUSA can begin to reconnect its understanding of the Lord’s Supper with an understanding of the means of grace observed in Wesley.

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<sup>104</sup> Sanders, *Early American Methodism*, 370.



## Considering Faithfulness

As Howard Snyder rightly pointed out in his essay, “The Lord's Supper in the Free Methodist Tradition,” the issue of the Lord’s Supper never played a prominent role in the development of the FMC’s theological discussion or practice.<sup>105</sup> Having considered the development of the Wesleys’ Eucharistic thought and practice above, the question remains as to whether the FMC truly represents its Wesleyan heritage in its claim that the Lord’s Supper is a means of grace.<sup>106</sup>

### *Freedom in the Form*

As I noted earlier, there is a tension between freedom and form in the practice of the Lord’s Supper within the worship of the FMC. Regarding this tension, Snyder rightly contends that the Free Methodist Church does not fit neatly within the main categories of Christian history, but rather is, a hybrid of Anglo-

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<sup>105</sup> Snyder, “Free Methodist Tradition,” 213.

<sup>106</sup> It is important to note that this thesis has tried to avoid making declarative statements on how the FMC should “practice” the Lord’s Supper (e.g. frequency) in order to highlight the need for further conversation in light of our Wesleyan heritage. An example of how the conversation could be expanded can be found in *The Manual of the Free Methodist Church in Canada*. While the Canadian book of discipline maintains the FMCUSA’s description of the sacraments found in the Articles of Religion, in chapter 7 it expands the discussion when introducing the ritual later. The discussion includes connecting the Lord’s Supper to the work of the Holy Spirit, how the sacrament influences the believer as they grow in faith, why ordination is required to serve the sacrament, the role the Lord’s Supper plays in worship, etc. <http://fmcic.ca/our-ethos/the-manual/>

Catholic, Charismatic, Evangelical, and Anabaptist.<sup>107</sup> These four diverse traditions create a complex DNA that affects how the denomination has come to understand issues within the church such as worship, community, discipleship, and the sacraments.

When it comes to the issue of the Lord's Supper, the FMC holds in tension both a loyalty to its tradition (the ritual used today has not seen a lot of change) and passion for a Spirit led sense of freedom within worship. Although Bishop Marston celebrated the heritage of "freedom in the Spirit," he was quick to caution those attempting to take too much liberty with the communion ritual.<sup>108</sup> As Bastian points out, even today, pastors still struggle with understanding how to embrace the ritual handed down when to them it seems "dull and lifeless."<sup>109</sup>

In attempting to navigate this tension, Bastian recommends that pastors "prayerfully consider making every service involving a ritual a fresh means of grace for the worshipper."<sup>110</sup> It is the desire of the Free Methodist Church to, on one hand, "avoid the stuffy and meaningless repetition of words" while on the other hand, "avoid the devaluing of sacred moments when words and actions are overly casual and unduly ad lib."<sup>111</sup> Although the attempt is admirable, once again

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<sup>107</sup> Snyder, "Seven Keys," 142.

<sup>108</sup> Marston, *Age to Age*, 340.

<sup>109</sup> Bastian, *First Love*, 194.

<sup>110</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 63.

<sup>111</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 63.

it seems the FMC's complex DNA is trying to balance itself. By looking more closely to their Wesleyan roots, the FMC can work to better navigate this tension between freedom and form.

When it came to John Wesley this tension was addressed as there was a joining together of the new and the old. As mentioned earlier, Snyder points out that the Aldersgate experience (Wesley's new sense of freedom in the Spirit) served to deepen his relationship with the Lord's Supper.<sup>112</sup> While he understood a new sense of freedom when it came to the love of God and his assurance of salvation, Wesley still remained grounded in the traditions of the church. Snyder, in fact, argues that it was Wesley's acknowledgement of the Spirit working through the sacrament that helped to keep the balance together.<sup>113</sup>

According to Wesley, as one continues to experience God's grace through participation in the means of grace, one's ability to recognize and respond to grace grows.<sup>114</sup> William Willimon notes that when it comes to pursuing the sanctified life, "the Christian life ought not to be formed in a haphazard way. It takes constant, life-long attention, habits, and care to embody this character."<sup>115</sup> Through following the form, practicing the "methods," one begins to cultivate a better

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<sup>112</sup> Snyder, *Radical Wesley*, 102.

<sup>113</sup> Snyder, *Radical Wesley*, 103.

<sup>114</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 196.

<sup>115</sup> William H. Willimon, *The Service of God: How Worship and Ethics are Related* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 127.

understanding of freedom in their life. When it comes to observing the Lord's Supper, Willimon concludes, "the normality, the constancy of the Eucharist is part of its power."<sup>116</sup>

The tension between freedom and form is very much a part of the Free Methodist identity. In the end, it is this tension that can be used to strengthen the Free Methodist Church. To claim the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, the FMC would benefit from constantly and consistently viewing and practicing Holy Communion as a means of grace one that can ground and better equip the church for ministry as it is strengthened in belief, love, and obedience to God.<sup>117</sup> For the FMC, it takes both parts of its name in order to live into its identity.

### *A Pulpit and a Table*

The tension within the Free Methodist Church between the ministry of the preached Word (pulpit) and the observance of Holy Communion (Table) is a significant departure from what had been during the lives of the Wesleys. As it has already been shown, the language used within the FMCUSA tends to place a greater emphasis on the ministry of preaching over against the sacrament. After

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<sup>116</sup> Willimon, *Service of God*, 127.

<sup>117</sup> Wesley, "Constant Communion," 336.

describing the “revival of preaching” led by John Wesley, the *Pastors and Church Leaders Manual* goes on to state that:

The Free Methodist Church today builds on this heritage of preaching. We believe that preaching is a foremost activity of the Christian Ministry...This conviction has important implications. It implies that the hard work of preaching must have priority in the time and energies of the Free Methodist pastor. We invest ourselves in preaching that is primarily the exposition of God’s Word and that communicates clearly and convincingly to today’s culture.<sup>118</sup>

Although the *Manual* goes on to claim that in Free Methodist churches, like the early church, the “central character of this sacrament [Lord’s Supper] is being recognized again and its use made more regular and frequent,” the *Manual* fails to link the ministry of the table (Lord’s Supper) with that of the pulpit (preaching a sermon).<sup>119</sup>

In one sense the *Pastors and Leaders Manual* is correct in stating that the Methodist revival was a revival of preaching, which placed an emphasis on Scripture. For John Wesley the study of Scripture was also considered a means of grace. Wesley encouraged his followers to study, hear, and meditate on the scriptures because he believed that, through participation in this means of grace they would find a Spirit-led grace for their lives.<sup>120</sup> This renewed passion for the Scriptures helped to fuel the evangelical spirit that led to such a powerful

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<sup>118</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 49.

<sup>119</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 62.

<sup>120</sup> Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” 164.

preaching ministry. However, in *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision*, Paul Wesley Chilcote contends that, "In the Wesleys' view there could be no suggestion of setting the preaching of the gospel over against the celebration of the sacrament. It was impossible to think about the spoken word (preaching) apart from the Word made visible (Eucharist)."<sup>121</sup>

Chilcote goes on to point out that, "for the early Methodists, it was clear that God confirmed the message of good news through the action of the Eucharist."<sup>122</sup> By grounding the ministry of the proclaimed gospel in the greater context of worship, observing the Lord's Supper helped to open people up to a broader experience of God. Through the sacrament they could see, touch, taste, and smell the Good News.

By seeing the symbols of bread and cup, the gospel story is preached. By touching the elements, the reality of the incarnation becomes clearer. Through the acts of tasting and smelling, our bodies are reminded of the hunger felt and the need to be fed by God. While "the sermon" is perhaps the most recognizable form of preaching, it is important not to forget that through the words of the communion liturgy and the actions required to reenact the story, the sacrament goes forth and boldly proclaims the love and grace of God.

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<sup>121</sup> Chilcote, *Recapturing*, 81.

<sup>122</sup> Chilcote, *Recapturing*, 84.

Coming out of a tradition that developed on the frontier and in an age of revivalism, it is not surprising that the FMC has placed an emphasis on the proclamation of the Gospel through preaching. While it is true that this evangelical aspect has played an important role in shaping the FMC's Wesleyan identity, it is also important to recognize the role the sacrament of the Lord's Supper played in shaping that identity as well. The revival led by John Wesley was one that sought to bring a balance to the preached Word and a sacrament of the Lord's Supper that had been neglected. Chilcote believes that:

at the heart of the Wesleyan concept of the sacrament is this: the Lord's Supper always faithfully proclaims the Word...The human witness may fail. In fact, preaching has frequently failed, as important and vital as it is. But as long as the Lord's Supper is celebrated, there will always be a visible sign of God's love and grace in the midst of our brokenness.<sup>123</sup>

By bringing the pulpit and the Table back together, the Free Methodist Church would be pairing together two vital means of grace that would better equip the church to address the brokenness in the lives of the people they are ministering to.

### *Beyond the Presence*

In the section entitled "Views on the Lord's Supper" in the *Pastors and Church Leaders Manual*, the Free Methodist Church chooses to focus its discussion

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<sup>123</sup> Chilcote, *Recapturing*, 86.

on the issue of the presence of Christ within the sacrament.<sup>124</sup> Throughout history this particular theological issue has played an important role when it came to identifying where various traditions stood. Brent Peterson writes, “The issue of Christ’s presence in or around the elements is one of the most intensely debated topics of Eucharistic conversation.”<sup>125</sup> However, Peterson concludes that, “Unfortunately, the conversation has sadly and ironically caused division and discord in the Christian Church. Lost in the conversation is the gift, command, and promise of God to be present.”<sup>126</sup>

While it is important to clarify the FMC position on the matter of Christ’s presence in the sacrament, the lack of broader theological discussion regarding the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper raises concern. The FMC claims that Holy Communion is a means of grace, yet it does not explain what this actually means for the church. By narrowing the discussion to just the issue of the metaphysical nature of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the Free Methodist Church is left to conclude their discussion on the Lord’s Supper by stating:

In any case, the two views that we [FMCUSA] described, the “real presence” and the “memorial” views, represent the basic options that are possible, whatever refinements with them might be made.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Kendall et al., *Discipline*, 23-4; Krober et al., *Pastors and Leaders Manual*, 62-5.

<sup>125</sup> Brent D. Peterson, *Created to Worship: God’s Invitation to Become Fully Human* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012), 176.

<sup>126</sup> Peterson, *Created to Worship*, 176.

<sup>127</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 65.



While the issue of presence is sorted out (although one could argue with an ambiguous conclusion), what is lost is the rich Eucharistic theology available to the FMC in its heritage.

In contrast to the current FMC's presentation of the Lord's Supper, with the publication of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, the Wesleys provided a theology that is both wide and deep. Based on the organization of the hymns alone, the Wesleys present a eucharist theology that breaks down to:

Part I: "As it is a Memorial of the Sufferings and Death of Christ"

Part II: "As it is a Sign and a Means of Grace"

Part III: "The Sacrament a Pledge of Heaven"

Part IV: "The Holy Eucharist as it Implies a Sacrifice"

Part V: "Concerning the Sacrifice of our Persons"

"After the Sacrament"<sup>128</sup>

Daniel Stevick, in his work on the Wesleyan eucharistic hymns, included a six page appendix that lists all the various words that the Wesleys use to describe the sacrament of the Lord's Supper within the hymn collection.<sup>129</sup> With this diverse understanding within the Wesleyan tradition, one could argue that the FMC commits a major injustice to the Wesleyan heritage they claim by reducing their theological treatment of the Lord's Supper to just the issue of presence.

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<sup>128</sup> Wesley and Wesley, *Hymns*; Stevick, *Altar's Fire*, 29

<sup>129</sup> Stevick, *Altar's Fire*, 233-8.

Noticeably absent from the Free Methodist description of the Lord's Supper is the work of the Holy Spirit within the sacrament.<sup>130</sup> As noted above, it is the Wesleys' understanding of the power of the Holy Spirit working through the sacrament that helped to define the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. As a Christian seeks to live a sanctified life, it is the power of the Spirit working through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that provides the sanctifying power needed. This Trinitarian aspect was essential to understanding the means of grace as Wesley concludes:

Settle this in your heart, that the opus operatum, the mere work done, profiteth nothing; that there is no power to save, but in the Spirit of God, no merit, but in the blood of Christ; that, consequently, even what God ordains, conveys no grace to the soul, if you trust not in Him alone.<sup>131</sup>

James White points out that by recognizing and including the Holy Spirit within the observance of the Lord's Supper the church recognizes, "Christ's sacrificial self giving as, not only a past history or future hope, but as present reality here and now in its very midst."<sup>132</sup> Including a theology of the Holy Spirit within their

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<sup>130</sup> The only connection between the Lord's Supper and the Holy Spirit in both the *Discipline* and the *Pastors and Leaders Manual*, comes in the prayer of the ritual itself. While the alternate ritual for the Lord's Supper (adopted in 1989) does include an *epiclesis*, the traditional ritual does not. Even within the introduction to the alternate ritual, the Holy Spirit is never mentioned. See Krober et al, *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 128-36.

<sup>131</sup> Wesley, "The Means of Grace," 170.

<sup>132</sup> James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 60.

treatment of the Lord's Supper could help the FMC in areas such as discipleship and transformational ministries.

The presence and work of the Holy Spirit within the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is just one example of the immense theology left by the Wesleys when it comes to the sacrament in which the FMC could benefit. I believe that John Wesley would agree when Rob Staples articulates that:

The Eucharist may be understood as that means of grace, instituted by Christ, to which we are invited for repentance, for self-examination, for renewal, for spiritual sustenance, for thanksgiving, for fellowship, for anticipation of the heavenly kingdom, and for the celebration in our pilgrimage toward perfection in the image of Christ. All these are involved in our sanctification, and all these are benefits available to us at the Lord's table.<sup>133</sup>

*Eucharist: Sacrament of Sanctification*<sup>134</sup>

One of the glaring omissions in how the FMC talks about the Lord's Supper is the sacrament's connection to the theology of sanctification. When commenting on the issue of entire sanctification, the *Discipline* describes the process of sanctification as:

Sanctification is that saving work of God beginning with new life in Christ whereby the Holy Spirit renews His people after the likeness of God, changing them through crisis and process, from one degree of glory to another, and conforming them to the image of Christ.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Rob L. Staples, *Outward Sign and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1991), 202.

<sup>134</sup> Staples, *Outward Sign*, 201.

<sup>135</sup> Kendall et al, *Book of Discipline*, 21.

While the FMC acknowledges this journey of salvation, through the power of the Holy Spirit, sanctification is never connected to later discussions on the Lord's Supper.<sup>136</sup>

Instead of connecting the process of sanctification to the Lord's Supper, the *Discipline* describes the Lord's Supper as:

a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death. To those who rightly, worthily and with faith receive it, the bread which we break is partaking of the body of Christ; and likewise the cup of blessing is partaking of the blood of Christ. The supper is also a sign of the love and unity that Christians have among themselves.<sup>137</sup>

Without this connection, the question remains: If the Free Methodist Church holds to a doctrine that has a "distinctive emphasis on the scriptural teaching of entire sanctification as held by John Wesley"<sup>138</sup> and views the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace,<sup>139</sup> why is there no mention of sanctification when describing the Lord's Supper?

In *Outward Sign and Inward Grace*, Rob Staples refers to the sacrament of Holy Communion as the "sacrament of sanctification."<sup>140</sup> Staples uses this term because it "was in the doctrine of sanctification that John Wesley made one of his

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<sup>136</sup> When discussing the Lord's Supper in both the *Book of Discipline* and the *Pastors and Church Leaders Manual*, the words "sanctification" or any of its variations fail to appear in conjunction with the sacrament.

<sup>137</sup> Kendall et al, *Book of Discipline*, 23-4.

<sup>138</sup> Kendall et al, *Book of Discipline*, 14.

<sup>139</sup> Kendall et al, *Book of Discipline*, 23.

<sup>140</sup> Staples, *Outward Sign*, 201.

unique contributions to theological discussion.”<sup>141</sup> Wesley saw the means of grace as means in which God extends “preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”<sup>142</sup> For the FMC to separate out the issue of sanctification from a discussion on any of the means of grace would not have made sense to John Wesley.

Instead of connecting the observance of the Lord’s Supper to the process of sanctification, the *Discipline* states that the Lord’ Supper is “a sacrament of our redemption by Christ’s death.”<sup>143</sup> The language used suggests more of a connection to the theology of justification. While the *Discipline* captures John Wesley’s understanding of a “justifying ordinance” in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, by failing to connect the sacrament to sanctification the *Discipline* still fails to address the holistic view of what is entailed in the Lord’s Supper being a means grace.

The language presented in the *Discipline* calls the participant in the sacrament to just look back and remember God’s grace, instead of being a means that strengthens and empowers one with grace in the life of faith. While John Wesley recognized the “memorial” aspect of the sacrament, the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace was much more. John Wesley writes:

Is not the eating of that bread, and the drinking of that cup, the outward, visible means, whereby God conveys into our souls all that

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<sup>141</sup> Staples, *Outward Sign*, 201.

<sup>142</sup> Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” 160.

<sup>143</sup> Kendall et al, *Book of Discipline*, 23.

spiritual grace, that righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which were purchased by the body of Christ once broken and the blood of Christ once shed for us?<sup>144</sup>

Free Methodist minister, L. Mendenhall cautioned the Free Methodist church about the dangers of restricting the view of the Lord's Supper to just being a time to remember what Christ did. Writing in the FMC periodical, *The Earnest Christian* in November 1891, Mendenhall points out the error of those who believed that:

this sacrament is only commemorative of this historical events of the crucifixion of Christ and His sacrificial death. The problem is that it strips it of its gracious element of fellowship with Christ, which it is intended to promote, as the mind contemplates not only the past event of a Savior crucified, but of a risen Saviour at the right hand of God, who "ever liveth to make intercession for us."<sup>145</sup>

Mendenhall recognized that the Lord's Supper served as a present reality of God's grace, not just a moment to look back on.

For John Wesley, salvation was understood in part to be a process of participation in sanctification. He believed that:

from the time of our being born again, the gradual work of sanctification takes place. We are enabled "by the Spirit" to "mortify the deeds of the body," of our evil nature; and as we are more and more dead to sin, we are more and more alive to God. We go on from grace to grace...<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Wesley, "The Means of Grace," 165.

<sup>145</sup> Rev. L. Mendenhall, "Sacrament of the Lord's Supper." *The Earnest Christian*, November 1891.

<sup>146</sup> Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," 374.

John Wesley believed that the Lord's Supper was a key means of grace in the ongoing journey of sanctification. It is within the observance of the sacrament that:

the grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins, and enables us to leave them. As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls: This gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection.<sup>147</sup>

For Wesley, the grace provided through the Lord's Supper was grace that strengthened the believer today, it was not just a testimony of past events.

If the FMCUSA is to live into its claim that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a means of grace, used to "quicken, strengthen and confirm our faith," then the theology of sanctification must be present in the FMC's understanding of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper cannot not just be understood as a "sacrament of our redemption"<sup>148</sup> but the FMC must also recognize that the sacrament provides grace that is a present reality and strength for the journey to come.

### *Conversation around the Table*

In the *Pastors and Church Leaders Manual*, the FMCUSA makes the claim that "people's hunger for meaning and mystery, as well as the contemporary desire to

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<sup>147</sup> Wesley, *Constant Communion*, 335-6

<sup>148</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, 23.

belong, make the use of the Lord's Supper vital in connecting with today's believers and seekers."<sup>149</sup> If this sentiment is correct, then the FMCUSA has a great opportunity in which to explore their rich Wesleyan heritage when it comes to the Lord's Supper. Although the FMCUSA is showing signs of moving in the right direction, this thesis has shown that there are still conversations to be had on what it means for the Lord's Supper to be described as a means of grace.<sup>150</sup>

When it comes to the Lord's Supper, the Wesleyan heritage offers a vast and wonderful tradition both theologically and in practice. As the FMC seeks to "love God and people, and to make disciples,"<sup>151</sup> it can look to the sacrament of Lord's Supper for support. The legacy of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, which was given to the FMCUSA by John and Charles Wesley, speaks of a grace that is available to all – no matter where one may be in life. The Lord's Supper empowers the process of sanctification, granting "the renewal of [one's] soul in righteousness and true holiness" to those who partake of it<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 62.

<sup>150</sup> Krober et al., *Pastors and Church Leaders*, 62-62. Adopting language from *The Manual of the Free Methodist Church in Canada*, the FMCUSA describes the participation of the Christian in the Lord's Supper stating, "'In Communion we look *in* at ourselves and confess the things that have gone wrong. We look *back* to Calvary and praise Jesus for his death for us. We look *up* to his risen presence longing to nourish us through the bread and cup which he said were his body and blood. We look *around* in love and fellowship with other guests at God's table. We look *forward* to his return at the end of all history, the marriage supper of the Lamb, of which every Communion is a foretaste. And then we look *out* to a needy world; Communion is battle rations for Christian soldiers.

<sup>151</sup> Kendall et al., *Book of Discipline*, viii.

<sup>152</sup> Wesley, "The Means of Grace," 170.



As the FMCUSA seeks to be faithful to their Wesleyan heritage, it is important that they do not forsake the “methods” that were handed down to them. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord’s Supper speaks of the grace received, the grace given today, and the hope of the grace yet to come. For the FMCUSA, as part of the Wesleyan tradition, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace is a rich legacy. It is a legacy of blessing in which the FMCUSA would do well not to forsake. As Charles Wesley wrote:

Glory to Him who freely spent  
 His Blood that we might live,  
 And through this choicest Instrument  
 Doth all his Blessings give.

Fasting he doth and Hearing bless,  
 And Prayer can much avail,  
 Good Vessals all to draw the Grace  
 Out of Salvation’s Well.

But none like this Mysterious Rite  
 Which dying Mercy gave  
 Can draw forth all his promis’d Might  
 And all his will to save.

This is the richest Legacy  
 Thou hast on Man bestow’d,  
 Here chiefly, Lord, we feed on Thee,  
 And drink thy precious Blood.

Here all thy Blessings we receive,  
 Here all thy Gifts are given;  
 To those that would in Thee believe,  
 Pardon, and Grace, and Heaven

Thus may we still in Thee be blest

'Till all from Earth remove,  
And share with Thee the Marriage-feast,  
And drink the Wine above.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Wesley and Wesley, *Hymns*, no. 42.

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