

# Breathed out

[Religion](#), [Jesus](#)



Breathed Out The Church as Sacrament to the World 1 Richard Shockey  
December 11, 2011 Spiritual practices in the church have often been considered only for their inward expression, often referred to as works of piety by John Wesley.[1] But the church has a responsibility to be engaged in the salvific work of Christ in the world, especially to those referred to in Matthew 25 as "the least of these." This paper will consider how the church is meant to be concerned with social responsibility to the "least of these" by being a sacrament to it. It will begin by exploring what is meant by sacrament and means of grace. Then, it will explore why the church should be envisioned as a means of grace to the world and the theological implications of such a view. Finally, it will explore some constructive proposals of how the view of the church as a means of grace can fit within a Nazarene context. There has been considerable work done describing the importance of the inner life of the church. Rob Staple's seminal work on the place of the sacraments called *Outward Sign and Inward Grace*, for example, goes far to explain the importance of sacramental practice within the church as the ordinary means of receiving God's grace.[2] Staples quotes John Lawson's definition of "means of grace" as, "The means by which the general saving action of God is mediated to particular congregations and to individual believers." He goes on to show Gustav Aulen's view of the means of grace as, "The constitutive factors of the church through which the activity of the Holy Spirit which creates the church takes place. Finally, Staples refers to John Wesley's perspective on "means of grace" in Wesley's sermon with the same title: "By "means of grace" I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be

the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace. I use this expression, means of grace, because I know none better; and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages; -- in particular by our own Church, which directs us to bless God both for the means of grace, and hope of glory; and teaches us, that a sacrament is " an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same." The first two authors use the phrase to refer specifically to the way God bestows grace upon believers or upon the church, but they do not necessarily limit God to this inward direction of grace. Wesley, however, even though he was referring particularly to Christians, talks of ordinary channels of grace " to men [sic]", in general. He did not go so far as to explicitly name the church as a means of grace to the world, but he does not preclude the notion. Alexander Schmemmann, in *For the Life of the World*, defines sacrament in a helpful way. " For a sacrament, as we have seen, implies necessarily the idea of transformation, refers to the ultimate event of Christ's death and resurrection, and is always a sacrament of the Kingdom. In a way, of course, the whole life of the Church can be termed sacramental, for it is always the manifestation in time of the " new time".[3] This implies that the presence of the church in the world is eschatological and, by its presence, proclaims the coming of the Lord, both past and future. He goes on to further define his view of sacrament: " A sacrament, as we already know, is always a passage, a transformation. Yet it is not " passage" into " supernature", but into the Kingdom of God, the world to come, into the very reality of this world and its life as redeemed and restored by Christ. It is the transformation not of " nature" into "

supernature", but of the old into the new. A sacrament therefore is not a "miracle" by which God breaks, so to speak, the "laws of nature," but the manifestation of the ultimate Truth about the world and life, man [sic] and nature, the Truth which is Christ. "[4] The world can then, in a way, participate in the Kingdom of God by way of the church's activity in it. Through the church, they have a foretaste of the Kingdom yet to come in its fullness. These "means of grace", then, are often referred to as the ordinary means by which the church and its believers receive the grace of God. But how, then, do non-believers receive the grace of God? Are there ordinary channels of God's grace that flow to the rest of the world? A short piece in *Postmodern and Wesleyan?* by Brent Peterson may answer this question. Peterson's central theme in his piece is that the Eucharist is the central means of renewing and remaking the church.[5] In laying out his thesis, he describes an understanding of worship that includes a "breathing in and breathing out". The breathing in refers to the gathering of God's people into communal worship, by the Holy Spirit (the ruach, or breath of God). The breathing out is the sending of the church back out into the world. Breathing out is an extension of the breathing in. There is sacramental activity in both actions. Peterson says, "This Eucharistic moment is a divine-human transforming encounter. In it, the church continually renews as the Body of Christ. But it does not end in this sacramental moment. Like any runner will tell you, something inhaled must be exhaled." Peterson goes on to tie the sacramental action of the Eucharist, an act of piety, with a sacramental action in the world, or acts of mercy in Wesley's language. "The church is sent out-exhaled-into the world to be the broken body and shed blood of

Christ. This means that it loves and cares for the oppressed, the hopeless, those living in the shadows, and those dying physically and spiritually. By loving and caring for persons in our world, we are making the Eucharist fruitful. Our response is important for God's love to flourish. Like manna hoarded and not shared, however, we spoil the Eucharist if we do not love and care for those in our world. "[6] This breathing out is a sending into the darkness of the world, a reflection of the missional activity of God. Just as holy communion remembers the body of Christ which was broken for the world, and the blood of Christ that was spilled out for the world, the church then is sacrament to the world by breaking itself open in service to the world, spilling itself out in merciful acts. The church has the Eucharist as the primary and ordinary way of receiving the grace of God. The world has the church as the primary and ordinary means of grace. The authors of the small book, *Compassion*, make a case for the connection between the church's action at the table of the Eucharist and its action in the world. " It is in this life that is taken, blessed, broken, and given that Jesus Christ wants to make us participants... When we eat bread and drink wine together in memory of Christ, we become intimately related to his own compassionate life. In fact, we become his life and are thus enable to re-present his life in our time and place. Our compassion becomes a manifestation of God's compassion lived out through all times and places. The breaking of the bread connects our broken lives with God's life in Christ and transforms our brokenness into a brokenness that no longer leads to fragmentation but to community and love. "[7] John Wesley considered this responsibility of the church to act redemptively in the world and called this activity " works of mercy, " which

he contrasted with " works of piety. " In his sermon, On Visiting the Sick, detailed in Eric Serverson's work called The Least of These[8], Wesley contended that works of piety like the Eucharist, prayers, and reading Scripture, are not the only means of grace. Works of mercy are also means of grace. Regular attendance to both are important to the spiritual lives of believers. In his sermon, On Zeal, Wesley says that works of mercy are, in fact, to be preferred to works of piety. Again, he does not explicitly contend that this grace is then extended to the object of the works of mercy, but it can be inferred. Here is Wesley on the subject: In a Christian believer love sits upon the throne which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers; - longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, fidelity, temperance; and if any other were comprised in " the mind which was in Christ Jesus." In an exterior circle are all the works of mercy, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers- by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed works of piety - reading and hearing the word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord's supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one body, the church, dispersed all over the earth - a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation. [9] Thus should he show his zeal for works of piety; but much more for works of mercy; seeing " God will have mercy and not

sacrifice," that is, rather than sacrifice. Whenever, therefore, one interferes with the other, works of mercy are to be preferred. Even reading, hearing, prayer are to be omitted, or to be postponed, " at charity's almighty call;" when we are called to relieve the distress of our neighbour, whether in body or soul. [10] It is important to notice, too, that Wesley sees committing acts of mercy as the primary way of exercising holy tempers. In other words, acts of mercy must flow from acts of piety. Viewed Eucharistically, extending grace into the world is the outer circle whereby table fellowship is made complete. The Eucharist, as an act of piety, is extended into the world through works of mercy by the church. Nouwen called these " bread connections". They " challenge us to work with all our energy for the daily bread of all people. In this way our praying together becomes working together, and the call to break the same bread becomes a call to action. "[11] He also goes on to call this bread to the world a gift. He says, " Wherever we see real service we see joy, because in the midst of service a divine presence becomes visible and a gift is offered. "[12] It is not surprising that Wesleyanism finds itself working among the most poor and marginalized of the world. In *Here We Stand*, the author describes the terrible conditions in 18th c. London that surrounded John Wesley. Horse manure was piled 14 feet high on many London streets. Typhoid, cholera, dysentery and smallpox was decimating the population. Graveyard would make large " poor holes", which were large open graves to fill with the countless nameless poor who died. Ninety percent of the population was poor, and 40 percent were desperately poor. Violence, gambling and alcoholism were very common. School was attended by only 1 in every 25 children.[13] The conditions were

deplorable. John Wesley could not conceive of a right religion that did not find intersection in the lives of the destitute. The Gospel had to respond to the plight of the poor and marginalized of society. Piety and mercy were inseparable. Wesley's view of acts of mercy as means of grace grew out of very practical and pragmatic concerns for the humanity that was spiritually and literally dying around him. Schmemmann's view of the Church may be helpful here in his discussion of the Church's role in participating in the healing of the world. In reference to the Church's work toward a man who is suffering in pain, he says, " For the man, as for every man in the whole world, suffering can be defeat, the way of complete surrender to darkness, despair and solitude. It can be dying in the very real sense of the word. And yet it can be also the ultimate victory of Man and of Life in him. The Church does not come to restore health in this man, simply to replace medicine... The Church comes to take this man into the Love, the Light, and the Life of Christ. It comes not merely to " comfort" him in his sufferings, not to " help" him, but to make him a martyr, a witness to Christ in his very sufferings." [14] The Church has a very active role in extending grace and mercy into the world. It is more than mere comfort. It is a dynamic taking into " the Love, the Light, and the Life of Christ. " This is the " breathing out" referred to by Peterson. The church's Eucharistic encounter is completed by breaking itself open to the world. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned all become sacramental acts, for they convey the presence of God into the world. There is a tendency in the evangelical Christian world to see evangelism as primarily the conversion of sinners. This can often lead to a kind of dualistic approach in the Church's



engagement in the world. It only enters the world to speak words that lead to conversion, yet it retreats when it is called upon to relieve suffering and oppression. While conversion is certainly a part of salvation, evangelism means more than this. To evangelize means, literally, "to good news", or, "to share the good news." What is this good news? How does this news look good to the starving and freezing? The redemptive activity of the church in the world can be good news to those in greatest need. While liberation theology may depart from typical evangelical perspectives on theology, evangelicalism may have something to learn from authors like Gutierrez in his practical theology, which flows from a desire to bring respite to the suffering. Reflecting on the nature of a relationship with God, he says that "communion with the Lord inescapably means a Christian life centered around a concrete and creative commitment of service to others." [15] This service, for Gutierrez, is not only compulsion of the life of faith. He says, "Elimination of misery and exploitation is a sign of the coming of the Kingdom." [16] As the church enters the world bearing Christ, it proclaims the historical reality of His coming and presence in the world through the church, as well as in the coming eschaton. This sacramental movement is therefore eschatological. There is good news to be told to the suffering in the world: the Church has been sent to be the presence of Christ in the world until He comes again. How, then, is the Church of the Nazarene to respond? First, it should heed Peterson's call to sacramental practice within the church and its worship. Then, as an extension of the Eucharist, it can proceed into the world, breaking this bread in service to it. Works of mercy to the least of these include, but are not limited to, all those things listed in the Matthew

passage. Righting the wrongs of injustice, such as racism, sexism and other systemic oppression is surely not exempt. A final proposal is to consider a recommendation given by Gutierrez that may resound with Wesley's concern that the church relate to the poor. He says, " Instead of talking about the Church of the poor, we must be a poor Church. And we flaunt this commitment with our real estate, our rectories and other buildings, and our whole style of life... Poverty expresses solidarity with the oppressed and a protest against oppression. "[17] John Wesley seemed to agree with the notion of becoming poor on behalf of the poor in his sermon, On Dress, " For the more you lay out [spend]on your own apparel, the less you have left to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to lodge the strangers, to relieve those that are sick and in prison, and to lessen the numberless afflictions to which we are exposed in this vale of tears. "[18] Any resources above what one needed for necessities and basic comforts were to be used in service to the poor. Just as the Church needs the presence of God in its midst through the Eucharist and other means of grace, so the world needs the presence of God visible in the Church. Acts of mercy express the sacramental life of the Church living out its faith in the world. The world is in desperate need of the presence of Christ, which can only be manifest through the obedience and faithfulness of a Church dedicated to breaking itself open for the life of the world in service to God. Embracing the call to be a vehicle of God's grace, breathed out by God for the world's sake, is imperative for the Church to fulfill its mission. Bibliography Akkerman, Jay Richard, Thomas J. Oord, and Brent D. Peterson, eds. " The Eucharist Renews and Remakes the Church." In Postmodern and Wesleyan?: Exploring the Boundaries and Possibilities, 118.

Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009. Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1988.

Ingersol, Stan, and Wesley D. Tracy. *Here We Stand: Where Nazarenes Fit in the Religious Marketplace*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1999. Nouwen, Henri, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison.

*Compassion: A Reflection On the Christian Life*. New York, NY: Doubleday Image, 1983. Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004.

Severson, Eric R., ed. *The Least of These: Selected Readings in Christian History*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007. Staples, Rob L. *Outward Sign and Inward Grace*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1991. Wesley, John. "On Dress." *The Sermons of John Wesley*. <http://new.gbqm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/88/> (accessed December 11, 2011). Wesley, John. "On Zeal." *The Sermons of John Wesley*. <http://new.gbqm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/92/> (accessed December 11, 2011). ----- [1] Eric

R. Severson, ed., *The Least of These: Selected Readings in Christian History* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 234. [2] Rob L. Staples, *Outward Sign and Inward Grace* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1991), 98. [3]

Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 81. [4] *Ibid*, 102.

*Italics original*. [5] Jay Richard Akkerman, Thomas J. Oord and Brent D. Peterson, eds., "The Eucharist Renews and Remakes the Church," in *Postmodern and Wesleyan?: Exploring the Boundaries and Possibilities* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009), 118. [6] *Ibid*, 120.

[7] Henri Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection On the Christian Life* (New York, NY: Doubleday Image, 1983), 113-14. [8] *The Least of These* is a compendium of historical documents that interpret the Parable of the Sheep and Goats found in Matthew 25: 31-46. [9] John Wesley, " On Zeal, " *The Sermons of John Wesley*, <http://new.gbgbm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/92/> (accessed December 11, 2011). [10] *Ibid.* [11] *Compassion*, 115. [12] *Ibid.*, 32 [13] Stan Ingersol and Wesley D. Tracy, *Here We Stand: Where Nazarenes Fit in the Religious Marketplace* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1999), 41-43. [14] *For the Life*, 103. *Italics original.* [15] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 9. [16] *Ibid.* [17] *Ibid.*, 70. [18] John Wesley, " On Dress, " *The Sermons of John Wesley*, <http://new.gbgbm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/88/> (accessed December 11, 2011).