

See more clearly, love more dearly, follow more nearly:

Contemplation and Virtue Formation

Bruce Hindmarsh

“Practice Unto Virtue: The Role of Christian Practices in Virtue Formation”

Christian Formation Workshop,
Westmont College, Santa Barbara, May 27–29, 2026

Abstract

I argue in this essay that contemplative devotion to Jesus Christ—exemplified by Richard of Chichester’s prayer to know more clearly, love more dearly and follow more nearly—is central to genuine Christian virtue formation. Contemplation deepens knowledge and love of Christ, which in turn fuels discipleship and moral fidelity rather than mere self-improvement or instrumental practice. Drawing on writers from across the tradition, including Ignatius of Loyola, Francis de Sales, Jonthan Edwards, John of the Cross, John and Charles Wesley, and John Newton, I expound the way spiritual virtue is produced by the indwelling Spirit and contrast this with natural moral striving or “technologies of the self.” Contemplative practice, rightly ordered as means of grace, yields a harvest of virtues, including humility, patience in suffering, tender-heartedness, freedom from attachments, disinterested love, and sustained holiness.

Introduction

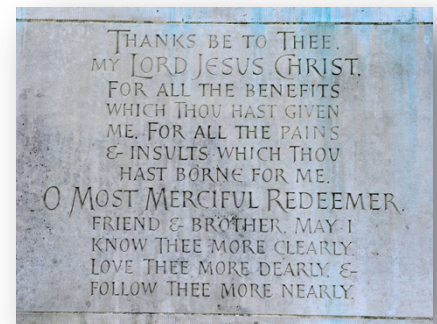
A number of years ago we visited the cathedral at Chichester on the south coast of England. It is forever associated with the godly medieval bishop, Richard of Chichester, who was canonized not long after his death in 1253.¹ Today, just outside the west door of the cathedral is modern life-size bronze statue of the saintly bishop. On its pedestal is inscribed the prayer that he was said to have recited on his deathbed. Recorded by his confessor Ralph Bocking, it appears in Latin in the massive collection of hagiographical texts compiled by some very industrious

¹ Ernest F. Jacob, “St Richard of Chichester,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 7, no. 2 (1956): 174–88; C. H. Lawrence, “Wyche, Richard of [St Richard of Chichester] (d. 1253), Bishop of Chichester,” Oxford University Press, January 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/23522>.

Belgian Jesuits in the seventeenth century. Modified and adapted over the years, it made its way into a few English devotionals and hymnals in the late nineteenth century, but then, even more surprisingly, the prayer was immortalized in what we might call a more groovy way when it appeared in 1971 as the folk-rock ballad “Day by Day” in the off-broadway musical *Godspell*. In that form, it charted in the Billboard Top 100 for fourteen weeks in 1972, and it has had a long run in popular culture since.

The original prayer, without the hippie vibe, has been translated this way:

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,
For all the benefits which thou hast given to me,
For all the pains and insults which thou hast borne for me.
O most merciful redeemer, friend, and brother,
May I know thee more clearly,
Love thee more dearly,
And follow thee more nearly,
Day by day.²



Inscription on the plinth of the statue of Richard of Chichester, Chichester Cathedral

This is the version of the prayer which is recited in the liturgy for pilgrims at the shrine of St. Richard at the cathedral today. The medieval recension and later reception history of this prayer

² The original is “Gratias tibi ego, Domine Jesu Christe, de omnibus beneficiis, quae mihi praestitisti; pro poenis et opprobis, quae pro me pertulisti; propter quae plactus ille lamentabilis vere tibim competeat. Non est dolor sicut dolor meus.” *Acta Sanctorum*, vol. 10, *April, Part One* (Paris and Rome, 1866), entry for Richard of Chichester for April 3, p. 306. Or, in translation, “I thank Thee, Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits which Thou hast granted to me, for all the pains and insults which Thou hast suffered for me, because of which the prophet’s sad lamentation truly applies to Thee: ‘There is no sorrow like unto my sorrow.’” David Jones, *Saint Richard of Chichester: The Sources for His Life* (Sussex Record Society, 1995), 213. The Latin original lacks the triplet of know, love, and follow (clearly, dearly, nearly); it is thought to have been added later. *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 5th ed. (2011), attributes the full prayer to Richard, but see further, Jones, *Saint Richard*, 261.

are complex, to be sure, but much more important for us, I think, is the link in this prayer, as it has come down to us, between Christ-centred contemplation and virtue.³

We may picture Richard of Chichester, like Julian of Norwich later, on his death bed receiving last rites and looking upon the corpus of Christ upon the crucifix held aloft by the attending priest and seeing there the sacrificial love which is the very heart of God.⁴ Fittingly, the response is deeply personal: all that “thou hast borne *for me*.” The invocation that follows is therefore to Christ as my “most merciful redeemer, friend, and brother.” Contemplation begins by attending to the love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. And it invites a response of deepening contemplation in the aspiration to know and to see Christ more clearly. May Christ become a more vivid and crystalline reality in *my* experience. The building parataxis of rhyming lines in the triplet adds further links to this chain: know more clearly, love more dearly, follow more nearly. A more vivid perception of Jesus Christ calls for a deeper and more expansive response of love. And love in turn fosters the desire for discipleship, to be entirely conformed to Jesus Christ and disposed to his will, to be, as we might say here at the Martin Institute, “apprenticed to Jesus” in real life, day by day.

Cue the band: Day by day, day by day . . . 

There is an important link here between contemplative practice and virtue formation. Indeed, in the second week of Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* (1548) this same threefold

³ The complex history of the prayer is reviewed by Steve Perisho in his blog post, “Liber Locorum Communium: Pseudo-St. Richard of Chichester: ‘Know Thee More Clearly, Love Thee More Dearly and Follow Thee More Nearly, Day by Day,’” *Liber Locorum Communium*, April 4, 2020, <https://liberlocorumcommunium.blogspot.com/2020/04/know-thee-more-clearly-love-thee-more.html>.

⁴ Bocking’s account of Richard’s deathbed : “So he embraced the image of the Crucified, which he had asked to be brought to him . . . He devoutly kissed and tenderly caressed the wounds as if he had just seen them newly inflicted on His Saviour’s dying Body and cried out . . . ,” and then follows his prayer. Jones, *Saint Richard*, 213. To see in the dying Christ the very heart of God is the theme of Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s profound meditation, *Heart of the World* (Ignatius Press, 1979).

sequence appears. Preparing for the contemplation on the incarnation of Christ, Ignatius directs the exercitant in the third prelude, “to ask for what I desire. Here it will be to ask for an intimate knowledge of Our Lord, who has become man for me, that I may love Him more and follow Him more closely.”⁵ The grace desired in the whole second week of the *Exercises* is the same as in the prayer of Richard of Chichester. There is, again, an expansive desire for more (*magis* is Ignatius’s word). *More* clearly, *more* dearly, *more* nearly. As Francis de Sales would teach ordinary lay people a little later in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609), contemplation increases love, and love makes keeping the commandments easy. We may take this as a general principle. The more that I lovingly contemplate my wife Carolyn, the more likely it is that I will do the dishes.

Francis de Sales on Contemplation and Virtue

Writing in the early seventeenth century, Francis set out a detailed program of contemplative practices, very much in the spirit of Ignatius, that were meant to cultivate not just love but devotion. His book was a kind of retreat in daily life aimed to stir up devotion in his lay readers. His program allows us to observe the connections between seeing more clearly, loving more dearly, and following more nearly.

He wants his reader to live a devout life. What is devotion? We recognize even today that the word denotes a particular intensity. We say, “He was a very *devoted* husband,” or “She was an artist *devoted* to her craft,” or, “This project will require the *devotion* of a great deal of time and money.” For Francis, devotion is “true love of God,” for it is love that has become intensified through contemplation. “Charity is spiritual fire and when it bursts into flames, it is

⁵ *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Loyola University Press, 1951), 49 (§104), emphasis added.

called devotion.” Such a devotion fosters virtue for it “not only makes us do good but also to do this carefully, frequently, and promptly.”⁶ When you are punch drunk in love, you quite naturally want to serve the beloved quickly and diligently, and as often as you have opportunity.

Contemplation pours gasoline on the fire of love.

Francis links contemplative practice and virtue: “Good people who have not as yet attained to devotion fly toward God by their good works but do so infrequently, slowly, and awkwardly.” It is like watching ostriches or chickens trying to fly. On the other hand, “Devout souls ascend to him more frequently, promptly, and with lofty flights.”⁷ This is more like watching swallows or eagles soaring aloft. Then he changes up the metaphor:

A man just recovered from illness walks only as far as he must and then slowly and with difficulty; so also a sinner just healed of his iniquity walks as far as God commands him, but he walks slowly and with difficulty until such time as he has attained to devotion.

Then like a man in sound health he not only walks but runs and leaps forward “on the way of God’s commandments.”⁸

More than this, such a man runs in the paths of “counsels and inspirations.” He is sensitive to the least nudge or intuition from God. The implication for virtuous living in everyday life are profound. Francis continues:

⁶ Francis De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John K. Ryan (Image, 1972), 40-41.

⁷ Francis, *Introduction*, 40.

⁸ Francis, *Introduction*, 41.

Every vocation becomes more agreeable when united with devotion. Care of one's family is rendered more peaceable, love of husband and wife more sincere, service of one's prince more faithful, and every type of employment more pleasant and agreeable.⁹

He then lays out his program of meditations that will be the means not only to be purged from sin but also from the affection for sin. (This is like an inverse of the relationship between charity and devotion.)

Imagine not only refraining from sin but rooting out even the desire to sin. Francis thinks this is possible. "To attain such a conviction and contrition you must faithfully practice the following meditations," he advises. "By the help of God's grace they will be very helpful in rooting out of your heart both sin and the chief affections for it."¹⁰ He then gives detailed directions for the meditations themselves. This is where there is something to do that requires concentration and effort. Unlike the *Spiritual Exercises*, which focus upon Gospel texts for the most part, these meditations are mostly given to theological mysteries, such as our creation, the end for which we were created, or the traditional four last things: death, judgment, heaven, hell. He advises doing one meditation each morning and then pondering it throughout the rest of the day. At the conclusion, when the meditations are complete, the reader is led to make a declaration of his or her resolution to serve God: "I desire, purpose, determine, and irrevocably resolve to serve and love him now and forever."¹¹ It ends, that is, with *follow him more nearly*.

The balance of the book is a masterpiece of parenesis or what was then called "casuistry"—counsel in cultivating virtue and avoiding vice in particular "cases" that test our

⁹ Francis, *Introduction*, 44.

¹⁰ Francis, *Introduction*, 52.

¹¹ Francis, *Introduction*, 73.

character. (Both “case” and “casuistry” derive from the same Latin word *casus*.) Having cultivated devotion through contemplative practice in the first two parts of the book, these later parts make the link between such charity and virtue explicit. He begins Part 3, saying, in one of his quaint images, “The king of the bees never goes out into the fields without being surrounded by his little subjects. In like manner, charity never enters a heart without lodging both itself and its train of all the other virtues which it exercises and disciplines as a captain does his soldiers.”¹² In my edition, this introduces about 150 pages of wise practical counsel on virtuous living. When each year I read this book with my students, I will ask for a show of hands for how many would like to have Francis for a spiritual director. Inevitably, all hands go up.

As one short example of his casuistry, which bears on the subject of contemplation in daily life, Francis offers advice about how watch over our affairs carefully but without undue solicitude or anxiety.

Imitate little children who with one hand hold fast to their father while with the other they gather strawberries or blackberries from the hedges. So too if you gather and handle the goods of this world with one hand, you must always hold fast with the other to your heavenly Father’s hand and turn toward him from time to time to see if your actions or occupations are pleasing to him. Above all things, take heed that you never leave his hand and his protection, thinking that thus you can gather more or gain some advantage. He changes the metaphor as he continues, “Look from time to time at God, like mariners who arrive at the port they are bound for look at the sky above them rather than down on the sea on

¹² Francis, *Introduction*, 121.

which they sail. Thus God will work with you, in you, and for you, and after your labor consolation will follow.”¹³

Contemplation Disposes Us to the Love of God

In the spirit of Richard of Chichester, Ignatius, and Francis, I would like to argue in this paper that the loving contemplation of Jesus Christ is central to Christian growth in virtue. Even more than this, it is paradigmatic of the relationship between spiritual practices and virtue formation.

For love and discipline are not opposites. On the contrary, a great love requires a great fidelity. It is in contemplative practice that we can see most clearly that *all* spiritual practices are simply means of being disposed to the love of God, just so many ways to stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, so many ways to let more light in, so many paths down which to come to Jesus Christ. He is the manifest love of the Father. And by the gift of his Holy Spirit, he has promised to come to us. “I will not leave you orphans,” he promised, “I will come to you” (John 14: 18). It is in, by, and through Jesus Christ that the believer is formed after his likeness. He is both the agent and form of godliness. Apart from the loving contemplation of Jesus Christ, any effort toward virtue formation is just so much Stoicism or behaviour modification.

This is, in essence, what Michel Foucault thought the Christian ascetical tradition of virtue formation was. He saw early Christian spirituality as a vector of ancient forms of self-care. Spiritual practices were reduced, in his famous phrase, to “technologies of the self.” These technologies “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection,

¹³ Francis, *Introduction*, 153.

or immortality.”¹⁴ Foucault’s characteristic elision of knowledge and power is here in evidence. The relational knowledge of contemplation that opens the believer to the grace of Christ becomes simply the operation of power by the autonomous self upon the self. Although Foucault recognized that in the monastic spirituality of the fourth and fifth centuries contemplation was considered the supreme good, this only meant for him an intensification of self-scrutiny, “the obligation of the monk to turn his thoughts continuously to that point which is God and to make sure that his heart is pure enough to see God.”¹⁵ Early Christian spiritual practices were therefore a technology of the self, a form of fastidious self-care, centred on the self.

I do not think this is correct. In John Cassian’s *Conferences*, Abba Isaac says almost the opposite when he declares, “Prayer is not perfect when the monk is conscious of himself and of that he is actually praying.”¹⁶ Contemplation ought to orient us *away* from our preoccupation with ourselves we move toward a disinterested, loving attention to Jesus Christ. Foucault seems not to recognize that there is someone on the other end of the line. In Christian contemplation we are taking hold of wiring with the electricity still on and the wires hot. Hans Urs von Balthasar reminds us that one of the reasons we must keep listening to God is that he is not an impersonal force. He is an utterly free person, and therefore he might say something today that he did not

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, First Edition, ed. Luther H. Martin et al. (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18. The essay from which this book takes its title is published online: Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self: Lectures at University of Vermont in October 1982,” Michel Foucault Info., accessed January 2, 2025, <https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.technologiesOfSelf.en/>.

¹⁵ Foucault, “Technologies,” 45.

¹⁶ John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Paulist Press, 1997), 120.

say yesterday.¹⁷ If God is real, then this is a two-way communication, not merely an operation of the self upon the self.

However, I think that Foucault can alert us to the fact that Christian spiritual practices are always in danger of being reduced to technologies of the autonomous self. Perhaps this is especially true in our technological age. The danger is less a Hellenistic “alone to the alone” than it is to depend on the resourcefulness of the modern, enclosed self. There is something to resist here. The loving contemplation of Jesus Christ is always fruitful, but it is never merely instrumental. It is the end (*frui*), not the means (*uti*) of the Christian life. Instrumental actions produce single outcomes; love produces a harvest that is a hundredfold. As Francis said, love brings all the virtues in its train when it lodges in the heart. “Make room,” say the virtues: “We’re all coming to stay.”

The figure who most decisively broke with any hint of spirituality as “technologies of the self” was Martin Luther. When he finally broke free of thinking of holiness as a self-centred project, it was liberating spiritually and ethically. His paradoxical thesis in *Freedom of a Christian* (1520) captures this. The inner freedom of his breakthrough to justification meant “a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none,” but this being so, one could look at others without seeing them only as instrumental to one’s spiritual ascent. One was free to love one’s neighbour with a radical freedom from self-regard, to take on willingly a subjection to them and their good: “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” I am inclined to say that Luther introduces a contemplative view of the neighbour. One is able to see

¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (Ignatius, 1986), 21. Balthasar continues, reflecting on what it means to respond to the word of God in its freedom: “It is not only a matter of what is called ‘the moral life’ or of living according to ‘Christian precepts’: what is essential is that incandescent centre which is the very heart and source of morality, and without which it would very swiftly grow cold and become twisted into pharisaism” (ibid., 22).

the neighbour for the first time. Thus, “By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbour.”¹⁸

Jonathan Edwards on True Virtue

We may take a short excursus here to raise the question of the difference between natural virtue as it appears in human beings generally and the virtue formation that occurs in Christians. In the second last chapter of *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis emphasized that Christians are not better than non-Christians, but hopefully any given Christian is a better person than he or she was before. However, the whole program is fundamentally different for the Christian. “For mere improvement is not redemption, though redemption always improves people even here and now and will, in the end, improve them to a degree we cannot yet imagine. God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature.”¹⁹

Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) tackled this same question in the context of British moral philosophy in the eighteenth century when for more than a generation the question had been on the table: “Can you be good without God?” He began to reckon with this question in his sermons, and particularly his early sermon, about 1729, on Romans 7:14 (“For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin”).²⁰ Edwards argues in this sermon that people in themselves have nothing of any *spiritual* goodness, but merely a *natural* goodness related to

¹⁸ Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Fortress Press, 1989), 596, 623.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, from the chapter, “Nice People or New Men,” in *Mere Christianity* (Collins, 1952), 175, 180.

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, “154. Sermon on Rom. 7:14 [c. 1729],” in *Sermons, Series II, 1729–1731, Works of Jonathan Edwards Online* (New Haven, Conn., 1957–), vol. 45.

reason and conscience. The outward actions of the natural and the spiritual person might be the same, but the deepest principles from which those actions flow are fundamentally different. Natural goodness proceeds from a principle of self-love, but spiritual goodness from the love of God. There is still “not one principle of true virtue” in merely natural goodness. We can emphasize that word *true*. It recalls the way Francis wrote about devotion as the *true* love of God.

True virtue, rooted in the love of God, requires a supernatural principle, Edwards argued. Original sin led to the loss of this supernatural, animating principle, leaving only a natural principle in operation. Humans were left to whatever limited goodness could be realized in the absence of any abiding love for God. The supernatural principle of original righteousness had consisted in “no other than the indwelling of God’s Spirit in his heart and the immediate influence of the Spirit.” The natural was meant to be governed by a superior principle, but when God in judgment took away his Holy Spirit from human beings, their spiritual principles ceased, and what was natural became disordered, inadequate to attain its proper end. Natural virtue was real, but it did not have the resources to go deep enough, broad enough, or high enough for “true” virtue. Edwards concludes with a pointed exhortation: “Learn how great a mercy Conversion,” for “in Conversion this spiritual Principle begins again to be Restored.”²¹

Edwards thus gives one of his earliest accounts of natural virtue and true virtue, one that he would continue to develop to the end of his life, especially in his posthumously published treatise, *On the Nature of True Virtue*.²² There is such a thing for him as natural goodness, but it

²¹ Edwards, “154. Sermon.”

²² This was published by Samuel Hopkins as part of the work, *Two Dissertations: I. Concerning the End for Which God Created the World. II. On the Nature of True Virtue* (Boston, 1765). The critical edition is *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, Conn., 1957–), vol. 8.

is of a vastly different kind from the sort of goodness in human beings that derives from the indwelling Holy Spirit. Between these two states was a chasm crossed only by the experience of evangelical conversion. “Seeing Conversion is so Great a mere blessing, Let all Natural men be exhorted Earnestly to seek it.”²³ Natural goodness was rational, oriented toward “outward” duties. Spiritual goodness demanded a deeper concurrence with God’s law, seated in the will. It required, above all, love.

To *love him more dearly* required for Edwards a new inward principle. He develops this in similar way in his *Treatise on the Religious Affections* (1746). Thus, the first sign for Edwards that affections are truly spiritual and gracious is that they “arise from those influences and operations on the heart, which are *spiritual, supernatural* and divine,” which for Edwards means that they derive from the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. From the Spirit’s arises a new spiritual sense (*see him more clearly*) and a new disposition of the heart (*love him more dearly*), and hence the affections as “more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul” and the spring of man’s actions and the highest motive determining the will.²⁴

Spirituality here, as always in Edwards, means the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is careful to guard against the notion of morality as heteronomous in any sense, alienated from God’s own being and goodness, since it is only by participating in God’s goodness through his own indwelling presence that one will share in that goodness. Hence the “reason why the saints and their virtues are called spiritual (which is the principal thing), is that the Spirit of God

²³ When he reflected on these same themes in his “Miscellanies,” Edwards’s conclusion was the same: “Conversion is a work that is done at once, and not gradually.” For those thus converted, “there is something immediately put into their hearts . . . that is new, that there was nothing of there before, that makes them so immediately act in a manner so altogether new, and so alien from what they were about before.” Edwards, “Miscellanies,” no. 673, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, Conn., 1957–), 18: 230–31; cf. no. 683, p. 245.

²⁴ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, vol. 2, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, Conn., 1957–), 96, 206.

dwelling as a vital principle in their souls, there produces those effects wherein he exerts and communicates himself in his own proper nature.”²⁵ He proceeds to enumerate the signs of truly gracious affections in an arc from the inward to the outward, and from above to below, as it were. The last, twelfth sign of the authenticity of religious affections is therefore that “gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice.”²⁶ For Edwards too, then, knowledge and love issue in the discipleship that *follows him more nearly*.

In a very different context in Counter-Reformation Spain, John of the Cross, writing about the dark night of the spirit, made a similar point to Edwards. John understood the spirit as constituted by memory, reason, and will. But as for Edwards natural virtue can’t quite attain to true virtue without a new spiritual principle, so also for John our finite and sinful faculties cannot attain God unaided. In a sense, the faculty of reason has to be eclipsed and go dark to allow faith to be supernaturally infused in the understanding by the Spirit; the memory has to come to a point where it goes dark to allow the Holy Spirit supernaturally to infuse hope in the imagination; and the will has to come to the end of itself and go dark to allow love to be infused supernaturally in the affections.²⁷ These theological virtues of faith, hope, and love require something more than a neo-Aristotelian framework of practices that become habits that become character.

²⁵ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 201. Cf. William J. Danaher Jr., *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Westminster John Knox, 2004), 117–56.

²⁶ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 419.

²⁷ John of the Cross, *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh (Paulist Press, 1987), 199.

Wesley on the Means of Grace

The evangelical concern in Jonathan Edwards that virtue formation in the Christian is first and foremost a work of the indwelling Holy Spirit, like the concern in C. S. Lewis that Christian formation is not just about improvement but about becoming a new creature, and like the concern of John of the Cross with infused virtue—this finds its correlate in an understanding of spiritual practices that honours the agency of the Spirit. The salutary term of art that was used widely by the early evangelicals for spiritual practices was “means of grace” or in early modern scholastic writers, such as Francis Turretin (1623–1687), *media gratiae*.

In English usage the phrase had its origin in the anxiety of the Reformers and Puritans to find the right way to affirm both divine and human agency in our salvation without falling into Pelagianism on the one side or Antinomianism on the other. The English puritan John Downname (1571-1652) published a widely read pastoral treatise, *The Christian Warfare*, in 1604, and the subtitle promised a full discussion of the “severall causes and meanes of our salvation.” In his exposition of what it is to put on the whole armour of God in Ephesians 6, he used the language of “means” from beginning to end of his 676 pages of exhortation. For example, “*Prayer is the meanes of obtaining Gods assistance, and the rest of the spirituall armour.*”²⁸ His very Puritan concern was to speak about practices in a way that avoided both presumption and despair. Means were available to the Christian but were effectual only by the working of God’s grace. William Prynne (1600-1669) sought likewise to defend the Calvinist view of God’s grace in his *Anti-Arminianisme* tract in 1630, and he asks the reader to “survey all the internal and external means of grace” and to see them as simply metonyms, “expressions of God’s eternal love to man.”²⁹

²⁸ John Downname, *The Christian Warfare* (1604), 63.

²⁹ William Prynne, *Anti-Arminianisme*. (1630), 126.

By the mid-seventeenth century, this way of speaking of spiritual practices was incorporated into the Westminster standards. The answer to question 88 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is this:

The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially the Word, Sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.³⁰

One of the Westminster divines was Edward Reynolds (1599–1676). A moderate Puritan, he would conform after the Restoration in 1660 and was made bishop of Norwich. The revised *Book of Common Prayer* of 1662 contains a prayer attributed to him, the Prayer of General Thanksgiving. It was adapted from a prayer used by Queen Elizabeth I. It is a profound prayer that Anglicans have been using now for over 350 years in public and private worship, and it placed the phrase “means of grace” into the mouths of the faithful. At the centre of the prayer is thanksgiving for “the means of grace, and the hope of glory.”³¹ *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. (As we pray, so we believe.)

³⁰ Westminster Assembly (1643-1652), *The Grounds and Principles of Religion, Contained in a Shorter* (1646), 23.

³¹ See further, Charles Hefling and Cynthia L. Shattuck, *The Oxford Guide to The Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 70-71. The full prayer (with the phrase underlined) runs like this:

ALMIGHTY God, Father of all mercies, We thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks For all thy goodness and loving-kindness To us and to all men; We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; But above all for thine inestimable love In the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; For the means of grace, And for the hope of glory. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, That our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, And that we show forth thy praise, Not only with our lips, but in our lives; By giving up ourselves to thy service, And by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, To whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen

In the following century, John Wesley (1703-91) grew up praying this prayer regularly. But his evangelical conversion in 1738 involved a new appreciation for the interior work of the Holy Spirit in the quest for holiness. He had been an earnest young man, fastidious in his devotion to an extreme. If anyone was devoted to spiritual disciplines, it was Wesley between about 1725 and 1738. His diary, recording what he did every hour of the day, displays this Anglican ascetical devotion. The so-called Holy Club at Oxford gathered for prayer, study of the Greek New Testament, self-examination and mutual accountability, and to spur one another on to austere exercises of self-denial, fasting, frequent communion, and acts of charity. Up to this time, Wesley was working on the assumption that his hope of salvation was placed in his sincerity. In the words of his admired Thomas à Kempis, he was seeking to “do the best he could” (*fac quod in te est*), allowing God to assist or fulfil his good will. Like many other evangelicals of his generation, though, he was brought to a kind of breaking point. Encountering the Moravian Brethren in 1736 enroute to Georgia, he was taken aback by their simple faith and direct assurance. August Spangenberg asked him point blank in Georgia, “Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?” Wesley hummed and hawed and gave the best answer he could, but recorded in his journal, “I fear they were vain words.”³² For all his earnest Christian practice, this exposed his inner poverty and put him on the path that would climax in his Aldersgate conversion in 1738 when he felt his heart strangely warmed. He saw that there was a change God could work in the heart through faith, and he wanted it.

In his journey to a more personal faith in Christ, his contact with the Moravian Brethren in Georgia and London was catalytic. However, a controversy soon arose in London over the

³² John Wesley, February 7, 1736, *Journals and Diaries I (1735-1738)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 18 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Clarendon Press and Abingdon Press, 1976–), 146.

question of “stillness.” Questions of divine and human agency in salvation had surfaced in the society meetings of Methodists and Moravians at Fetter Lane in London. The Moravian Philipp Heinrich Molther (1714-80) was counselling anxious souls that they should leave off all anxious striving, attending sermons, praying, taking the sacrament, and all other practices, and simply wait for God. The question was how far was one to remain still. The debate about “stillness” is writ large in many of the lay narratives in both the Moravian and Methodist archives. It also raised in an acute form the question of how to understand the relationship between spiritual practices and virtue formation.

Here are a few examples from manuscript letters written to Charles Wesley that demonstrate how fraught this issue became for ordinary lay people. Elizabeth Hinsome stayed away from church and sacrament until her mother asked her to go, and then she was too ashamed not to. Taverner Wallis heard someone “speak ag[ains]t the means” and claimed this led him “back into the World, and into Sin.” Thomas Cooper claimed he was challenged by the “German bretheren” to go to bed without prayer and to cease praying altogether for a fortnight to prove that he was not trusting in his own works. Many of his acquaintances, he said, left off prayer and going to the sacrament and were now almost as bad as if they had never been awakened. Samuel Webb, however, went to Fetter Lane twice a week and “heard them Preach their Still Doctrine,” but for his part he did not think they were saying anything more than that you ought not to trust that routine religious practices could in any way merit salvation.³³ From Wesley’s point of view the Moravians introduced a dangerously quietist theology, teaching members of the society that

³³ William Barber [1741], Elizabeth Hinsome (25 May 1740), Taverner Wallis (24 Nov. 1741), Thomas Cooper [1741], Samuel Webb (20 Nov. 1741), ms. letters to Charles Wesley, Early Methodist Volume, John Rylands Library, Manchester.

“till they had true faith, they ought to be *still*, that is (as they explained themselves) ‘to abstain from the ‘means of grace,’ as they are called.” There were “no other means than Christ.”³⁴

When Wesley found himself embroiled in another controversy with George Whitefield and the Calvinists, the issues were similar. Wesley worried that predestination cut the nerve of moral endeavour and bound men and women to a chain of fatalism. There was a danger that sinners might feel too far below the law to use the means of grace before conversion, and that they might feel themselves too far above the law after conversion to use them. In this context, Wesley, and other evangelicals worked out their understanding of Christian practice as “waiting upon God in the means of grace.”³⁵

Indeed, Charles Wesley published small pamphlet in 1740 with a hymn on “The Means of Grace” in twenty-three stanzas of common metre.³⁶ It was only two years since Charles’s own conversion on Pentecost Sunday, 1738. He had prayed that day for more of the Holy Spirit and had a breakthrough like his brother. He wrote in his journal, “I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ.”³⁷ Writing about the means of grace now in 1740, he remembered what it was like before. He begins with a confession, acknowledging that he had once himself been legalistic about practices:

1 Long have I seemed to serve thee, Lord,

³⁴ *Works of John Wesley*, 19: 120.

³⁵ Calvinist and Wesleyan evangelicals were largely agreed here. The redoubtable Calvinist William Romaine (1714-95) wrote in the preface to his *Life of Faith* (1764), “We do not use the means to set the Lord of all means aside. No. We use them that we may find him in them. It is his presence, which makes the use of them effectual” (p. 7).

³⁶ There are not extant copies of Charles Wesley, *The Means of Grace* (1740), nor of the second edition (1742) but the hymn was reprinted in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1740), 35–39. This is the text cited below.

³⁷ *Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley*, 2 vols., ed. Thomas Jackson (1849), 1: 129.

With unavailing pain;
Fasted, and prayed, and read thy word,
And heard it preached, in vain.

2 Oft did I with th' assembly join,
 And near thine altar drew;
A form of godliness was mine,
 The pow'r I never knew.

3 To please thee thus (at last I see)
 In vain I hoped, and strove:
For what are outward things to thee,
 Unless they spring from love?

The spiritual principle, about which Jonathan Edwards wrote, was missing. In the fifth stanza, he introduces his error about the means of grace: "But I of *means* have made my boast, / Of *means* an idol made." In terms we used above, we might say that he was thinking of his spiritual disciplines as "technologies of the self." What was necessary was a more contemplative attitude, looking in humility to Jesus Christ for the grace necessary to grow in holiness:

7 Where am I now, or what my hope?
 What can my weakness do? JESU!
To thee my soul looks up,
 'Tis thou must make it new.

But he realizes that this does *not* mean he is to sit idly by like the Moravian leaders in London were counselling others to do. He was to wait for the grace of Christ *in the means* of his

appointing. So he will fast and pray, read Scripture, attend church, receive the sacrament, and so on (stanzas 10-13).

14 Here, *in thine own appointed ways*,

I wait to learn thy will:

Silent I stand before thy face,

And hear thee say, “*Be still!*”

This was the proper sort of stillness: to wait “in thine own appointed ways.” But one looked through these practices, as it were, like through a window, to Christ himself who alone can mediate grace to needy souls. One did not trust in practices or disciplines but in Christ.

20 I trust in him who stands between

The Father’s wrath and me:

JESU! Thou great eternal mean,

I look for all from thee.

We might say that spiritual practices were the instruments of grace but Jesus Christ was the agent. It was the grace of Jesus Christ as Mediator that one looked for rather than for a self-enclosed virtue.

John Wesley continued to develop “the means of grace” as framework for practice as Methodism grew. In 1746 he was ready to publish a sermon on the subject. His definition was exact: “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”³⁸ He said he liked this language since it had generally been used in the Church and in the Prayer Book. The chief means, according to Wesley were prayer (public

³⁸ John Wesley, *The Means of Grace. A Sermon on Malachi iii. 7* (1768), 6.

and private), Scripture (reading, hearing, and meditating), and the Lord's supper. These were not optional for the Christian; they were ordained in Scripture. Sometimes he would include fasting in this list also. Yet all these practices were of value only in "subservience to the end of religion" toward the "conducting" of the knowledge and love of God. Moreover, they were effective only by the power and working of God's Spirit, not on their own. And the means could never atone for sin. It remained by grace alone that one was saved.³⁹

Given that one is saved by grace, and that one is called upon to believe, there was a necessary waiting upon God "But how am I to wait?" asks Wesley "In the means of Grace, or out of them? Am I to wait for the grace of God . . . by using these means, or by laying them aside?" He wanted to be absolute clear to his followers. He answers: "All who desire the grace of God, are to wait for it, in the means which he hath ordained; in using, not in laying them aside."⁴⁰ In Dallas Willard's terms, grace would come without earning, but not without effort.⁴¹

This way of understanding practice genuinely allowed a contemplative attitude to frame all the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life: "*In using all Means,*" Wesley counsels his hearers, "seek God alone." "In and through every Outward Thing, look singly to the *Power* of his Spirit, and the *Merits* of his Son. . . . Nothing short of God can satisfy your soul. Therefore eye him, in all, through all and above all."⁴² To "eye him," as he says, is to seek to *see him more clearly* day by day. Contemplation is joined to practice.

³⁹ Wesley, *Means of Grace*, 6-7.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Means of Grace*, 9.

⁴¹ His memorable phrase was "Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort." Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (HarperOne, 2006), 34.

⁴² Wesley, *Means of Grace*, 22.

Wesley would continue to develop this framework for practice, and in the Minutes of his annual conferences with his lay preachers he distinguished between the ordained means of grace and the prudential means of grace.⁴³ If Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and the sacraments were clearly instituted for all Christians as “the ordinary channels which convey the grace of God to the souls of men,” then other practices, such as for example class meetings (small groups), though standing without divine command in Scripture, could be recognized as efficacious in a similar way for the cultivation of holiness and growth in grace.⁴⁴ In this way, the heuristic “means of grace” was extended to include all of what we might think of as spiritual practices.⁴⁵ This was the way to understand practice. Not early modern self-improvement, not “technologies of the self,” but ways of opening ourselves to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have a black Labrador retriever at home named Gus. Yes, his name is short for Augustine. (Before he was neutered, we could easily imagine him praying, “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.”) Somehow, Gus has learned that if he goes and sits by the patio door, he might get let out to do his business or explore the outside world. And because his food dish is near the door, he has also associated food with the same spot, so he will often go sit by the door when he is hungry or hopeful for a meal or wants to go out. Or he will just sit there, hoping something good will happen. We’ve taken to calling this his glory spot. There is an old Pentecostal song, “I’m under the spout where the glory comes out. Praise the Lord, I’m under the

⁴³ John Wesley, ‘Large’ Minutes, 1780-89, §48, in *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of the Conference*, ed. Henry Rack, vol. 10 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Abingdon Press, 1976–), 923.

⁴⁴ Wesley, *Means of Grace*, 6. Cf.

⁴⁵ See also Wesley’s sermon no. 98, “On Visiting the Sick,” in Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, Reprinted from the 3rd edition of 1872, 14 vols. (Baker, 1978), 117.

spout.” We imagine Gus singing this song. He goes to that spot so he can be under the spout where the glory comes out.

Perhaps this is the way we should think of Christian practices. Here are time-honoured sites, places to go, where we might expect good things to happen. These are the thin places associated with grace and an increase of holiness.

The Methodist lay preacher John Furz wrote a narrative of his spiritual life and ministry. In the course of this, he tells of one woman who lived ten miles from Manchester. A neighbour had been to the Methodist meeting and reported back, “We have been there, and we have found the Lord.” This woman was determined to go and “find the Lord” herself, but she had no shoes. Her neighbour loaned her hers, so she went to look for the Methodists. When she came to Manchester, she asked a man in the market where people go to find the Lord. She was directed to the preaching house. On arrival, she asked again, “Is this the place where people find the Lord?” She was taken to sit in the middle of the room and told to watch the preacher closely. “About the middle of the sermon [she] cried out, ‘Glory be to God, I have found the Lord!’ which she repeated over and over, being filled with joy unspeakable.”⁴⁶ There are places we go to find the Lord, and there we look for his grace.

Contemplation and the Cultivation of Particular Virtues

The eighteenth-century evangelical clergyman John Newton (1725-1807) wrote thousands of letters of spiritual counsel. One set of three letters that I have especially appreciated was written to his friend, the businessman John Thornton (1720-90). Thornton asked Newton how grace typically progressed in the life of a believer over time. Newton’s response was a splendid

⁴⁶ John Telford (ed.), *Wesley's Veterans*, 7 vols. (1912–14), 5: 220-21.

specimen of evangelical spiritual theology. Here I would like to focus on his last letter which set out to describe the mature state of a believer.⁴⁷ When the acorn has become the oak tree, what is it like? Newton said there was no better word to describe this state than “contemplation.”

Properly speaking the person in this mature stage of the Christian life has no greater stock or warehouse of grace than one who is just beginning in the Christian life. “He is in the same state of absolute dependence, as incapable of performing spiritual acts, or of resisting temptations, by his own power, as he was at the first day of his setting out. Yet, in a sense, he is much stronger, because he has a more feeling and constant sense of his own weakness.” There is a paradox here. Maturity involves becoming more aware of weakness. The psychology of the saint is not heroic. It is chastened. “Having found again and again the vanity of all other helps, he is now taught to go to the Lord at once for ‘grace to help in every time of need.’”⁴⁸

The superiority of his condition lies in this: “By the Lord’s blessing on the use of means, such as prayer, reading, and hearing of the word, and by a sanctified improvement of what he has seen of the Lord, and of his own heart, in the course of his experience, he has attained clearer, deeper, and more comprehensive views of the mystery of redeeming love.” He has come to *see thee more clearly*. And this is why Newton describes the mature believer as in a state characterized above all by contemplation. “His great business is to behold the glory of God in Christ; and by beholding, he is changed . . . His contemplations are not barren speculations, but have a real influence and enable him to exemplify the Christian character to more advantage, and with more consistency.” Contemplation, for Newton, leads to virtue.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ I have reprinted these letters in John Newton, *The Life and Spirituality of John Newton*, ed. Hindmarsh (Regent College Publishing, 1998), 95-111.

⁴⁸ Newton, *Life and Spirituality*, 106.

⁴⁹ Newton, *Life and Spirituality*, 107. True contemplation of Jesus Christ is thus always morally transforming. Indeed, as Balthasar says, “If we fail to let the word’s sharp edge have its effect on us, we shall always

And indeed it leads to *specific* virtues that he enumerates. First, it leads to humility. The knowledge of Christ and of his own heart have progressed together, and as each has come into more clear focus, the divergence is profound and humbling. Compared to earlier stages, he knows more now. “As he knows most of himself, so he has seen most of the Lord. The apprehension of infinite majesty combined with infinite love, makes him shrink into the dust.”⁵⁰ This genuine humility in the presence of the living God produces two further virtues. There is a willingness to submit to God’s will, being content with circumstances, and suffering one’s condition with deep acceptance. One makes no claim or demands on God. And then there is a tenderness of spirit, making due allowances for the failings of others in a spirit of meekness rather than censoriousness. One of the clear signs of a lack of self-knowledge is harshness with the faults of others.

Contemplation of Jesus Christ, with proper self-knowledge, leads not only to humility with its attendant spirit of acceptance and meekness, but also, secondly, to what Newton calls “spirituality.” This word does not appear much in the eighteenth century, but here Newton means one is able to live on a different plane with something like what Ignatius called “holy indifference,” since one’s disordered attachments have been in large measure rectified. By experience, one has learned the vanity and evil of attachment to worldly things. “He sees nothing worth a serious thought but communion with God, and progress in holiness.”⁵¹

be meeting a merely imaginary Redeemer . . . It almost does not matter which word of holy scripture the contemplative chooses; the fire to which he exposes himself will not abate until it has penetrated his inmost being, provided that he yields to it and does not draw back.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (Ignatius, 1986), 224-25.

⁵⁰ Newton, *Life and Spirituality*, 106-107.

⁵¹ Newton, *Life and Spirituality*, 109.

Thirdly, contemplation reorients a person away from an anthropocentric concern to a theocentric concern. It is characteristic of a young believer to be preoccupied with his own feelings and states. “At first . . . our concern is chiefly about ourselves.” The mature believer is genuinely preoccupied with God’s glory and God’s will. “In proportion as we advance nearer to him, our judgment, aim and end, will be conformable to his, and his glory will have the highest place in our hearts.” There is an experience of union of heart and a union of loving wills with God. “He loves and adores him . . . with a more simple and direct love, in which self is in a manor forgot.”⁵² *Love thee more dearly.*

If Newton is right, then the contemplation of Jesus Christ, with self-knowledge, is the goal of the Christian life, and it ought to produce the particular virtues of humility, willingness to suffer, tender-heartedness, freedom from worldly attachments, and a love for God that is free of self-interest. Contemplation is not an introspective style of spirituality or something that some people are “into.” It is not niche or exotic or trippy (notwithstanding *Godspell*). And it is neither Catholic nor Reformed. Contemplation is of the essence of the Christian life. It will look different for different people. The grace of contemplation will appear in a variety of situations. The believer who has matured, says Newton, “may be rich or poor, learned or illiterate, of a lively natural spirit, or of a more slow and phlegmatical constitution.”⁵³ Life might be comparatively hard or easy. He might as easily be a lay person as a minister. But above all, he is *following more nearly* now. Contemplation is compatible with different personalities, temperaments, and conditions of life. So Newton closes with a full-page encomium to the beauty of such a soul in which the power of divine grace has been made manifest. “The sun, in his daily

⁵² Newton, *Life and Spirituality*, 109-110.

⁵³ Newton, *Life and Spirituality*, 110.

course, behold nothing so excellent and honorable upon the earth . . . He is the object and residence of divine love, the charge of angels, and ripening for everlasting glory.”⁵⁴

I agree with Newton. There is nothing more beautiful in all the earth than a soul made radiant by the presence of God and the power of his grace. Like candlelight on the faces of those we love, the contemplation of Jesus Christ beatifies the face of the one who gazes upon him. And this goes on and on: “Changed from glory into glory / Till in Heav'n we take our place, / Till we cast our crowns before thee, / Lost in wonder, love, and praise!”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Newton, *Life and Spirituality*, 111.

⁵⁵ Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” hymn § 374 in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, vol. 7 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976–), 545-47.