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Wesley's Groups: The Heart of Early Methodism

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WESLEY'S GROUPS: THE HEART OF EARLY METHODISM

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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BY
HAMISH MCMINN

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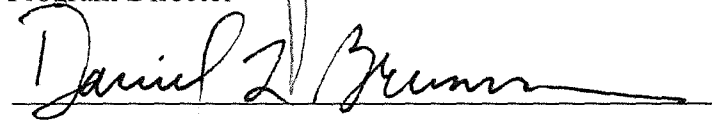
Title: WESLEY'S GROUPS: THE HEART OF EARLY METHODISM

Presented by: HAMISH MCMINN

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.



Program Director



Research Advisor

To the friends who have traveled with me

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

John Wesley (1703-1791) stood at the helm of a renewal movement that altered the course of Protestant history and equipped an army with the power of the gospel that changed people's lives. By the time of his death it had breached virtually impenetrable social barriers reaching England's urban poor and the American frontier.

What role did Wesley's group methodology play in early Methodism? How important was it to the development of Methodism? Wesley's group methodology lay at the heart of early Methodist polity and practice, giving an organizational focus that dominated early Methodism. The purpose of this study is to chart the historical precedents and the emergence of Wesley's group structures in early Methodism. This research will be a descriptive study of the development of Wesley's group methodology to investigate its role in the development of early Methodism. Henderson asserts that the formative period of Wesley's methodology had reached its conclusion by 1743 and from that point onwards this methodology was implemented with relatively few changes until his death.¹ This study will focus on this formative period.

Wesley developed a group strategy that preserved paradoxes of the gospel and harnessed the tension between them creating a powerful dynamic that made the pursuit of holiness a practical reality for people. Wesley's practical Christianity was loyal both to salvation by faith alone, and to the fruit it bore through faith working by love. Wesley heard the call of the gospel

¹ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meetings: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee: Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 72.

and he knew that it demanded a human response. He discovered that his responses were futile, and reached a point of despair in 1738 when he cried out “Lord, help thou my unbelief!”² Soon after, Wesley had an encounter with faith and it transformed him—he tasted the “power of faith” and he went to work. Wesley’s method grew at the confluence of grace and human response—it made people available to God, and it gave Christ entrance. Wesley’s methodology harnessed the power of faith, putting it to work through love and unleashing a movement that would touch the lives of millions of people. Wesley’s work was with people and the forum he used were groups he created and directed. Almost all of the requirements for Christian growth found their answer in the context of community expressed in custom-made groups. Wesley’s group methodology was not just a part of early Methodism—it was *early Methodism*.

History has much to teach us about our failings and Wesley succeeded in an area of church life where few have followed. He developed a method of discipleship which transformed eighteenth century England, and far beyond. Wesley broke new ground, which the church struggled to maintain after his death. If we can discover what made his method so effective and contextualize it for the twenty-first century, then we may be able to remobilize the church on an even greater scale than Wesley. Even if that is unrealistic we are still stewards of Wesley’s legacy and we must put it to the best use we can.

² John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1854, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols., CD-ROM edition (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 1994), 1:91 Journal, 23 April 1738.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

Some claim Wesley never had an original idea.¹ True or not, Wesley found much to draw upon and was profoundly influenced by his experience and his own interpretation of tradition. Original or not, Wesley built his work from the materials, people, and ideas he was given. The purpose of this chapter is to examine some of the precedents Wesley drew upon in developing his method. At the time John Wesley was born (1703), England and her church were recovering from one of their worst periods of history—largely paid for by innocent blood and tears. Before turning to Wesley’s life we must sketch out its religious backdrop.

The English Reformation

Under Henry VIII, England broke from the Roman Church and rejected the authority of the Pope, putting ecclesiastical authority into the hands of the King and parliament. The Act of Supremacy (1534) created the state church of England. Unlike the Continental reformers, the English rejection of the Church of Rome owed more to political concerns than to theological differences. To begin, the Anglican Church did not closely follow the theology of the Continental reformers except in its hostility to the Pope, but later their influence became apparent in the Revised Book of Common Prayer (1552) and the Forty-Two Articles, which took the Calvinistic position on supralapsarian predestination.² These were overturned when Mary

¹ Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley: & Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 1980), 143.

² Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 6.

took the throne (1553) and returned England to Roman Catholicism, but her reign was too short to establish changes that would outlive her. Mary's death (1558) brought Elizabeth to the throne and England's surviving Protestants out of exile. The Protestants, refugees of Mary's persecution, returned from Calvin's Geneva with a profound distrust of Catholicism, and strong Calvinistic theology. Elizabeth sought religious unity by adopting the *via media*, a compromise to appeal to Catholics and Protestants, by defining the Anglican Church in terms of its liturgy, rather than doctrinal standards. But the door to religious diversity had been opened and it would not be closed again. Future monarchs did not match Elizabeth's mediation and the tensions that arose would lead the English into Civil War, the disestablishment of the Church and eventually the restoration of the monarchy. Charles II steered England in the direction of Catholicism and his son, James II—James VII of Scotland—furthered this policy until forced to flee the arrival of William and Mary (1688) at parliament's invitation.

The Act of Toleration (1689) provided some freedom of worship to Protestant dissenters (nonconformists) who could not subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles, but at a price—they were unable to hold public office, vote, or graduate from University.³ This was the soil that gave birth to John Wesley in 1703.

Anglican Religious Societies

Restoration England, recovering from the extremes of politicized Puritanism, abhorred religious fanaticism⁴ and moved into a period of moral laxity, which drew concern from some clergy.⁵ Dr. Anthony Horneck, an ordained Anglican minister, started Anglican Religious

³ *Ibid.* 16.

⁴ Daniel L. Brunner, *Halle Pietists in England : Anthony William Boehm and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 30.

⁵ David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985; reprint, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 68.

Societies in 1678 to promote “real holiness of heart and life.”⁶ Open to laity under the guidance of an ordained minister, their combination of moralism and devotion promoted piety by encouraging prayer, scripture study, and morality.⁷ Meetings were structured with a liturgy followed by “discourse” on a chosen subject, usually with an emphasis on personal piety, such as repentance, self-examination, etc.⁸ Woodward’s *Account of the Rise and Progress of the Religious Societies* lists forty duties of Christian life that were subjects for weekly examination and discussion. Members would be invited to respond to questions from the Director.

What constitutes the nature of this duty? What Directions do you propose in order to make the practice of it more sure and easy? What discouragements do any of you find in the practice of it? What motives may encourage the practice of this duty, and our perseverance in it?⁹

Concern for the poor was to improve their standard of living in the spiritual and moral arena, rather than the economic, and they were careful to emphasize their design to teach the duties of servants.¹⁰ Horneck’s teaching pre-figured many of the doctrines that would be taken up by Wesley.¹¹ Thoroughly evangelical, Horneck insisted on “new birth” as a preliminary to holiness and saw grace as essential, and manifested in works and actions that would not always be acceptable in the eyes of the world. He preached on perfection, urging a fervent love for

⁶ Josiah Woodward, *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Religious Societies in the City of London and of Their Endeavours for the Reformation of Manners*, Progress of the Religious Societies, 2d ed. (London: J. Downing, 1698), 120.

⁷ Heitzenrater, *People Called Methodists*, 22.

⁸ Watson, *Class Meeting*, 68.

⁹ Woodward, *Progress of the Religious Societies*, 160-61.

¹⁰ The poor were seen as contributors to growing immorality. Heitzenrater, *People Called Methodists*, 24.

¹¹ Similarities included written rules, the combination of talk, prayer, reading and psalm, and a weekly schedule. Wesley’s father had conducted such meetings at Epworth. While Horneck required that members be recommended by clergy, John Wesley established a ticket system to ensure access to members only. A probationary period and good attendance were required to remain in good standing. Wesley’s conditions for the issue of tickets are given in *Works*, 8:307 *Minutes of Several Conversations*.

Jesus, which comes from intimate acquaintance with the sufferings of Christ, appealing to people to “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”¹² Holiness was the purpose of the Societies and had a practical meaning, combining the love of God with the love of neighbor. Their members worked to care for the poor, release debtors from prison, and set up nearly one hundred charity schools in London, besides others elsewhere. The movement provided the momentum for the birth of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in 1699, and its sister organization, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) in 1701.

Religious Societies reached their height during the reign of Queen Anne (1702-1714), creating a demand for clergymen to oversee them that could not be met. Dr. Horneck’s rules insisted on clergy oversight, but this was relaxed at this time to allow laymen to conduct worship and guide spiritual conversations.¹³ Woodward responded to those who criticized the societies fearing they would be open to Popish influence and might lead to schism and dissension.

1. That they have not yet learnt, that the reading of *God’s Word*, and conferring on the practical Points of *Religion*, in order to a more holy Conversation, hath at any time, by good Men, been thought prejudicial to the *Church of Christ*. On the contrary, our best *Divines* recommend these things both from the pulpit and the press, as the best Expedients to support and adorn our *Reformed Church*, and render it worthy of that *Venerable Name*.
2. That they do not well understand what the Objector means by *refining upon our Reformed Church*. If it meant, that they pretend to reform her *Doctrine*, or quarrel with her *Government*, they utterly disclaim any such practice. But if it be meant that they desire to *refine and reform* themselves and others so as to come nearer to her

¹² John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Religious Societies* (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 20. Citing Richard Brindley Hone, *Lives of Eminent Christians*, 3 vols (London: J. W. Parker, 1839-1843), 2:287-90.

¹³ According to Henderson, Religious Societies at this time drew mainly single men, though Wesley reported eight women members of the Fetter Lane Society in October 14 1738, and by 23 July 1741 (when he left Fetter lane) this number had grown to fifty. Wesley, *Works*, 1:283 Journal, 23 August 1740, and 12:55 Letter to the Church at Hernhuth, 14 October 1738. Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 44-45. Simon notes that lay leaders sometimes resented clerical interference and exercised power as in the case of the Fetter Lane Society. Simon, *Religious Societies*, 18, 310. For an example of women’s role in Methodism in the 1760s see Paul Wesley Chilcote, “An Early Methodist Community of Women,” *Methodist History* 38, no. 4 (June 2000): 219-30.

Purity of Doctrine in their practice than some others do who shelter their *profane Lives* under the pretence of her *Holy Communion*: they own this, and must adhere to it, not doubting but they shall have the Prayers of all good People that they may so do.¹⁴

From the devotional piety of the Religious Societies emerged the Voluntary Societies.

The Society for the Reformation of Manners (1691) was concerned with assisting authorities in enforcing laws.¹⁵ The SPCK, founded in 1698 by Thomas Bray (1656-1730), chose education as its weapon of choice in the war against immorality, diagnosing ignorance of the Christian religion as a contributing cause.¹⁶ The main activities of the SPCK were the establishment of charity schools, lending libraries, and the publication and distribution of devotional writings.

In 1700 Samuel Wesley established a society at Epworth modeled on the Religious Societies in London, and ordered books and tracts from SPCK, of which he was a corresponding member.¹⁷ These groups were limited to twelve members and provision was made for further groups to be established if required, taking two members from the original group. The first group had authority over subsequent groups, in matters of policy, though this was under his control, thereby keeping all activities within the jurisdiction of Anglican polity.¹⁸ Samuel's intention for the Epworth society's charitable work is shown in his policy statement:

Their first care is to set schools for the poor, wherein children (or if need be, adult persons) may be instructed in the fundamentals of Christianity by men of known and approved piety.

¹⁴ Woodward, *Progress of the Religious Societies*, 142-43.

¹⁵ The Society's use of informers led to their unpopularity and eventual decline. Heitzenrater, *People Called Methodists*, 24.

¹⁶ Brunner, *Pietists in England*, 24.

¹⁷ J. Wickham Legg, *English Church Life from the Restoration to the Tractarian Movement* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914), 292.

¹⁸ Heitzenrater, *People Called Methodists*, 27-29.

Their second design is to procure little practical treatises from Holland, England, and Germany, etc., to translate them into the vulgar tongue, print them, and so to give or lend them to those who are less solicitous of their own and others edification. The third is to establish a correspondence with such societies in England, Germany, etc., that so they may mutually edify one another. The fourth is to take care of the sick and other poor, and to afford them spiritual as well as corporal helps.¹⁹

The early success of the Religious Societies did not last long into the eighteenth century and although the reasons are not entirely clear Simon offers three factors that contributed. The Societies had long been suspected of Roman Catholic influence and were accused of Jacobite sympathies. The second generation of clergy leading did not match the spirituality of their predecessors, and finally, the Societies were confused in the minds of many with the Society for the Reformation of Manners, further eroding respect for them.²⁰

Monr. de Renty

Gaston Jean Baptiste de Renty (1611-1649) a French Catholic nobleman, was a significant influence on Wesley's group methodology. De Renty experienced a transforming encounter with Christ and committed himself to caring for the poor and fostering holiness in others. He started several small societies in the 1640s and John's father, Samuel, was acquainted with de Renty's work, mentioning him in a letter of encouragement to Anglican Religious Societies in 1699.²¹ Wesley began reading de Renty's biography on 20 March 1736 and his

¹⁹ Taken from Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory: Reflections on Early Methodism* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 44. Heitzenrater does not indicate source.

²⁰ Simon, *Religious Societies*, 27.

²¹ Henry Bett, "A French Marquis and the Class Meeting," *Proceedings of the Wesleyan Historical Society* 18 (September 1931): 43-44.

diary mentions him several times in the following days.²² Wesley later edited an abbreviated version of de Renty's biography²³ which he would publish in 1741.

While the Anglican societies concentrated on personal growth by self-examination, de Renty emphasized growth through serving others. Anglicans viewed Christian service as a desirable outcome, while de Renty saw it as a means of growth and development of personal holiness. Wesley copied some of his practices from de Renty. For example, they both visited prisoners weekly, de Renty carried a piece of sponge for removing graffiti and Wesley followed suit.²⁴ Bett argues strongly for the influence of de Renty on Wesley's developing method, though Schmidt sounds a note of caution mentioning that Wesley's diary entries indicate that he began reading de Renty *after* forming his groups in Georgia. Schmidt notes that Wesley's groups were not drawn from "independent people, but subdivisions of the congregation. He did not create new organizations but deepen existing ones."²⁵

Pietism

In seventeenth century Germany, the Lutheran church had been unable to maintain the renewal it inherited from its founder and its theology developed along philosophical lines using the methodology of the scholastics, leading to a lifeless orthodoxy. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705), concerned at the condition of Lutheranism, experimented with *collegia pietatis*—

²² There is some confusion over dates in the region 1737-8. Bett says he left Georgia Christmas Eve 1738, but it must have been 1737, so there is confusion over the numbering of the years.

²³ Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure, *An Extract of the Life of Monsieur de Renty, a Late Nobleman of France*, 1741, ed. John Wesley, 1st American ed. (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1795).

²⁴ De Renty did not stop at defacing offensive graffiti—in its place he would write "something of Instruction." Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure, *Monsieur de Renty*, 7.

²⁵ For a comparison of Wesley's groups and de Renty's see Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (London: Epworth Press, 1962), vol. 1 191-92.

”colleges of piety,” small groups of laypeople who met for Bible study and devotion.²⁶ Five years later he published *Pia desideria*²⁷ (1675), the manifesto for Pietism, affirming the possibility of reform from scriptural promise and setting out six proposals to this end.²⁸ These included encouraging laity to study scripture and play a role in ministry, and reforming the education of ministers with an emphasis on practical training. He stressed that knowledge of the Christian faith is not enough, it must be followed up by practice and our lives must bear testimony to Christ, not just our words. Count Zinzendorf, (1700-1760) a German nobleman, owed his Pietistic upbringing to Spener and Francke. As a boy he had started “the Order of The Mustard Seed” at his school for practical devotions and General Oglethorpe had been one of its members.²⁹ When Oglethorpe was Governor of Georgia he offered land to the Moravians and a group sailed there with Wesley in 1735.³⁰

²⁶ The *collegia pietatis* began in Spener’s home from 1670 to 1682, and then moved to the church at the advice of city authorities. Spener complained that the move was detrimental, inhibiting some members from speaking openly in the more public place. Spener never saw these groups as an alternative to the church and resisted the call for separation calling it a “medicine which was more dangerous than the disease it was meant to cure.” Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 60-62.

²⁷ Spener laments the spiritual condition of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and calls for reform of the clergy; there are too many who “have never taken even the first practical principle of Christianity seriously, namely, denial of self.” The condition of the common people is inevitable; “none of the precepts of Christ is openly observed.” Love, the hallmark of Christians, shows how few qualify. Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 1650, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 45, 57.

²⁸ Brown characterizes Pietism having as strong emphasis on (1) Reformation of the Church, (2) scripture, (3) reformation of life, i.e., orthopraxy, right living, (4) experience, (5) and hope for the world. Brown, *Pietism*, 27.

²⁹ General Oglethorpe had been an acquaintance of Zinzendorf since boyhood, who gave shelter to Moravian refugees and sought permission from Oglethorpe to allow some to settle in Georgia, fearing they might be expelled from Germany. Wesley sailed in 1735 with Oglethorpe and the second batch of Moravian settlers who numbered twenty-six. Clifford W. Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist: Relationships and Influences in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Epworth Press, 1957), 27, 35-36.

³⁰ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 52.

Early Christianity

Wesley read Dr. Cave's *Primitive Christianity: or the Religion of the Antient Christians in the first age of the Gospel* influencing his efforts to recreate early Christianity in his groups. He created an abridged edition which was used for teaching children at the school he started in Kingswood.³¹ Wesley justified his formation of small groups from New Testament precedents and commented:

Upon reflection, I could not but observe, This is the very thing which was from the beginning of Christianity. In the earliest times, those whom God had sent forth "preached the gospel to every creature." And the oi akroatai, "the body of hearers," were mostly either Jews or Heathens. But as soon as any of these were so convinced of the truth, as to forsake sin and seek the gospel salvation, they immediately joined them together, took an account of their names, advised them to watch over each other, and met these katechoumenoi, "catechumens," (as they were then called,) apart from the great congregation, that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them, and for them, according to their several necessities.³²

Summary

In his search for authentic Christianity Wesley raided the history books and devotional classics, but while they deepened his hunger they did not satisfy it. Wesley inherited an earnest practical nature that would never be satisfied with contemplative Christianity—he had to see it working if it was to be of value. It was Wesley's experience that would give force and direction to his drive to be a scriptural Christian. Wesley would discover a widening gap between the promises of scripture and his own experience of the Christian life. Eventually the strain of these conflicting forces would bring him to a crisis of faith and in the place of despair he would encounter grace in a powerful way, but first Wesley had to come to the point of failure.

³¹ Leslie F. Church, *The Early Methodist People* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 156.

³² Wesley, *Works*, 8:250-51 A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists 1748.

CHAPTER 3

WESLEY'S PERSONAL JOURNEY

Wesley's method grew out his synthesis of doctrine and experience.¹ His doctrine was not a cold orthodoxy that resisted any outside influence and stubbornly asserted its own authority—it was governed by his commitment to spreading the gospel. His experiences provided opportunities to learn and Wesley never stopped learning. The purpose of this chapter is to survey formative events in Wesley's life that would shape his methodology as his doctrine was tempered by the victories and failures of a life seeking after Christ. Wesley's method had been under gradual development from his earliest life as he explored his puritan inheritance, but it did not find the motive power that would drive Methodism across continents and oceans until Wesley encountered faith. Wesley's search for a faith that had the power to withstand hell took him to the point of exhaustion. In that place Wesley found faith. From then on his method was not just the work of Wesley—now God's spirit had access, and the difference was that it worked.

John Wesley's Childhood Home: Epworth

Both of John's parents, Samuel and Susanna, came from nonconformist stock, and both converted back to the Established Church as young adults. Samuel's father, John Westley, had lost his living as a result of his principles,² and Susanna was daughter of Samuel Annesley, a

¹ Snyder, *Radical Wesley*, 146.

² Simon, *Religious Societies*, 34.

noted nonconformist minister.³ In spite of similar backgrounds Samuel and Susannah did not share the same enthusiasm for the reigning monarch and Susanna's refusal to say amen to her husband's prayers for the King were his reason for walking out on the family. Reconciliation came with the arrival of a new monarch (Anne) and John's birth was the fruit.⁴ During Samuel's absence from Epworth (1711-1712), Susannah ran Sunday evening prayer meetings at their home, the rectory, and their attendance grew to several hundred people. This ran the danger of being viewed as a "conventicle," (worship service in a private home), strictly forbidden by the Act of Toleration, and Samuel's response from London was matched only by Susanna's challenge to him.

If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly,. . . send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵

Puritan Richard Baxter and Episcopalian Henry Scougal influenced Wesley's adoption of personal discipline and spiritual submission in his educational strategy. "Puritan zeal for the care and cure of souls" was a theme in Wesley's upbringing at Epworth.⁶ The Wesley home encouraged spiritual growth and both of John's parents practiced this in their home life and pastoral work. Susanna's discipline of her children rested on her conviction that self-will lay at the root of sin and could not be allowed mastery.

³ John Westley, (John Wesley's grandfather), refused to adopt the Book of Common Prayer and was forced to give up his vicarage under the Act of Uniformity (1662). Dr. Samuel Annesley was admitted to the vicarage of St Giles's Church, Cripplegate, London, by Richard Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England in 1658. He was ejected from his living in 1662, rejecting the offer of preferment in the church if he would conform. Simon, *Religious Societies*, 34, 42.

⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 13:504 *An Account of the Disturbances in My Father's House* 26 March 1784.

⁵ Heitzenrater, *People Called Methodists*, 29. Heitzenrater does not cite the source.

⁶ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 37.

In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will, and bring them to an obedient temper. To inform the understanding is a work of time; and must with children proceed by slow degrees, as they are able to bear it: but the subjecting the will is a thing which must be done at once, and the sooner the better; for by neglecting timely correction, they will contract a stubbornness and obstinacy which are hardly ever after conquered, and never without using such severity as would be as painful to me as to the child.⁷

But her discipline does not tell the whole story and her house rules show a mixture of firmness and compassion.

3. That no child should ever be chid or beat twice for the same fault; and that, if they amended, they should never be upbraided with it afterwards.
4. That every signal act of obedience, especially when it crossed upon their own inclinations, should be always commended, and frequently rewarded, according to the merits of the case.
5. That if ever any child performed an act of obedience, or did any thing with an intention to please, though the performance was not well, yet the obedience and intention should be kindly accepted, and the child with sweetness directed how to do better for the future.⁸

Susanna devoted an hour per week to each of her children, to discuss their spiritual journey.⁹ John Wesley's philosophy of education can be traced to his own home schooling. The techniques Wesley used in instructing people were learnt at Epworth and he attached importance to the education and development of children, requiring of his preachers:¹⁰

- (1.) Where there are ten children in a society, meet them at least an hour every week.
- (2.) Talk with them every time you see any at home.
- (3.) Pray in earnest for them.
- (4.) Diligently instruct and vehemently exhort all parents at their own houses.¹¹

⁷ John A. Newton, *Susanna Wesley and the Puritan Tradition in Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1968), 113.

⁸ Newton, *Susanna Wesley*, 112.

⁹ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 34-37.

¹⁰ Newton, *Susanna Wesley*, 114.

¹¹ Wesley, *Works*, 8:316 Minutes of Several Conversations 1791.

Susanna followed the Puritan emphasis of redeeming time and her strict time management was a major influence on John.¹² In a letter of advice to her son Samuel, Susannah tells how as a girl she would allow herself as much time for recreation as she spent in devotions and urged him to “throw all your business into a certain method . . . to improve every precious moment.”¹³

John Wesley’s Books

Wesley nurtured a lifelong love of learning which was secondary only to his love for the gospel. “I would throw by all the libraries in the world, rather than be guilty of the loss of one soul.”¹⁴ Several times he describes himself as a man of one book, to emphasize the centrality of scripture, though in practice he was a prolific reader.

In 1727 I read Mr. Law’s ‘Christian Perfection,’ and ‘Serious Call,’ and more explicitly resolved to be all devoted to God, in body, soul, and spirit. In 1730 I began to be homo unius libri; to study (comparatively) no book but the Bible.¹⁵

Wesley’s love of books and belief in the value of education lay behind his extensive publishing ventures which resulted eventually in a Methodist library of over fifty works made available in editions priced within reach of Methodists.

¹² Wesley urged his preachers to make the best use of their time, “Do we not loiter away many hours in every week? Each try himself: No idleness can consist with growth in grace. Nay, without exactness in redeeming time, you cannot retain the grace you received in justification.” Wesley, *Works*, 8:316-17 Minutes of Several Conversations 1791.

¹³ Newton, *Susanna Wesley*, 55. See also Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 39.

¹⁴ *Works*, 8:304 Minutes of Several Conversations 1791.

¹⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 3:213 Journal 14 May 1765.

The Holy Club

In a letter to the *London Magazine* in 1760, John Wesley opened his history of the Methodists with the introduction of an influential book called “*The Country Parson’s Advice to his Parishioners*” which made the following appeal:

If good men of the Church will unite together in the several parts of the kingdom, disposing themselves into friendly societies, and engaging each other in their respective combinations, to be helpful to each other in all good, Christian ways, it will be the most effectual means for restoring our decaying Christianity to its primitive life and vigour, and the supporting of our tottering and sinking Church.¹⁶

Following this advice, a group of earnest young men at Oxford began to meet with one purpose in mind: “Their one design was, to forward each other in true, scriptural Christianity.”¹⁷ Encouraged by Charles, John made a visit to Oxford (arriving on Charles’s birthday, June 17 1729) and during that summer met with Charles and a group of his friends to pursue mutual religious interests (prayer, study, attending church and journaling). This was the earliest beginnings of Oxford Methodism. In November of that year John returned to Oxford, this time to take up his share of tutorial duties as fellow of Lincoln.¹⁸ The activities of the group soon attracted derision and they were variously labeled the “Holy Club,” the “Godly Club,” and “Methodists,”¹⁹ but the faithfulness of the members would later bring great dignity to these names. In addition to its pursuit of devotional practices, the social concern of the Holy Club involved it in a variety of activities including visiting the prison and working with the poor. These initiatives originated mainly from William Morgan, and John’s leadership came from his

¹⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 13:387-388 *A Letter to Mr. T. H., alias Philodemas, alias Somebody, alias Stephen Church, alias R. W.* 12 December 1760.

¹⁷ Wesley, *Works*, 13:388 *Short History of the People called Methodists*.

¹⁸ Heitzenrater, *People Called Methodists*, 38.

¹⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:8, 12 *Introductory Letter* in *Journal* 18 October 1732 and 8:340 *Character of a Methodist*.

ability to integrate these activities into a common purpose.²⁰ Wesley went further than the religious societies, not satisfied just with self examination and cognitive learning, he insisted on the practical outworking.²¹ Holy Club members were not content to be just hearers, but strove to be doers of the word and in 1735 three of them boarded ship for Georgia.²²

Georgia and the Moravians

Wesley's opening entry in his journal Tuesday, October 14, 1735 states his reason for traveling to Georgia:

Our end in leaving our native country was not to avoid want, (God having given us plenty of temporal blessings,) nor to gain the dung or dross of riches or honour; but singly this, to save our souls; to live wholly to the glory of God.²³

In addition to its missionary objectives, Wesley saw his trip to Georgia as a means of personal growth. He understood that the heathen people lacked the "artifice" and "conceit" he found among his cultured peers, and their simplicity had a purity of its own that would recognize truth. This innocence would be a litmus test for his own teaching, helping him to discover authentic faith for himself, in the hope of saving his own soul.²⁴

²⁰ William Morgan was a founding member of the Holy Club and initiated several of their activities such as prison visiting. He left Oxford in 1732 and died later that year. Morgan's health had been poor and possibly worsened by fasting. Rumors spread accusing Wesley of hastening his death by promoting rigorous self-denial in the Holy Club. On October 18 1732 Wesley wrote to Morgan's father defending the practices of the group. Wesley, *Works*, 1:5-14 *Introductory Letter* in Journal 18 October 1732.

²¹ For a connection between the Holy Club members and their participation in the Religious Societies see Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Reverend John Wesley, M. A.* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1872), 87, 73.

²² John Wesley was invited to transfer the Holy Club to Georgia by Dr. John Burton, Trustee for the colony and patron of the SPG. Wesley was accompanied to Georgia by his brother Charles and Benjamin Ingham, all Holy Club members. George Whitefield, not yet ordained, promised to join them later. Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 10-11.

²³ Wesley, *Works*, 1:17 Journal 14 October 1735.

²⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 12:38 Letter to a Friend 10 October 1735.

Wesley really did see himself a fellow traveler with those he ministered to—he was not their better, but committed to a personal pilgrimage himself, bringing continuity between him and the people he worked with. Despite his good intentions, the voyage to Georgia was a trial for Wesley. Among the passengers were a group of Moravians traveling at the invitation of General Oglethorpe, Governor of Georgia. The courage shown by the Moravians during a storm exposed to Wesley the weakness of his assurance of salvation and his lack of faith.

A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, “Was you not afraid?” He answered, “I thank God, no.” I asked, “But were not your women and children afraid?” He replied, mildly, “No; our women and children are not afraid to die.”²⁵

The Moravians made a deep impression on Wesley and on arrival in Georgia he sought advice from their leader, August Spangenberg, whose challenge must have been a shock.

I soon found what spirit he was of; and asked his advice with regard to my own conduct. He said, “My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?” I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” I paused, and said, “I know he is the Saviour of the world.” “True,” replied he; “but do you know he has saved you?” I answered, “I hope he has died to save me.” He only added, “Do you know yourself?” I said, “I do.” But I fear they were vain words.²⁶

Wesley could not escape the reality that he did not possess the courage that he knew should belong to one who knows their salvation. At the Moravian ordination of a Bishop, Wesley was moved.

The great simplicity, as well as solemnity, of the whole, almost made me forget the seventeen hundred years between, and imagine myself in one of those assemblies where form and state were not; but Paul the tent-maker, or Peter the fisherman, presided; yet with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power.²⁷

²⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 1:22 Journal 25 January 1736.

²⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 1:23 Journal 7 Feb, 1736.

²⁷ Wesley, *Works*, 1:26 Journal 28 Feb, 1736.

Wesley's rigorous approach to the religious life of the colonies did not meet with the support he wished for, but in Savannah a few people had formed a religious society the previous year under Robert Hows, and Wesley found a small core of serious followers among the flock.²⁸ Wesley set out to replicate this group in Frederica, and was able to gather a small group of "the most serious of the communicants, in singing, reading, and conversation."²⁹ However the society at Frederica did not succeed as well as the one at Savanna—when Wesley returned sixteen months later in October 1737 he was unimpressed, finding that morning and evening prayers had been discontinued and things had deteriorated with "not many retaining any more of the form than the power of godliness."³⁰

Wesley's final visit to Frederica (5 Jan 1737) was a disappointment to him, finding the people there "cold and heartless."³¹ He despaired of doing any good in Frederica and returned to Savannah, but he made enemies despite the modest success of his work there. Charges were brought against him and he was forbidden to leave the province. Wesley saw his prospects of fair treatment deteriorating and made his exit discreetly. His time in Georgia ended unhappily and he left the province in near disgrace:

as soon as Evening Prayers were over, about eight o'clock, the tide then serving, I shook off the dust of my feet, and left Georgia, after having preached the Gospel there (not as I ought, but as I was able) one year, and nearly nine months.³²

²⁸ Wesley commented much later that his intentions were always to preach to the native people in Georgia and he only agreed to take responsibility for the European settlers there when "detained at Savannah and Frederica, by the importunity of the people, who, having no other Ministers, earnestly requested that we would not leave them." Wesley, *Works*, 7:422 Sermon 132 preached 21 April 1777.

²⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:32-33 Journal 10 June 1736.

³⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 1:42 Journal 12 October 1736.

³¹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:45 Journal 5 January 1737.

³² Wesley, *Works*, 1:61 Journal 2 Dec 1737.

He set sail for England deeply troubled by the weakness of his faith, which was unable to prevent his heart from being troubled in times of distress, and humbled by the discovery that what he had counted as faith was his own pride. Wesley's assessment of his time in Georgia was harsh.³³

I went to America, to convert the Indians; but O! who shall convert me? who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near: But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, 'To die is gain!'³⁴

Wesley's time in Georgia had exposed serious problems with his faith and forced him to reflect deeply on his own condition, even questioning his own salvation.³⁵ But from this place of failure Wesley was able to glean some useful lessons. His experiment in Georgia had enabled him to see his teaching strategies working in a very different context and culture to that previously. He was able to experiment with the transferability of the Holy Club model into a different culture and make adjustments to it.³⁶ Henderson notes that in Georgia, Wesley further refined his group strategy, dividing his congregation into groups according to their readiness and faithfulness. While the religious societies attracted only young men, usually single, Wesley's groups involved the whole congregation. Wesley was not creating a separate body but working within the church.³⁷

³³ Wesley's own assessment does not give the full picture. George Whitefield arrived in Savannah shortly after Wesley's departure—his journal on 2 June 1738 records "The good, Mr. John Wesley has done in America, under God is inexpressible. His name is very precious among the people; and he has laid such a foundation, that I hope neither men nor devils will ever be able to shake. Oh, that I may follow him, as he has Christ!" George Whitefield, *Journals* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 157.

³⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 1:74 Journal 24 January 1738.

³⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 1:75-76 Journal 29 January 1738.

³⁶ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 47.

³⁷ See Simon, *Religious Societies* Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 44-45.

On 1 February 1738 Wesley landed at Deal, England, to hear that George Whitefield, a former member of the Holy Club, was just offshore waiting for wind to sail to Georgia. Wesley sent him a note advising him not to go, but Whitefield declined this recommendation.³⁸

Moravians in England

Wesley returned deeply concerned over his lack of assurance of faith. He did not have the deep assurance which he admired in the Moravians. He made his way to Oxford where his brother lay sick and there he saw Peter Böhler, a Moravian.³⁹ Through Böhler, John Wesley was “clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved.”⁴⁰ Wesley now faced a crisis over whether or not he should preach, to which Böhler replied, “Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”⁴¹ Wesley wrestled with Böhler’s teaching on instantaneous faith and his journal records his grudging acceptance of the testimony of scripture and of several living witnesses. Eventually cornered by the implications this had for his own faith he “could now only cry out, ‘Lord, help thou my unbelief!’”⁴²

³⁸ Wesley had cast lots to test whether Whitefield should go and then advised Whitefield of the outcome. Whitefield was unhappy both with the content and the source of this unsolicited advice and it would become the cause of a disagreement between them. Wesley, *Works*, 1:83 Journal 1 February 1738. Whitefield, *Journals*, 119ff, 572-73.

³⁹ John’s first meeting with Böhler was three weeks previously in London, where John secured lodgings for Böhler who had just arrived from Germany. John was deeply impressed by Böhler and “did not willingly lose any opportunity of conversing with them.” Wesley, *Works*, 1:84 Journal 7 February 1738.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 1:86 Journal 4 March 1738.

⁴¹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:86 Journal 4 March 1738.

⁴² Wesley, *Works*, 1:91 Journal 23 April 1738.

Fetter Lane Society

On 1 May 1738, Peter Böhler and John Wesley started a Religious Society which met at the bookshop owned by James Hutton.⁴³ It was associated with the Church of England, but differed from predecessors being the first to subdivide into smaller “bands,” a Moravian concept. The Moravians divided their members into small groups called bands according to their spiritual development. Moravian bands met two or three times a week to share the state of their hearts for the purpose of mutual accountability and encouragement.⁴⁴

In his justification of the Society Wesley appealed to scripture, citing James on the basis that they were meeting to confess their sins.⁴⁵ Within five months the society had moved to Fetter Lane, from which it took its name. Distinct from earlier experiments of Wesley, membership of the Fetter Lane Society was not confined to membership of the Church of England. Furthermore, there was no requirement that members attend Anglican services, a departure from the conditions set down by Horneck. These differences put the Fetter Lane Society outside the law of the day, a problem for the society from its beginning.⁴⁶ The Fetter Lane Society was a synthesis, combining the strengths of the Moravian bands and the Anglican Religious Societies. The latter were an effective means of instructing, while the former were successful in cultivating an environment for developing devotional piety.⁴⁷

⁴³ James Hutton provided an important link between Wesley and the Moravians. He met the Moravians through Wesley when they were embarking for Georgia. The Wesleys often lodged with him when in London. Hutton organized a Religious Society which met at Aldersgate Street and would read Moravian letters and Wesley’s diaries. Hutton eventually parted with Wesley and became the “first English Moravian.” Snyder, *Radical Wesley*, 26-27, 29.

⁴⁴ Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist*, 185.

⁴⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 1:92-93 Journal 1 May 1738.

⁴⁶ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 65.

⁴⁷ For an overview of their integration in Fetter Lane Society see Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist*, 188.

The Fetter Lane Society gave Wesley the opportunity to see Moravian piety applied in an Anglican setting and this experience further developed his methodology. His frustration with the Religious Societies had been their lack of opportunity to explore one's spiritual struggles in a safe environment. In the Fetter Lane Society people had a forum where they could discuss intimate spiritual struggles in an accepting and accountable group. Henderson estimates that "it seems to have been by far the most ingenious plan for personal religious development yet devised in England."⁴⁸ But Wesley cannot take all the credit for the form of the Fetter Lane Society and Podmore sees most of its features as "purely Moravian."⁴⁹ The Orders of Fetter Lane Society⁵⁰ show that from the beginning it was subdivided into bands and their purpose was to be accountable about the real state of their heart. The bands met twice a week, once together with other bands and the second time on their own at a convenient time. The large group weekly meeting had a lecture format and individual participation was not encouraged. By adopting a dual structure, they were able to address both instructional and devotional concerns.

Wesley came under criticism for using lay leadership (a Moravian norm given their commitment to the universal priesthood of all believers).⁵¹ Band leaders in the Fetter Lane Society were following a precedent set in the Religious Societies, which would have lay leaders when clergy were unavailable.⁵² Henderson points out that members of bands could speak more

⁴⁸ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 66.

⁴⁹ Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England, 1728-1760* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 44-48.

⁵⁰ See Appendix D.

⁵¹ Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist*, 105-37.

⁵² Simon refers to the provisions for laypeople to read scripture subject to some restrictions; "all controversial points are forbidden.. to be meddled with...they have recourse to Dr. Hammond's *Exposition*, or some other author recommended by their Ministers." Woodward, *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Religious Societies in the City of London and of Their Endeavours for the Reformation of Manners*, 136-37. Simon, *Religious Societies*, 18.

openly about their spiritual condition under the leadership of their peers than they might feel able to under a priest who was clearly their superior. Group membership was subject to the approval of the group, putting authority into the hands of the membership, another departure from Horneck's design.⁵³

The Fetter Lane Society ran for two years before internal tension caused a rift. Some members resented the restrictions imposed by the connection to the Church of England and felt that separation offered the best solution against the fierce opposition of the Wesleys.⁵⁴

Wesley had successfully modeled a two-pronged educational strategy, with the bands developing piety and the wider group providing instruction. The subdivision of the society into bands distinguished it from earlier societies and created a further organizational tier under the Anglican Church.

⁵³ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 67-68.

⁵⁴ The precise identity of the Fetter Lane Society is disputed. Simon and Towlson assert its Anglican identity while Podmore questions the strength of the Anglican connection in favor of Moravian identity. Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 68. Simon, *Religious Societies*, 296-97. Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist*, 184.

Table 1. A Summary of Instructional Elements in the Fetter Lane Society⁵⁵

| | BAND | SOCIETY |
|---|---|---|
| PURPOSE: | overt behavioral change | cognitive acquisition |
| LEADERS: | lay leadership | professional leadership |
| LEADERSHIP FUNCTION: | leader as enabler | leader as instructor |
| METHODS AND TECHNIQUES: | personal interaction 5-10 members one sex active participation confession of struggle every person spoke subjective emphasis appointed membership | lecture/sermon 50-100 members both sexes passive response biblical presentation only the leader spoke objective emphasis membership by choice |
| PHILOSOPHICAL/ THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS: | Moravian precedents priesthood of all God as immanent faith as experiential | Anglican precedents priesthood of elite God as transcendent faith as inferential |

Assurance of Faith

In early 1738 John and Charles Wesley were both struggling for an assurance of salvation by faith and they found it within three days of one another. In addition to the proximity of the timing they shared other catalysts. Both were impacted by the writings of Luther shortly before their conversions, Charles by Luther's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* and John by Luther's *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*.⁵⁶ Further similarities include the role played by Peter Böhler and the setting of an intimate group. John's Aldersgate experience occurred in the intimate fellowship of a Religious Society set up by Hutton and Charles' followed a prayer meeting at his bedside where he lay seriously ill. Furthermore, both made a deliberate decision

⁵⁵ Table from Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 69.

⁵⁶ Towlson notes the curious fact that Luther is rarely cited by Wesley though both Charles and John acknowledge Luther in their conversion experiences. Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist*, 17. For their accounts of their conversions see Wesley, *Works*, 1:103 Journal 24 May 1738, and Charles Wesley, *The Journal of Charles Wesley*, 2 vols, ed. Thomas Jackson (1849; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 1 88-90, 17-20 May 1738.

to strive for faith while conscious that they lacked it. Charles made the decision on 17 May and from then on he sought to persuade as many as he could of “this fundamental truth, salvation by faith alone, not an idle, dead faith, but a faith which works by love, and is necessarily productive of all good works and all holiness.”⁵⁷ In the meantime he wrestled for assurance of faith and was rewarded on 21 May 1738.

I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ. My temper for the rest of the day was, mistrust of my own great, but before unknown, weakness. I saw that by faith I stood; by the continual support of faith, which kept me from falling, though of myself I am ever sinking into sin. I went to bed still sensible of my own weakness, (I humbly hope to be more and more so,) yet confident of Christ’s protection.⁵⁸

John had been preaching faith since his conversation with Böhler, and three days after Charles it became a reality.

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.⁵⁹

John and Charles had what they had searched so long for. They had an assurance of faith, not a dead faith, but a faith that bore love and ignited a passion to reach others. The difference was that this new faith had power. The methods that Wesley had used to promote holiness and assurance of salvation had until now failed to produce lasting results, but this would soon change. When Wesley’s methods were empowered by his newly found faith they began to bear fruit. The Wesley brothers now had their mission and a new sense of empowerment. But first John realized that he needed to consolidate this new ground, and he knew who to turn to.

⁵⁷ Wesley, *Works*, 1:88, Journal 17 May 1738.

⁵⁸ Wesley, *Works*, 1:92, Journal 21 May 1738.

⁵⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:103 Journal 24 May 1738.

Herrnhutt

Wesley set off for Germany on the 13 June 1738, just 20 days after his Aldersgate experience, to visit the Moravian community at Herrnhutt. He hoped to meet there “living witnesses of the full *power of faith*,” who would help him to “go on from faith to faith,” and “from strength to strength.”⁶⁰ Lodging at the community at Marienborn he was not disappointed and reported,

I continually met with what I sought for, viz., living proofs of the *power of faith*: Persons saved from inward as well as outward sin, by “the love of God shed abroad in their hearts;” and from all doubt and fear, by the abiding witness of “the Holy Ghost given unto them.”⁶¹

Traveling by Halle, Wesley desired to visit Professor Francke⁶² and was disappointed to find that he was away, but was able to visit the orphan-house, “that amazing proof, that all things are still possible to him that believeth.”

Six hundred and fifty children, we were informed, are wholly maintained there; and three thousand, if I mistake not, taught. Surely, such a thing neither we nor our fathers have known, as this great thing which God has done here!⁶³

Wesley arrived at Herrnhutt on 1 August 1738 and took the opportunity to find out if what he had heard about it was accurate. He immersed himself in conversations with the leading figures “concerning the great work which God had wrought in their souls, purifying them by faith” and “concerning the discipline used therein.”⁶⁴ During Wesley’s visit to Herrnhutt, the

⁶⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 1:106 Journal 7 June 1738. Emphasis added.

⁶¹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:110 Journal 6 July 1738. Emphasis added.

⁶² “the son of that August Herman Francke whose name is indeed as precious ointment. O may I follow him, as he did Christ! And “by manifestation of the truth, commend myself to every man’s conscience in the sight of God!” Wesley, *Works*, 1:112 Journal 24 July 1738.

⁶³ Wesley, *Works*, 1:113 Journal 24 July 1738.

⁶⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 1:115 Journal 3 August 1738.

issue of the day was the importance of the assurance of faith. The question they were wrestling with was, “can a person be justified without the full assurance of faith?” Martin Dober indicated that it was very common to receive justification before assurance. It seems they were arriving at the conclusion that the full assurance of faith, that they had previously held to be closely connected with justification, was now beginning to be separated.⁶⁵ From the Moravians, Wesley saw the model for renewing the Church of England. Zinzendorf followed Luther and Spener in restoring and revitalizing the church through “*ecclesiolae in ecclesia*.”⁶⁶ In this model, Wesley saw a way to bring spiritual renewal to his spiritual home, the Anglican Church, the church he loved. Its combination of renewal from the ground up, under the authority of established church leadership, could provide a balance between authority, order, and spontaneity.⁶⁷ John wrote to Herrnhut shortly after his return.⁶⁸ He mentioned the growth in his bands since his return.

XXXVI. To the Church of God which is in Herrnhut,
JOHN WESLEY, an unworthy Presbyterian of the Church of
God in England, wisheth all grace and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

October 14, 1738.

GLORY be to God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for his unspeakable gift! for giving me to be an eyewitness of your faith, and love, and holy conversation in Christ Jesus! I have borne testimony thereof with all plainness of speech, in many parts of Germany, and thanks have been given to God by many on your behalf.

We are endeavouring here also, by the grace which is given us, to be followers of you, as ye are of Christ. Fourteen were added to us, since our return, so that we have now eight bands of men, consisting of fifty-six persons; all of whom seek for salvation only in the blood of Christ. As yet we have only two small bands of women; the one of three, the other of five persons. But here are many others who only wait till we have leisure to

⁶⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 1:131 Journal 10 August 1738.

⁶⁶ Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist*, 18.

⁶⁷ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 61.

⁶⁸ It is worth noting the difference with his letter published later, largely drafted at this time, voicing his reservations, which for now he does not mention.

instruct them, how they may most effectually build up one another in the faith and love of Him who gave himself for them.⁶⁹

During his visit to Herrnhut, Wesley observed the Moravian system of dividing the people “into about ninety bands, each of which meets twice at least, but most of them three times a week, to confess their faults one to another, and pray for one another, that they may be healed.”⁷⁰ Wesley was impressed by much of what he saw in Germany, “I greatly approve of your Conferences and Bands; of your method of instructing children; and, in general, of your great care of the souls committed to your charge.”⁷¹

A Moravian innovation which Wesley adopted in his Societies was the separation of “instruction from edification.” Instruction at Herrnhut was by “choirs,” dedicated to teaching, while “bands” were for sharing, confession and accountability. Henderson points out that while much religious education saw no need for a distinction, the Moravians did. Wesley saw the wisdom of this and made it a central feature of Methodism. The groups that he would create were intentionally designed to serve these distinctive functions without confusing them.⁷² Furthermore, the Moravian community valued the contribution of women in their educational system and the Methodist appreciation of women’s gifting in service can be traced back to this relationship with the Moravians. Moravian women were under the pastoral care of a female “eldest,” setting a precedent for female lay leadership.⁷³

⁶⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 12:55 Letter to Mr. John Smith 28 September 1745.

⁷⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 1:141 Journal August 1738. See Appendix E and Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist*, 185.

⁷¹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:332 Journal September 1741.

⁷² Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 60.

⁷³ See Appendix E and Wesley, *Works*, 1:141 Journal August 1738.

Field Preaching

George Whitefield, upon his return to London from Georgia, made several visits to the Fetter Lane Society in December 1738.⁷⁴ Whitefield was present at the love feast held there on 1 January 1739 at which Wesley recorded a tremendous outpouring of God's Spirit:

the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his Majesty, we broke out with one voice, "We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord."⁷⁵

The next day the seven clergy of the society including Whitefield and the Wesley brothers met to plan the spread of the revival.⁷⁶ Whitefield went to Bristol and on 17 February he preached to a group of about two hundred Kingswood colliers after local churches were closed to him.⁷⁷ Within days, crowds numbering thousands were turning out to hear him.⁷⁸ Whitefield invited John Wesley to join him in his work in Bristol where he arrived on the 31 March 1739.

In the evening I reached Bristol, and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church.⁷⁹

Wesley's initial suspicion was quickly overcome by the evidence of God's power at work and he preached the following day on the Sermon on the Mount, noting it as a "pretty remarkable

⁷⁴ Whitefield, *Journals*, 194, 196.

⁷⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 1:170 Journal 1 January 1739.

⁷⁶ Podmore, *Moravian Church*, 48-49.

⁷⁷ Whitefield's outdoor preaching had a precedent—at Frederica, Georgia, he had preached under a tree as the church was under construction! His purpose in preaching in England was to raise funds for his orphanage in Georgia. Whitefield, *Journals*, 161, 216. See also Simon, *Religious Societies*, 254.

⁷⁸ Whitefield, *Journals*, 217-20.

⁷⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:185 Journal 29 March 1739.

precedent of field-preaching.” He “submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation,” to a crowd of about three thousand people.⁸⁰ Wesley would comment much later on his deep dislike for field-preaching, yet his practical nature saw the need for it and he submitted to it.⁸¹ In field-preaching, Wesley saw the Spirit ministering powerfully to people, but outside the normal form of Anglican polity, proving to him that ministry could not be confined exclusively to the existing structures of the church.

Wesley moved quickly and within three days had organized the first bands. On 9 May 1739 he acquired land in Bristol to build rooms for the societies there and within three days building had started. Wesley appointed a group to manage finances but was soon forced to undertake full financial responsibility. He incurred a personal debt of more than a hundred and fifty pounds and this would later give rise to a uniquely Wesleyan innovation—the class meeting.⁸²

Wesley insisted on four emphases in his preaching from 1738 onwards.⁸³ These caused great offence and were new to many resulting in his expulsion from many churches.⁸⁴ He insisted that religion requires the image of God stamped upon the heart, through repentance, by

⁸⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 1:185 Journal 2 April 1739.

⁸¹ Over thirty years later after preaching at Kingswood, Wesley commented in his journal “I preached on the quay, at Kingswood, and near King’s Square. To this day field-preaching is a cross to me. But I know my commission, and see no other way of ‘preaching the Gospel to every creature.’” Wesley, *Works*, 3:479 Journal 6 September 1772.

⁸² Whitefield and others advised him to dismiss the trustees mainly because they would then be able to control what was preached. This represents a significant departure from the model of Horneck’s religious societies. Wesley, *Works*, 1:192 Journal 9 May 1739.

⁸³ George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 45.

⁸⁴ It is interesting to note that Wesley’s preaching was getting him thrown out of most of the places he preached starting just three days after his return from Georgia—he had not met Böhler and Aldersgate was a few months away. Over the next few weeks he is repeatedly barred from pulpits. See Wesley, *Works*, 1:84-6 Journal February-March 1738.

faith, not works, and justification by faith brings holiness and happiness.⁸⁵ As Wesley turned to England's poor he developed his method to suit them. Instead of appealing to the minds of Oxford he designed "plain truth for plain people." He used concrete rather than abstract language, appealing almost exclusively to scripture rather than academia, and his method sought a behavioral rather than an intellectual response.⁸⁶ The success of field preaching brought large numbers of people into the church, many from social backgrounds that knew nothing of the expectations of Christian living. Wesley knew it was not enough to preach the gospel and leave the rest to God. Wesley saw a clear need for church discipline, without which the church could not prosper. The rationale for Wesley's method arose from the success of field-preaching, an integral part of his mission to spread scriptural holiness, which needs to be taken as an integrated system if we are to look at Wesley holistically. Field preaching brought people into the church through the side door and Wesley had to find openings for them to be nurtured and find grace.

Wesley's Departure from Fetter Lane

The Fetter Lane Society was falling into dispute over the doctrine of "stillness."⁸⁷ Philipp Heinrich Molther (1714-1780) was delayed in London en route for Pennsylvania and was alarmed by the emotional pitch of the meetings at the Fetter Lane Society, marked by groaning, howling and contortions. He is traditionally held responsible for introducing a new doctrine emphasizing stillness, and advising people to abstain from sacraments and even church, until they had faith. Podmore demonstrates that stillness was consistent with Böhler's teaching in February 1738, though it subsequently gained emphasis, and it was Spangenberg who exhorted

⁸⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 8:249 People Called Methodists 1748.

⁸⁶ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 71-2.

⁸⁷ For other factors e.g., Wesley's suspicion of Zinzendorf's antinomianism, and Zinzendorf's rejection of Wesley's view of works, see Towson, *Moravian and Methodist*, 79.

people to “lie still in His hand.” Molther spoke little English and did not address the society until several weeks after Wesley’s involvement in the dispute, but Wesley was convinced that Molther was the source of the problem.⁸⁸

My brother and I went to Mr. Molther again, and spent two hours in conversation with him. He now also explicitly affirmed, 1. That there are no degrees in faith; that none has any faith who has ever any doubt or fear; and that none is justified till he has a clean heart, with the perpetual indwelling of Christ, and of the Holy Ghost; and, 2. That every one who has not this, ought, till he has it, to be still: That is, as he explained it, not to use the ordinances, or means of grace, so called. He also expressly asserted, 1. That to those who have a clean heart, the ordinances are not matter of duty. They are not commanded to use them: They are free: They may use them, or they may not. 2. That those who have not a clean heart, ought not to use them; (particularly not to communicate;) because God neither commands nor designs they should; (commanding them to none, designing them only for believers;) and because they are not means of grace; there being no such thing as means of grace, but Christ only.⁸⁹

Neglecting the sacraments was irreconcilable with Wesley’s Anglican commitments and the Fetter Lane Society as a Religious Society could not accommodate such deviations from Anglican practices and maintain its connection.⁹⁰ Wesley proposed that bands be reorganized to separate those who endorsed “stillness.” Relationships in the society deteriorated as the dispute grew acrimonious and by early July 1740 Wesley “found their hearts were quite estranged.”⁹¹ After a hostile meeting of the society on 16 July 1740 Wesley “gave them up to God” and two days later met with a group at the Foundry to decide what to do. The decision was put into effect at the love feast at the Fetter Lane Society on 20 July 1740, where Wesley read the following statement:

⁸⁸ Podmore, *Moravian Church*, 59-61.

⁸⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:269-270 Journal 25 April 1740.

⁹⁰ John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Methodist Societies.*, 1923, 2d (London: Epworth Press, 1937), 12-15.

⁹¹ Wesley, *Works*, 1:280 Journal 2 July 1740.

About nine months ago certain of you began to speak contrary to the doctrine we had till then received. The sum of what you asserted is this: —

1. That there is no such thing as weak faith: That there is no justifying faith where there is ever any doubt or fear, or where there is not, in the full sense, a new, a clean heart.
2. That a man ought not to use those ordinances of God, which our Church terms ‘means of grace,’ before he has such a faith as excludes all doubt and fear, and implies a new, a clean heart.

You have often affirmed, that to search the Scriptures, to pray, or to communicate, before we have this faith, is to seek salvation by works; and that till these works are laid aside, no man can receive faith.

I believe these assertions to be flatly contrary to the word of God. I have warned you hereof again and again, and besought you to turn back to the Law and the Testimony. I have borne with you long, hoping you would turn. But as I find you more and more confirmed in the error of your ways, nothing now remains, but that I should give you up to God. You that are of the same judgment, follow me.⁹²

Eighteen or nineteen people left the society following this ultimatum and three days later Wesley reported:

Our little company met at the Foundery, instead of Fetter-Lane. About twenty-five of our brethren God hath given us already, all of whom think and speak the same thing; seven or eight and forty likewise, of the fifty women that were in Band, desired to cast in their lot with us.⁹³

Despite the debt Wesley owed to the Moravians, he did not agree with them on all points.

Although John Wesley and Peter Böhler started the Fetter Lane Society in good faith it seems in hindsight that the synthesis they attempted was bound for conflict that could not be resolved without substantial compromise. At stake for Wesley was his loyalty to the Anglican Church. Simon points out that the Fetter Lane Society was “a Religious society in connexion with the Church of England” from 1738 and did not become a congregation of the Church of the Brethren

⁹² Wesley, *Works*, 1:282 Journal 20 July 1740.

⁹³ Wesley, *Works*, 1:283 Journal 23 July 1740.

until a decision made in 1741 was effected on November 10 1742.⁹⁴ Colin Podmore sheds a different light pointing out that Böhler’s purpose in England was to liaise with the trustees for Georgia, care for Germans in London, and develop relations with theological students at Oxford. Böhler agreed to set up what became the Fetter Lane Society only when pressed (Wesley was there by accident rather than design) and followed the Moravian model closely. Podmore argues that the Fetter Lane Society was Moravian in character and practice from the beginning and its Anglican identity has been overstated.⁹⁵

Table 2 The Moravian Legacy to Wesley’s Methodology⁹⁶

| Elements Wesley liked | Elements Wesley disliked |
|---|--|
| Hymn-singing as a form of instruction | Lack of openness, frankness, and simplicity in speech |
| Women’s place of service | Exclusiveness |
| Special services: “Agape Feast,” Watchnights, etc. | Domination by Zinzendorf |
| “ecclesiolae in ecclesia” | Antinomianism |
| Intense fellowship: unity before information | The Moravian doctrine of “stillness” |
| Emphasis on conduct, no speculation | Downgrading the “means of grace,” like communion and baptism |
| Emphasis on instantaneous conversion, assurance of salvation | Making decisions by casting lots |
| Simplicity of lifestyle | A tendency toward mysticism |
| Distinction of choirs for instruction and bands for edification | Subjective piety unrelated to human affairs |

Summary

The Moravians showed Wesley Christianity that had the power to change lives. The Fetter Lane Society was enormously influential on the development of Wesley’s method and provided a proving ground for a synthesis of Moravian and Anglican piety. Wesley now had

⁹⁴ Simon, *Methodist Societies*, 14-15.

⁹⁵ Podmore, *Moravian Church*, 36-40.

⁹⁶ Table reproduced from Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 64.

extensive first-hand experience of Moravian methods and ideas and would not let these go to waste. The Fetter Lane Society was developing its Moravian identity at the expense of Anglican loyalty and was perhaps as far as Wesley was willing to depart from his beloved home church. Furthermore, the Moravian emphasis on stillness ran counter to Wesley's drive for a practical outworking of faith. But the Fetter Lane Society had not been Wesley's only sphere of influence during his time there. He was deeply involved in work in Bristol and took in many other cities, fueling the revival as he commuted between London and Bristol. The societies that formed under his leadership from this point on would differ from their predecessors, molded by Wesley's unrelenting commitment to seeing people grow in holiness and his willingness to pay whatever price this called for. Wesley would graft German pietism onto Anglican rootstock and unleash an aggressive hybrid that flourished in the hardest of soils.

CHAPTER 4

EARLY METHODIST POLITY 1739—1743

Wesley's polity was driven by practical demands and reflected his belief in the integrity of people and their experience. As Snyder puts it, "Wesley saw the connection between experience and structure."¹ Wesley developed his structure specifically to nurture the process he saw at work in people's lives as they were touched by God. He understood the necessity of social Christianity and had harsh words against "solitary Christianity." We now turn to Wesley's final phase of development as he experimented with group structures and scaled up.

Birth of Wesley's Societies

Wesley reported that late in 1739, "eight or ten persons came to me in London, who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption." He suggested:

If you will all of you come together every Thursday, in the evening, I will gladly spend some time with you in prayer, and give you the best advice I can. Thus arose, without any previous design on either side, what was afterwards called a Society.²

This Society was separate from the Fetter Lane Society and their timing overlapped between late 1739 and Wesley's disengagement from Fetter Lane in July 1740.

The new Society had only one requirement for entrance:³

They wanted to "flee from the wrath to come," and to assist each other in so doing. They therefore united themselves "in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other to work out their salvation."⁴

¹ Snyder, *Radical Wesley*, 147.

² Wesley, *Works*, 8:250 People Called Methodists 1748.

³ Later class membership became a stipulation.

⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 8:250 People Called Methodists.

The Society was a success—those who joined grew in their faith, while those who did not soon gave way. The efficacy of community was being demonstrated. Wesley later observed that these societies resembled the *katechoumenoi*, “catechumens,” that existed in the early church “that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them.”⁵

The Foundery

Wesley was pressed to take on the Foundery, an old cannon works which had been virtually destroyed by an explosion and was according to Wesley a “vast, uncouth heap of ruin.”

In November, 1739, two gentlemen, then unknown to me, (Mr. Ball and Mr. Watkins,) came and desired me, once and again, to preach in a place called the Foundery, near Moorfields. With much reluctance I at length complied. I was soon after pressed to take that place into my own hands. Those who were most earnest therein lent me the purchase-money, which was one hundred and fifteen pounds. Mr. Watkins and Mr. Ball then delivered me the names of several subscribers, who offered to pay, some four or six, some ten shillings a year towards the repayment of the purchase-money, and the putting the buildings into repair.⁶

Once again, Wesley bore the financial responsibility personally and the Society at the Foundery was a new venture under his sole leadership.⁷ The Foundery Society marked the beginning of the United Societies, a growing number of Societies that were under Wesley’s direct leadership. From 1739 Wesley experimented and modified his group management system over the next four years until he had reached a stage of development that would remain substantially unchanged for the next fifty years. Henderson marks the period from 1703-1743 as the *developmental* stage of Wesley’s system, and from 1743-1793 as the *implementation* stage.⁸ Wesley sought improvement upon the Fetter Lane Society model of which Henderson cites two

⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 8:250-251 People Called Methodists.

⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 8:37-38 An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, 1744.

⁷ At the Fetter Lane Society Wesley had been a joint founder with Peter Böhler.

⁸ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 72.

weaknesses:⁹ firstly, leadership of Religious Societies, including the Fetter Lane Society was elected by the membership and could be removed at any time allowing arguments to dominate proceedings, led by the most vocal members.¹⁰ Secondly, Religious Societies ministered only to the most motivated people. Wesley's field preaching demanded pastoral care for the large numbers arriving into the fringes of the church but he was frustrated by the Religious Societies' ability to diagnose problems with society without providing solutions. As his problems with the Fetter Lane Society worsened, Wesley had an opportunity to start again from scratch.¹¹

Membership of the Foundery reached over three-hundred by June 1740 when the building was complete. Wesley put the most serious into bands. A modification from earlier societies was to have an open membership policy; the only requirement was to have, "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins."¹² This was in direct contrast to strict exclusion clauses of Horneck's Religious Societies. Wesley also offered early morning Bible teaching for workers before work, creating a linkage between the society and his field preaching.¹³ Wesley adopted a policy of house visiting, borrowed from his father,¹⁴ and soon realized the need to delegate some of this work to oversee his rapidly growing membership. His frustration grew as he looked for a way to provide oversight. He delegated as much work as he could, appointing stewards to visit the sick and carry out other duties. He adopted an innovative method of regulating membership by presenting the names of prospective members to the bands for

⁹ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 74.

¹⁰ In Wesley's Societies leadership were appointed from the top down.

¹¹ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 74-75. See preface to Rules for United Societies Appendix H, Wesley, *Works*, 8:269.

¹² Wesley, *Works*, 8:250 People Called Methodists.

¹³ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 75-76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 76.

approval. If any objections were raised these were examined, and if upheld then the person would not be admitted; if not upheld then the person was admitted on trial. Admission was by a ticket valid for three months. Henderson notes that after three months, all members of the society were interviewed to determine whether the applicant should continue as a member. The criteria for approval did not rest on doctrine or even moral standards, but on willingness to submit to group participation.¹⁵ Membership of the Foundry Society continued to grow rapidly and by June 1741 stood at nine-hundred though membership of the bands was not keeping pace, raising concerns over supervision.

Methodism in the Provinces

On 3 June 1739 Wesley held the first meeting at the property he financed in Bristol (which predated the Foundry by six months). From then on he undertook an arduous traveling ministry dividing his time between Bristol and London, and a growing number of other places. His commitment to following up the results of field preaching must be emphasized. On 21 April 1741 Wesley wrote to his brother “I must go round and glean after Mr. Whitefield The Bands and Society are my first care.”¹⁶

His organization developed with puritan efficiency and by 1743 societies were in London, Bristol, Kingswood, and Newcastle-upon-Tyne.¹⁷ It is difficult to tell in many cases which societies originated with Wesley, and which already existed. His journals give abundant evidence that he found a ready audience at the existing societies, even when churches were

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 83.

¹⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 12:109 Letter to Charles Wesley 21 April 1741.

¹⁷ Wesley, *Works* 8:269-271 The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, &c, 1743.

banning him from their pulpits.¹⁸ It seems likely that many members of the religious societies would be predisposed to favor Wesley's Methodism because they shared his objectives for holiness of life, his loyalty to the Church of England, and they were sufficiently motivated to pursue membership of the societies. It may not be possible to tell how many societies he took over, but Methodist societies would eventually differ from earlier societies simply by their loyalty to Wesley's leadership. Religious societies had the right to dismiss their director and the members of the Fetter lane society exercised this right against Wesley. This did not apply in Bristol or the Foundery Society because Wesley was not under financial or legal control of the members; furthermore, Wesley had been approached by people in London seeking his pastoral care. Their continued submission to it was voluntary.

Band Meeting

The bands were the original pastoral structure of Methodism (borrowed from the Moravians). They had been a feature from the start of the Fetter Lane Society in 1738 and were transferred to Wesley's own United Societies beginning in Bristol on 3 April 1739. Wesley's bands differed slightly from the Moravian model—both were segregated by sex, but Wesley permitted married and unmarried in the same band, unlike the Moravians. Wesley drew up his own rules for the bands.¹⁹ Each member would give an account of their spiritual condition in response to very direct and personal questions:

- 1 What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
- 2 What temptations have you met with?
- 3 How were you delivered?

¹⁸ For example, 26 March 1738 (after having been barred from several London churches) he "went in the evening to a society in Oxford, where, (as my manner then was at all societies,) after using a Collect or two and the Lord's Prayer, I expounded a chapter in the New Testament, and concluded with three or four more Collects and a psalm." Wesley, *Works*, 1:89-90 Journal 26 March 1738.

¹⁹ See Appendix F.

4 What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?²⁰

The accountability of these groups went beyond Horneck's design which allowed for some discussion but made very few demands on members' privacy. Bands were criticized by Methodists as well as outsiders. Some objected to husband and wife being separated into different bands. Another complaint was the difficulty of putting intimate questions to people in front of their servants. Some complained they were not commanded by scripture, worse still, that "all these bands are mere Popery." Wesley dismissed these objections on the basis that there was no similarity between mutual confession between peers, and private confession to a priest. He defended confession²¹ and cited the injunction in James as a foundation of both the earlier Fetter Lane Society and the subsequent United Societies.

IN obedience to the command of God by St. James . . . we will meet together once a week to "confess our faults one to another, and pray one for another, that we may be healed."²²

THE design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."²³

John Pritchard (1736?-1807) gives us a testimony of the success of an early band and the power of the bonding that occurred between single men. Pritchard met the Methodists at the Foundery. After five years with them John Wesley invited him to take a trip to Ireland and they

²⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 8:272-73 Rules of the Band-Societies 1738.

²¹ Wesley, *Works*, 8:259 People Called Methodists. Also Philip F Hardt, *The Soul of Methodism: The Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 2000), 13. Anthony Armstrong, *The Church of England, the Methodists, and Society* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 67.

²² Wesley, *Works*, 1:92 Journal 1 May 1738.

²³ Wesley, *Works*, 8:272-73 Rules of the Band-Societies 1738.

“left London the first Sunday in March, 1770.”²⁴ He was about twenty nine when appointed a class leader.²⁵

When you [The following part of this account is addressed to the Rev. John Wesley] appointed me for a class-leader, and would not excuse me from undertaking that office, I gave myself up to do all the good in my power to those you appointed to meet with me. Soon after this I got a band of single men. It increased every month, until I was forced to divide it into four bands. But being unwilling to be parted, we appointed to meet together once a month, and to make it a prayer-meeting. In these meetings God was with us of a truth. We had a heaven among us, and a paradise within us! We lived as the Christians of old, having all things common; so that few, if any, counted anything that he possessed his own.²⁶

Unfortunately, not all Methodists were committed to the band meeting. According to Hardt, the majority resisted the deeper commitment which a band required.²⁷ The band meeting was never compulsory and although Wesley attached great importance it did not enjoy the support he hoped for. Hardt concludes,

Wesley’s ideal of a band society functioning as the heart of a Methodist Society, providing guidance by examination and precept, stimulating the brethren to the wholehearted pursuit of godliness, ceased to be a motivating vision for the Methodists soon after his death.²⁸

²⁴ John Pritchard, “The Life of Mr. John Pritchard,” in *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, ed. Thomas Jackson, vol. 6, 4th ed. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1871). 6 vols.

²⁵ Henry D. Rack, “The Decline of the Class Meeting,” *Proceedings of the Wesleyan Historical Society* 39, no. 1 (February 1973): 12.

²⁶ Pritchard, “The Life of Mr. John Pritchard,” 258.

²⁷ Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 13.

²⁸ William W. Dean, “Disciplined Fellowship: The Rise and Decline of Cell Groups in British Methodism” (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1985), 171.

Class Meeting

Holsclaw states that “the class meeting was an institutional expression of Wesleyan assumptions concerning pastoral care and general Christian duty.”²⁹ Wesley viewed sin as infectious in nature and saw danger in allowing those who were relapsing to remain in fellowship. Methodists agonized for some time over how to solve this problem, i.e., discovering who was living unrighteously, which was hampered by the geographic spread of their members. As Wesley put it, “several disorderly walkers did much hurt before I was apprized of it.”³⁰ The answer was found when Wesley, facing the problem of the debt he had incurred in building in Bristol, put it to the leaders there:

“How shall we pay the debt upon the preaching-house?” Captain Foy stood up and said, “Let every one in the society give a penny a week, and it will easily be done.” “But many of them,” said one, “have not a penny to give.” “True,” said the Captain; “then put ten or twelve of them to me. Let each of these give what they can weekly, and I will supply what is wanting.” Many others made the same offer. So Mr. Wesley divided the societies among them; assigning a class of about twelve persons to each of these, who were termed Leaders.

6. Not long after, one of these informed Mr. Wesley that, calling on such a one in his house, he found him quarrelling with his wife. Another was found in drink. It immediately struck into Mr. Wesley’s mind, “This is the very thing we wanted. The Leaders are the persons who may not only receive the contributions, but also watch over the souls of their brethren.” The society in London, being informed of this, willingly followed the example of that in Bristol; as did every society from that time, whether in Europe or America. By this means, it was easily found if any grew weary or faint, and help was speedily administered. And if any walked disorderly, they were quickly discovered, and either amended or dismissed.³¹

Captain Foy’s suggestion for collections in Bristol in 1742 presented a way of holding people accountable. This method was adopted quickly in London and elsewhere. Developed

²⁹ David F. Holsclaw, “The Demise of Disciplined Christian Fellowship: The Methodist Class Meeting in Nineteenth Century America” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1979), v.

³⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 8:252 People Called Methodists.

³¹ Wesley, *Works*, 13:259 Thoughts on Methodism 4 August 1786.

originally to meet a financial need, it was clear that the arrangement answered a spiritual one. But visiting people in their homes led to problems; firstly it was time consuming, and secondly, some people did not enjoy the support of other members of the household. This was particularly difficult for those who were servants. Furthermore, many had no privacy at home, undermining Wesley's hopes of "of exhorting, comforting, or reproving."³² The solution was to call people together to meet weekly as a class meeting. Wesley saw that this offered a means of pastoral oversight³³ and the benefits were soon apparent as members began to "bear one another's burdens," and to "care for each other."³⁴ More importantly, Wesley noted that they began to grow into Christ. Wesley made the connection between community and intimacy with Christ.

Speaking the truth in love, they grew up into Him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ; from whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, increased unto the edifying itself in love.³⁵

The success of the class meetings brought a "more tender affection than before" among some members who, realizing that trials still lay ahead, wanted an even more intimate group where they might share deeper personal matters (class meetings comprised a mixture of sex, age, and rank).

These, therefore, wanted some means of closer union; they wanted to pour out their hearts without reserve, particularly with regard to the sin which did still easily beset them, and the temptations which were most apt to prevail over them. And they were the more desirous of this, when they observed it was the express advice of an inspired writer: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."³⁶

³² Wesley, *Works*, 8:253-254 People Called Methodists.

³³ Dean, "Disciplined Fellowship," 175. Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 14.

³⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 8:254 People Called Methodists.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* 8:257-58.

In response, Wesley put people into bands.³⁷

3. In compliance with their desire, I divided them into smaller companies; putting the married or single men, and married or single women, together. The chief rules of these bands (that is, little companies; so that old English word signifies) run thus: —

In order to ‘confess our faults one to another,’ and pray one for another that we may be healed, we intend, (1.) To meet once a week, at the least. (2.) To come punctually at the hour appointed. (3.) To begin with singing or prayer. (4.) To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our soul, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting. (5.) To desire some person among us (thence called a Leader) to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.³⁸

Although the class meeting began for fund-raising (a purpose it retained), Wesley saw its potential as a means of pastoral oversight. Captain Foy’s suggestion provided an unexpected benefit. Membership of bands was not compulsory, but the class meeting provided an intermediate group. The class meeting was made compulsory and membership of the Societies would become conditional upon class attendance.

A distinction between class meetings and earlier societies was the sharing of religious experience in class. Horneck’s societies “expressed themselves in study and discussion, in the deepening of the spiritual life of their members, and in the extension of their theological knowledge.”³⁹ Evangelism became a key priority in class meetings possibly over and above financial and spiritual growth.⁴⁰

³⁷ Wesley is referring here to the bands in his United Societies

³⁸ *Ibid.* 258.

³⁹ Towson, *Moravian and Methodist*, 20. See also Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 15. For an account of the way that feelings played a part in the discussion of the class meeting, e.g. “Well brother, how do you feel the state of your mind tonight?” see Joseph Barker, “A Methodist Class Meeting, Circa 1822,” in *Nonconformity in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. David M. Thompson (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1972), 48. Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 15.

⁴⁰ Members could attend band meetings and these would later take on the role of Spiritual formation groups as the class meeting went into decline in the mid nineteenth century. See William W. Dean, “The Evangelistic Function of the Class Meeting,” *Conservative Evangelicals in Methodism Newsletter* 10 (1983): 32-33.

Criticism of the Class System

Not everyone welcomed the new class and complaints were raised. Some did not want to speak openly while others resented the arrival of a new system. Wesley justified their introduction and presented the meetings as a privilege, not a duty. They were “prudential” rather than mandatory for Christians, but for Methodists they were not optional, they became compulsory.

We declare them all to be merely prudential, not essential, not of divine institution. We prevent, so far as in us lies, their growing formal or dead. We are always open to instruction; willing to be wiser every day than we were before, and to change whatever we can change for the better.⁴¹

Wesley adapted practices as they proved useful. He was not interested in maintaining the status quo for its own sake. Some complained that scripture did not require class meetings but Wesley asserted that scripture gave only general rules.⁴²

‘There is no scripture for this, for classes and I know not what.’ I answer, (1.) There is no scripture against it. You cannot show one text that forbids them. (2.) There is much scripture for it, even all those texts which enjoin the substance of those various duties whereof this is only an indifferent circumstance, to be determined by reason and experience. (3.) You seem not to have observed, that the Scripture, in most points, gives only general rules; and leaves the particular circumstances to be adjusted by the common sense of mankind.⁴³

Wesley made the class meetings a condition of belonging to the Society and Methodist membership became synonymous with class membership. This meant that class membership was so integral to Methodist polity that as resistance to it remained and grew some confusion arose over Methodist polity. The class meeting had established itself as the core of Methodist

⁴¹ Wesley, *Works*, 8:254 People Called Methodists.

⁴² Hunter III, *Spread the Power*, 44.

⁴³ Wesley, *Works*, 8:254-255 People Called Methodists.

membership and identity, in preference to the bands, which had started earlier and were more demanding.⁴⁴

Class Tickets

With the growth of the society, Wesley had to increase efforts to maintain standards of holiness (conduct) and he decided to interview everyone personally every three months to check on their attendance at class. Satisfactory attendance was rewarded with a quarterly “class ticket” authorizing the holder to attend weekly society and class meetings, a concession offered on a limited basis to those without. Doorkeepers enforced the ticket system but Wesley’s rule on class attendance was not observed to his satisfaction.⁴⁵ Those who satisfied Wesley at these quarterly visitations were issued a ticket of endorsement. This provided a tactful way of excluding those who were found wanting. Wesley found a precedent in the early church’s use of letters of recommendation.

To each of those of whose seriousness and good conversation I found no reason to doubt, I gave a testimony under my own hand, by writing their name on a ticket prepared for that purpose; every ticket implying as strong a recommendation of the person to whom it was given as if I had wrote at length, “I believe the bearer hereof to be one that fears God and works righteousness.”

These also supplied us with a quiet and inoffensive method of removing any disorderly member. He has no new ticket at the quarterly visitation; (for so often the tickets are changed;) and hereby it is immediately known that he is no longer of the community.⁴⁶

Some non-members were so eager to attend Society meetings, Love-Feasts and services that members sometimes lent them their tickets. Much later the 1808 Conference would introduce a rule against this: “Any person who is proved to have lent a Society Ticket to

⁴⁴ Rack, “Decline of the Class Meeting,” 12.

⁴⁵ For examples of his concerns see *Journal* 3 Sep 1759. Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 18. For contrasting examples of his findings see *Journal* 5 Nov 1747 and 22 June 1787.

⁴⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 8:256-257 People Called Methodists.

another, not in the Society, for the purpose of deceiving the door-keepers, shall be suspended for three months.”⁴⁷ Class tickets provided ammunition for Wesley’s critics—Dr. John Scott, in a pamphlet entitled “*A Fine Picture of Enthusiasm*”(London 1744) was scathing about Wesley and Whitefield “deluding people into a passionate, mechanical religion.” He saw evidence of sympathies toward Rome because Wesley had

ordered the tickets for his people to be impressed with the crucifix; and this, with their confessions and other customs, intimates a manifest fondness for the orthodox institutions of the Church of Rome.⁴⁸

This ticket design was discontinued because of criticism.⁴⁹ Wesley was also criticized for his strict class ticket policy, but defended it in the interests of protecting their intimacy.⁵⁰

Class Papers

Class meetings were not concerned just with conversion—attendance was required of all members. Class leaders recorded attendance on a class paper using letters: “‘D’ for ‘distant,’ ‘S’ for ‘sick,’ ‘B’ for ‘business,’ ‘N’ for ‘neglect,’ and ‘A’ for ‘no reason.’ Three consecutive absences could result in expulsion.”⁵¹ But the class paper recorded more than just attendance; member’s spiritual states were also given a code.

The letter “a” meant “awakened,” a period meant the member “professed justification,” a colon meant the member claimed he or she had experienced “entire sanctification,” and a question mark meant the member had doubts about salvation.⁵²

⁴⁷ Fred M. Parkinson, “Methodist Class Tickets,” *Proceedings of the Wesleyan Historical Society* 1, no. 5 (1898?): 135.

⁴⁸ Tyerman, *Life and Times I*, 428.

⁴⁹ Joseph. D. Wright, “Class and Band Tickets: A Guide to Collectors,” *Proceedings of the Wesleyan Historical Society* 5, no. 2: 38.

⁵⁰ See Holsclaw, “Demise of Disciplined Christian Fellowship,” 44; Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 18.

⁵¹ Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 160. See also David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 107.

⁵² See Watson, *Class Meeting*, 77; Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 17.

This borrowed the Moravians' classifications: "dead, awakened, ignorant, willing disciples," and "disciples that have made progress."⁵³ Wesley monitored the condition of the classes by inspecting the class papers of every society quarterly.

Further Groups: Penitent Bands and Select Society

The bands were successful for many of their members but a few "fell from faith."

Wesley met with these separately, to minister "advice and instructions suited to their case."⁵⁴

The success of these "penitent bands" meant:

Many of these soon recovered the ground they had lost. Yea, they rose higher than before; being more watchful than ever, and more meek and lowly, as well as stronger in the faith that worketh by love. They now outran the greater part of their brethren, continually walking in the light of God, and having fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.⁵⁵

Wesley created a further grouping, a select society, in which he might make himself accountable, so they might "press after perfection."

I saw it might be useful to give some advices to all those who continued in the light of God's countenance, which the rest of their brethren did not want, and probably could not receive. So I desired a small number of such as appeared to be in this state, to spend an hour with me every Monday morning. My design was, not only to direct them how to press after perfection; to exercise their every grace, and improve every talent they had received; and to incite them to love one another more, and to watch more carefully over each other; but also to have a select company, to whom I might unbosom myself on all occasions, without reserve; and whom I could propose to all their brethren as a pattern of love, of holiness, and of good works.⁵⁶

The rules were very simple, yet membership of this group did bring an expectation that one would submit everything they could to share. This was Wesley's peer group.

⁵³ See Watson, *Class Meeting*, 77.

⁵⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 8:260 People Called Methodists.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

They had no need of being encumbered with many rules; having the best rule of all in their hearts. No peculiar directions were therefore given to them, excepting only these three:

First. Let nothing spoken in this society be spoken again. (Hereby we had the more full confidence in each other.)

Secondly. Every member agrees to submit to his Minister in all indifferent things.

Thirdly. Every member will bring, once a week, all he can spare toward a common stock.

Every one here has an equal liberty of speaking, there being none greater or less than another. I could say freely to these, when they were met together, “Ye may all prophesy one by one,” (taking that word in its lowest sense,) “that all may learn, and all may be comforted.” And I often found the advantage of such a free conversation, and that “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.” Any who is inclined so to do is likewise encouraged to pour out his soul to God. And here especially we have found, that “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”⁵⁷

Love Feast

Wesley borrowed the idea of the Love Feast from the Moravians. He made some changes; permitting all society members to attend,⁵⁸ emphasizing personal testimonies, and using them as a tool for evangelism.⁵⁹ Love feasts were held quarterly, some for men, some for women, and some mixed,

that we might together “eat bread,” as the ancient Christians did, “with gladness and singleness of heart.” At these love-feasts (so we termed them, retaining the name, as well as the thing, which was in use from the beginning) our food is only a little plain cake and water. But we seldom return from them without being fed, not only with the “meat which perisheth,” but with “that which endureth to everlasting life.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 261.

⁵⁸ Moravians only allowed bands.

⁵⁹ Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 12.

⁶⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 8:258-259 People Called Methodists.

Methodist Personnel

Wesley raised an army to do the work of Methodism and his skill in recruiting people, many from the lowest social ranks, and forging them into a force that changed the face of England and America must be one of the great contributions of the eighteenth century. Methodism needed workers to spread its message and it looked to itself to provide them. As Wesley saw the needs that confronted them he drew up job descriptions and found people to fill them.

These are Leaders of classes and bands, (spoken of before,) Assistants, Stewards, Visitors of the sick, and Schoolmasters.

2. In the third part of the “Appeal,” I have mentioned how we were led to accept of Lay-Assistants. Their office is, in the absence of the Minister,

To expound every morning and evening. (2.) To meet the united society, the bands, the select society, and the penitents, once a week (3.) To visit the classes once a quarter. (4.) To hear and decide all differences. (5.) To put the disorderly back on trial, and to receive on trial for the bands or society. (6.) To see that the Stewards, the Leaders, and the Schoolmasters faithfully discharge their several offices. (7.) To meet the Leaders of the bands and classes weekly, and the Stewards, and to overlook their accounts.⁶¹

Class Leaders

Class leaders were responsible for reporting the conduct of their members, those who would not amend their behavior were thrown out.

5. It is the business of a Leader,

(1.) To see each person in his class, once a week at the least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require; to receive what they are willing to give, toward the relief of the poor.

(2.) To meet the Minister and the Stewards of the society, in order to inform the Minister of any that are sick, or of any that are disorderly and will not be reproved; to pay to the Stewards what they have received of their several classes in the week preceding.⁶²

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 8:261.

⁶² *Ibid.* 8:253.

Leaders came in for criticism because of their lack of “gifts and graces,” but Wesley’s response was pragmatic. He had confidence in the leaders because of the evidence God was using them, and also in their ability to learn. He honored them by requiring those with a grievance to raise it with him privately, so he could take steps to resolve the situation.

12. They spoke far more plausibly than these, who said, “The thing is well enough in itself. But the Leaders are insufficient for the work: They have neither gifts nor graces for such an employment.” I answer, (1.) Yet such Leaders as they are, it is plain God has blessed their labour. (2.) If any of these is remarkably wanting in gifts or grace, he is soon taken notice of and removed. (3.) If you know any such, tell it to me, not to others, and I will endeavour to exchange him for a better. (4.) It may be hoped they will all be better than they are, both by experience and observation, and by the advices given them by the Minister every Tuesday night, and the prayers (then in particular) offered up for them.⁶³

Further extracts from Minutes of Several Conversations: regarding the role of class leaders.

Q. 11. How may the Leaders of classes be made more useful?

A. (1.) Let each of them be diligently examined concerning his method of meeting a class. Let this be done with all possible exactness at the next quarterly visitation. And in order to this, allow sufficient time for the visiting of each society. (2.) Let each Leader carefully inquire how every soul in his class prospers; not only how each person observes the outward Rules, but how he grows in the knowledge and love of God. (3.) Let the Leaders converse with the Assistant frequently and freely.

Q. 12. Can anything farther be done, in order to make the meetings of the classes lively and profitable?

A. (1.) Change improper Leaders. (2.) Let the Leaders frequently meet each other’s classes. (3.) Let us observe which Leaders are the most useful; and let these meet the other classes as often as possible. (4.) See that all the Leaders be not only men of sound judgment, but men truly devoted to God.⁶⁴

Expectations upon class leaders escalated as Methodism developed, changing their role from Wesley’s original vision. Tensions would arise between class leaders and traveling preachers over issues of authority and governance.⁶⁵ Conflict between class leaders and

⁶³ *Ibid.* 8:255.

⁶⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 8:301 Minutes of Several Conversations.

⁶⁵ See Dean, “Disciplined Fellowship,” 225-54; Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 19.

Methodist authorities would erupt after Wesley's death, though there were earlier signs of trouble:

In the Methodist discipline, the wheels regularly stand thus: The Assistant, the Preachers, the Stewards, the Leaders, the people. But here the Leaders, who are the lowest wheel but one, were got quite out of their place. They were got at the top of all, above the Stewards, the Preachers, yea, and above the Assistant himself.⁶⁶

Stewards

Stewards were the middle management of Methodism, responsible for the affairs of the society, covering most financial and practical responsibilities. They would organize and collect contributions from class leaders and had budget responsibility for the distribution of alms, the upkeep of buildings, and account keeping. They were also responsible for the maintenance of discipline and matters of doctrine. Wesley issued terse guidelines.

(1.) Be frugal. Save everything that can be saved honestly. (2.) Spend no more than you receive. Contract no debts. (3.) Have no long accounts. Pay everything within the week. (4.) Give none that asks relief, either an ill word or an ill look. Do not hurt them, if you cannot help. (5.) Expect no thanks from man.⁶⁷

Stewards were assisted by Helpers and generally performed their roles to Wesley's satisfaction—he found only two areas of weakness: finances were frequently overstretched, and visiting the sick proved difficult to carry out. To solve the problem of visiting the sick, Wesley created another office—"visitors of the sick" were required to visit all the sick people in their district three times a week and to "inquire into the state of their souls, and to advise them as occasion may require." Visitors were to serve the sick in whatever way they could and to give weekly reports to the Stewards. Again, Wesley drew attention to the precedent he found in the

⁶⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 3:428. Cited by Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 21.

⁶⁷ Wesley, *Works*, 8: 262 People Called Methodists.

early church.⁶⁸ Yet Wesley's concerns for the sick remained, particularly the poor. For many years he nurtured a layman's interest in medicine and circumstances prompted him to venture into medical practice. He hired an apothecary and a surgeon and informed the society that he was willing to see patients. His first case met with success and in the first five months five hundred people were seen.⁶⁹

Commitment to Follow-up through the Class Meeting System

Wesley came to attach such importance to class meetings that eventually he would only preach in places where societies and classes could be formed.⁷⁰ In contrast, Whitefield made no such stipulations, perhaps exemplifying their differing views on human responsibility.⁷¹ As Methodism grew, Wesley advised against preaching in places where people could not be put into societies. "We have made the trial in various places; and that for a considerable time. But all the seed has fallen as by the highway side. There is scarce any fruit remaining."⁷² Wesley resolved not to preach where he could not put people into class meetings, after expelling sixty four people for unsatisfactory conduct.

I went in the morning in order to speak severally with the members of the society at Tanfield. From the terrible instances I met with here, (and indeed in all parts of England,) I am more and more convinced, that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place should be half-awakened, and then left to themselves to fall asleep again. Therefore I determine, by the grace of God, not to strike one stroke in any place where I cannot follow the blow.⁷³

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 8:263.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 8:264.

⁷⁰ See *Journal* 25 August 1763.

⁷¹ Hardt, *Soul of Methodism*, 14.

⁷² Wesley, *Works*, 8:300 Minutes of Several Conversations.

⁷³ Wesley, *Works*, 1:416 Journal 13 March 1743. Cited by Hunter III, *Spread the Power*, 58-59.

Wesley's commitment to the class system would remain twenty years later.

I was more convinced than ever, that the preaching like an Apostle, without joining together those that are awakened, and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connexion; and the consequence is, that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.⁷⁴

The principle of preaching only where societies could be established was raised in

Minutes of Several Conversations:

"Is it advisable for us to preach in as many places as we can, without forming any societies?

A. By no means. We have made the trial in various places; and that for a considerable time. But all the seed has fallen as by the highway side. There is scarce any fruit remaining."⁷⁵

Wesley urged those who would not commit to deeper fellowship to give the class meeting a six week trial.

'But I do not care to meet a class; I find no good in it.' Suppose you find even a dislike, a loathing of it; may not this be natural, or even diabolical? In spite of this, break through, make a fair trial. It is but a lion in the way. Meet only six times, (with previous prayer,) and see if it do not vanish away.⁷⁶

Summary

Wesley had been at the cutting edge of England's evangelical revival from 1738 and this was the proving ground for his methodology as he sought to gather a harvest and then put it to work. Wesley's ministry spanned the continuum between a frontier evangelist and a pastor, putting the tension between these roles to creative effect. While modern thought often requires people to choose one in favor over the other, Wesley refused to dispense with either.

⁷⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 3:144 Journal 25 August 1763. Cited by Hunter III, *Spread the Power*, 58-59.

⁷⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 8: 300 Minutes of Several Conversations.

⁷⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 3:189 Journal 13 July 1764.

Methodism was a frontier movement that found its natural home in the turmoil of the Industrial Revolution and America's pioneers. It combined the vigorous mission activity of Moravian pietism with the quest for holiness of the Religious Societies and broke with the Anglican parish system, creating a highly mobile mission force that would trample across boundaries of parish, nation and culture without regard for social distinction. It survived well in thin soil under harsh conditions which did not favor the longer established denominations. Methodism had a commitment to mobility—it expected change, it brought change, and it created change—it was a method of change.

CHAPTER 5

WESLEY'S ECCLESIOLOGY

Up until May 1738, Wesley was driven in his search to find faith, but on the 24th he found faith in a new way and from then on his quest was faith *working through love*. His mission was to bring others to a place of faith and see that faith worked out in their lives. His group methodology was designed to bring people to a deep conviction of faith. The purpose of this chapter is to examine Wesley's perspective on his method in the wider context of the church and look for the rationale behind the ambiguous relationship between Methodism and the Anglican Church.

Faith Working by Love

Wesley's ecclesiology was a logical response to fulfill the purpose of the church, meeting the demands placed upon it by faith working through love. The purpose of the gospel was salvation and for Wesley this was not just an escape from hell—it required the restoration of the image of God. This was to be effected by the power of faith, working through love. Wesley's mission was to facilitate and maintain this process. His ecclesiology developed around this objective, seeking to bring people to an encounter with the power of faith and then to harness this in works of love. Wesley succeeded, in a way that very few have, in translating the paradoxes in the gospel into a working strategy for Christian life that people could actually follow. As Snyder puts it, "Wesley's genius, under God, lay in developing and maintaining a synthesis in doctrine and practice that kept biblical paradoxes paired and powerful." He was able to develop practices that preserved and harnessed the tension between faith and works, doctrine and experience,

personal and corporate spirituality, and temporal and eternal priorities.¹ Central to Wesley's thought was his view of the relationship between human responsibility and God's grace. As Maddox says, "without God's grace we cannot be saved; while without our (grace empowered but uncoerced) participation, God's grace will not save."²

The Purpose of Methodism

Watson attributes Wesley's practical churchmanship to the focus of Wesley's ecclesiology; an overwhelming concern for the purpose of the church. For Wesley this meant reaching people with the gospel—questions of doctrine and order were of secondary importance.³ Wesley's deep love of the Anglican Church was tempered by a pragmatism that held the salvation of people to be the highest priority. In 1746 in response to criticism on his breaches of church order he wrote to a Mr. John Smith.⁴

I would inquire, What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God; and to build them up in his fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable, as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth. Now, I would fain know, where has order answered these ends? Not in any place where I have been; not among the tanners in Cornwall, the keelmen at Newcastle, the colliers in Kingswood or Staffordshire; not among the drunkards, swearers, Sabbath-breakers of Moorfields, or the harlots of Drury-lane. They could not be built up in the fear and love of God, while they were open, barefaced servants of the devil; and such they continued, notwithstanding the most orderly preaching both in St. Luke's and St. Giles's church. One reason whereof was, they never came near the church; nor had any desire or design so to do, till, by what you term "breach of order," they were brought to fear God, to love him, and keep his commandments.⁵

¹ Snyder, *Radical Wesley*, 141.

² Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 19.

³ Watson, *Class Meeting*, 5.

⁴ John Smith was an assumed name thought to be Dr. Thomas Secker, then Bishop of Oxford, and later Archbishop of Canterbury. Wesley, *Works*, 12:56 Editor's comment referring to Letters to Mr. John Smith.

⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 12:80-81 Letters to Mr. John Smith 25 June 1746.

Salvation for Wesley did not end at conversion. Wesley's work was not finished when people found Christ—it had only begun. Wesley had bigger ambitions—he expected people to be changed.

By salvation I mean, not barely, according to the vulgar notion, deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth. This implies all holy and heavenly tempers, and, by consequence, all holiness of conversation.

Now, if by salvation we mean a present salvation from sin, we cannot say, holiness is the condition of it; for it is the thing itself. Salvation, in this sense, and holiness, are synonymous terms. We must therefore say, "We are saved by faith." Faith is the sole condition of this salvation. For without faith we cannot be thus saved. But whosoever believeth is saved already.⁶

Not only did Wesley expect people to be changed, he expected their lives to bear fruit in keeping with this. The faith he preached would purify the heart, by God's power, from all unrighteousness, replacing it with love for God and humanity which would inspire "works of God . . . spent for all" enabling the believer to endure with joy the malice directed against them. Wesley's solution to the paradox of faith and works was found in Galatians 5:6.

For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.⁷

For Wesley, the hallmark of a Christian was a *faith working by love*.⁸

Wesley's Understanding of Church

Wesley's understanding of church rested primarily on the principle set out in the nineteenth Article of the Church of England.⁹

⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 8:46 A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion - Part I.

⁷ KJV Galatians 5:6

⁸ Wesley, *Works*, 5:23 Sermon 2: *The Almost Christian*, preached at Oxford 25 July 1741.

⁹ Watson, *Class Meeting*, 9.

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

As the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, have erred; so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of Faith.¹⁰

For Wesley, dissent was failing to abide by the nineteenth article of the Church of England, something he would never agree to part from.¹¹ His ecclesiology was Anglican, in the sense that the universal church had a visible unity, making it inclusive, which was at odds with some of the Continental Reformers who regarded the true church as invisible.¹² Wesley's ecclesiology followed the Anglican theological method testing matters against scripture, tradition and reason, with scripture holding priority as set out in the sixth article of the Church of England.¹³ Wesley understood that the church had to be functional, fostering growth in holiness from commitment to Christ, and corporate accountability through voluntary discipline.¹⁴

Theological Influences

Debate over the relative influence of various theological traditions on Wesley has much to consider, given the Anglican context he trained in, with its commitment to the *via media*, embracing a wide range of theological positions from Catholic to Reformed. Wesley believed that "primitive" Christianity (early church) had much to offer in uniting and renewing Anglicanism and maintaining its *via media*. Wesley's preference for early Greek writers over

¹⁰ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 265.

¹¹ Watson, *Class Meeting*, 13.

¹² For Wesley's defense of the Church of England, see Appendix I.

¹³ Watson, *Class Meeting*, 11.

¹⁴ James A. Davies, "Small Groups: Are They Really So New?" *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 2 (1984): 44-45.

their Latin counterparts influenced his soteriology, preferring a Greek, therapeutic healing of sin-diseased nature to the Latin emphasis on guilt and absolution. Maddox claims scholarly consensus over Wesley's commitment to a therapeutic view of Christian life.¹⁵ Outler in no way patronizes Wesley in describing him as a "folk theologian." Wesley's guiding principle in theology as in everything else was that it brought Christ and his people together.¹⁶

Scripture persuaded Wesley that he needed "the mind which was in Christ," not just partially, but "walking as Christ also walked"; an "entire inward and outward conformity to our Master."¹⁷ In "Character of a Methodist,"¹⁸ Wesley defined a Methodist as "one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength."¹⁹

Rules of the United Societies: Methodist Discipline

Watson notes that the rules were the basis for everything for which Methodism was known during its formative years.²⁰ Although there were no preconditions to gain membership, there were conditions to *remain* in membership.²¹ Discipline was not optional for Methodists, it provided tension that gave the movement its direction. White finds the heart of Wesley's attitude

¹⁵ Maddox does not attempt to prove specific dependence on early Greek writers because of the known existence of others with similar commitments to a therapeutic model, e.g. Pietists, and Anglican "holy living" divines. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 22-23.

¹⁶ Outler, *John Wesley*, iii.

¹⁷ Wesley, *Works*, 11: 367 A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

¹⁸ Published in 1739, it was his first writing for publication on the subject of perfection, and he gave it the innocuous title to deflect hostility. Wesley, *Works*, 11:370-71 Christian Perfection.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 11:371.

²⁰ David Lowes Watson, "Aldersgate Street and the General Rules: The Form and the Power of Methodist Discipleship," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 34.

²¹ Watson, "Aldersgate," 38.

to discipline in his sermon, *The Cure of Evil-Speaking*, which Wesley opens with Matthew 18:

15-17:²²

“If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

“But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

“And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church: But if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”²³

Referring to the first step of discipline, Wesley requires it to be followed diligently.

This is a step which our Lord absolutely commands us to take, but that he commands us to take this step first, before we attempt any other. No alternative is allowed, no choice of anything else: This is the way; walk thou in it.²⁴

In his sermon, *Causes of the Inefficiency of Christianity*, Wesley shows the connection he drew between spirit and discipline.

It was a common saying among the Christians in the primitive Church, “The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian;” implying, that none could be real Christians, without the help of Christian discipline. But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians; for where is Christian discipline? In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now, whatever doctrine is preached, where there is not discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers.²⁵

This theme appears several times. For instance, in 1750 when traveling in Cornwall he complained, “I find the societies have suffered great loss from want of discipline. Wisely said the

²² Charles Edward White, “John Wesley’s Use of Church Discipline,” *Methodist History* 29, no. 2 (January 1991): 112-13.

²³ Wesley, *Works*, 6:114 Sermon 49 The Cure of Evil-Speaking.

²⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 6:118 Sermon 49 The Cure of Evil-Speaking.

²⁵ Wesley, *Works*, 7:285 Sermon 116 Causes of the Inefficiency of Christianity.

ancients, ‘The soul and body make a man; the Spirit and discipline make a Christian.’”²⁶ Wesley was very strict in his application of discipline and his journals provide accounts of his purges.

God humbled us in the evening by the loss of more than thirty of our little company, who I was obliged to exclude, as no longer adorning the Gospel of Christ. I believed it best, openly to declare both their names and the reasons why they were excluded. We then all cried unto God, that this might be for their edification, and not for destruction.²⁷

The societies provided the highest unit of organization in Methodism and were organized geographically, including everyone within their area. Membership of the society was a privilege which depended on faithful attendance of class meetings (or classes).²⁸ Class meetings were “points of accountability for faithful Christian living in the World.”²⁹ What mattered to Wesley was that people facing the challenge of Christian life had a point of accountability.

Likewise, if you would avoid schism, observe every rule of the Society, and of the Bands, for conscience’ sake. Never omit meeting your Class or Band; never absent yourself from any public meeting. These are the very sinews of our Society; and whatever weakens, or tends to weaken, our regard for these, or our exactness in attending them, strikes at the very root of our community.³⁰

The Threat of Schism

Wesley vigorously refuted the suggestion that he was creating a new sect and never deviated from his conviction that God had raised up Methodists “not to form any new sect; but to

²⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 2:204 Journal 17 August 1750.

²⁷ This example took place in Bristol on 9 December 1741 and a similar instance followed in London three weeks later. Wesley, *Works*, 1:348, 350 Journal 9 and 27 December 1741. Cited by White, “Church Discipline,” 114.

²⁸ The earliest societies predated the class meetings but Wesley quickly made them a condition of continued membership of the society.

²⁹ Watson, *Class Meeting*, xi.

³⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 11:433 Christian Perfection.

reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”³¹ His famous justification for crossing parish boundaries appears in his Journal on June 11 1739.

I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation.³²

Wesley fought to avoid schism with the Church of England. He distinguished between drawing people out of the church as a building, while strengthening their unity as a fellowship. He argued that unity could not be destroyed where it did not exist—the people coming to him had never been part of an authentic fellowship. “Rather, are not the bulk of the parishioners a mere rope of sand?”³³ On the failure of former separations Wesley commented that “the success never answered the expectations.”³⁴ He wanted people to continue attending normal Services for the sacraments and his initiatives were intended to be compatible with this, not forcing people to choose. His greatest concern was voiced in a letter to his brother; “I only fear the Preachers’ or the people’s leaving, not the Church, but the love of God, and inward or outward holiness.”³⁵

In 1758 Wesley set out twelve reasons against separation from the Church of England which centered mainly on the damage that would be done to those who needed the shelter that the Methodist connection provided.³⁶ Wesley stood against separation all his life, though he acknowledged that some parish ministers were unfit and defended Methodists who gave up

³¹ Wesley, *Works*, 8:299 Minutes of Several Conversations.

³² Wesley, *Works*, 1:201 Journal 11 June 1739. See also Wesley, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion - Part I,” 119.

³³ Wesley, *Works*, 8:251 People Called Methodists.

³⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 13:226 Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England 1758.

³⁵ Robert E. Chiles, *Scriptural Christianity: A Call to John Wesley's Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1984), 91. citing Wesley, *Works*, 12:118 Letter to Charles Wesley 28 June 1755.

³⁶ Wesley, *Works*, 13:225-32 Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England 1758.

attendance. He knew this was happening increasingly and saw no reason why he or Methodists should be blamed.³⁷

Wesley repeatedly urged people to live in the “unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace”³⁸ opening his sermon “On the Church” with Ephesians 4: 16.

I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.³⁹

Wesley sought unity among Christians at corporate and individual levels. He was scathing about the Mystic Divines and their “solitary religion.” His tone was vitriolic and may have been exacerbated by the dispute over “stillness” which reached its height that year (1739).

For the religion these authors would edify us in, is solitary religion. “If thou wilt be perfect,” say they, “trouble not thyself about outward works. It is better to work virtues in the will. He hath attained the true resignation, who hath estranged himself from all outward works, that God may work inwardly in him, without any turning to outward things. These are the true worshippers, who worship God in spirit and in truth.” For contemplation is, with them, the fulfilling of the law, even a contemplation that “consists in a cessation from all works.”

Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. “Holy solitaires” is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. “*Faith working by love*” is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. “This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also;” and that we manifest our love “by doing good unto all men; especially to them that are of the household of faith.” And in truth, whosoever loveth his brethren, not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be “zealous of good works.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Wesley, *Works* 13:263-64 Thoughts on Separation from the Church.

³⁸ This phrase appears repeatedly in Wesley’s writing, see for example Wesley, *Works*, 4:415 Journal 23 May 1788 Wesley, *Works*, 6:181 Sermon 53 On the Death of Mr. Whitefield 18 November 1770.

³⁹ Wesley, *Works*, 6:392 Sermon 74 Of the Church.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 14:321 List of Poetical Works. Emphasis added.

Wesley's insistence on remaining connected to the Church of England rested on his deep conviction that Christianity was *visible* by its unity. While the Continental Reformers had justified their break from Rome by denying its monopoly and positing an *invisible* church, Wesley would not allow sleight of hand to use this to justify schism, claiming unity where it simply did not exist. For Wesley, unity that was not demonstrated was a sham.⁴¹

Wesley was anxious to avoid the bigotry of dismissing all other parts of the wider church and arranged monthly meetings to share accounts of God's work in other denominations and parts of the world.⁴² The whole thrust of Wesley's work was based on the necessity of the community of the church. Unlike his contemporaries (e.g. Whitefield) Wesley provided follow up for seekers and he would not preach at places where people could not be put into Societies.

Wesley saw the mission of the church as a significant vehicle for personal growth and an integral part of church. He integrated the two making them interdependent, creating a hierarchy in his organization based upon faithfulness. This was very different from the Anglican hierarchy which mirrored the class stratification, and depended upon social rank. Wesley started from an egalitarian base making it possible in Methodism to reach any level in the organization regardless of social position, education, or wealth. Leaders at one level were automatically members of the next group up, regardless of social status.⁴³

The Religious Societies provided Wesley with a platform where he could preach regardless of parish boundaries, even when the pulpits of the parish churches were closed to him. Wesley found a welcome in the Religious Societies and they provided him a portal into the

⁴¹ Wesley, *Works*, 6:148-150 Sermon 51 The Good Steward.

⁴² Wesley, *Works*, 8:257 People Called Methodists.

⁴³ Henderson, *Class Meetings*, 47.

Anglican church. Furthermore, the Societies comprised people who were sympathetic to Wesley's message because they were already seeking "holiness of heart and life" according to Horneck's purpose. Not only did they provide Wesley with an audience which was not under the direct control of the local Anglican authority, but an audience predisposed to his message. Wesley brought them a strategy for renewal. These outcrops of piety provided fertile soil and Wesley worked in them to nurture side-shoots of new growth. They were one step removed from the parish system and their partly autonomous nature provided Wesley with the opening he needed. Wesley was secure in his Anglicanism and felt free to bring innovation. Wesley grafted the bold and aggressive mission activity of the Moravians and their testimony of a faith that proved itself in the face of death onto the heartfelt desire for holiness of the religious societies. Their roots ran deep into Anglicanism and in England, Wesley found no reason to sever them. Wesley lived and died an Anglican.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ John Wesley, "Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church," in *Works* 13:274.

CONCLUSION

Wesley was a man with only one mission. His soteriological focus dominated his thought and action.⁴⁵ By 1743 Wesley's method was prototyped and tested—it was time for rollout. The Evangelical revival had its follow up plan but Wesley's method was not just a program that could be cranked out. It was a means of grace that gave God entrance into people's lives and allowed him to make a difference. The method put people in a position of openness to God, and God used it.

Wesley implemented an effective working theology by integrating continental reformers' "salvation by faith alone" with a mandate to do works, not for the sake of salvation, but for the sake of love. Wesley saw James chapter two as an important adjunct to salvation by faith alone—without works faith was worthless, while works would "perfect" faith. "Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?"⁴⁶ Wesley's fusion of salvation by faith with his earnest desire and pursuit of holiness gave Methodism the breadth and span to forge an effective spirituality that changed lives. Wesley refused to be side-tracked by an emphasis of works-righteousness or faith alone—his ability to juxtaposition competing elements and hold these in balance gave Methodism a tensile strength that made it a vital force in eighteenth century England.

When in later years, the form of the meetings were followed but the spirit of openness and vulnerability was set aside, they ceased to be a means of grace and settled into orthodoxy. By the early nineteenth century, the class meeting was the only viable survivor of the network of

⁴⁵ Clarence Bence, "Salvation and the Church: The Ecclesiology of John Wesley," in *The Church: An Inquiry Into Ecclesiology from a Biblical Theological Perspective*, ed. Melvyn E. Dieter and Daniel N. Berg, Wesleyan Theological Perspectives, vol. 4 (Anderson: Warner Press, 1984), 299.

⁴⁶ KJV James 2:22

groups that Methodism began with. It drew criticism and resentment, and several books and articles were issued in the mid-nineteenth century to defend it.⁴⁷ Two problems existed: the unpopularity of the class meeting, and the relationship between class membership and church membership. Those who supported the class meeting regarded it as an essential means of grace and its centrality to Methodist polity meant that separating the two seemed impossible, raising the question of Methodist membership itself.⁴⁸

What lessons can we take from the formation of Wesley's method? Firstly, whatever form our methods take, if they don't intentionally set out to give God access then they will never be a work of his. Wesley's methods began as puny attempts to live in holiness until he stepped aside in defeat and let God work. Wesley's whole method was oriented to make people *available* to God. Wesley called people to accountable community and they came. Secondly, Wesley expected people who had been changed by grace to *demonstrate* that grace. He put them to work, serving in love, and their efforts would change the direction of English social history.

Finally, an important dimension to any renewal movement is the need to capture and maintain paradox and use its creative tension to promote growth. We must resist the temptation to harmonize paradox, reducing its logical tension. Like the opposing arms of a blacksmith's tongs, Wesley's methods captured the tensions of paradox and harnessed them to forge change in people's lives and growth in holiness.

⁴⁷ See "Class Delinquency," *Christian Advocate and Journal* 28 March 1834. "The Class Leader," *Christian Advocate and Journal* 4 December 1851. Reverend Charles Keys, *Class Leader's Manual* (New York: Lane and Scott, 1851); London Rosser, *Class Meetings* (London: Richmond and Sons, 1855); *idem*, *Class Meetings: Embracing Their Origin, Nature Obligations, and Benefits* (Richmond: L. Johnson Co., 1855).

⁴⁸ Rack, "Decline of the Class Meeting," 12-13.

APPENDIX

Appendix A

TIMELINE

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| 1670 | Philipp Jakob Spener begins <i>collegia pietatis</i> |
| 1675 | Spener publishes <i>Pia desideria</i> |
| 1678 | Dr. Anthony Horneck starts Anglican Religious Societies |
| 1691 | The Society for the Reformation of Manners |
| 1699 | Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) |
| 1700 | Samuel Wesley establishes a society at Epworth |
| 1701 | Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) |
| 1703 | John Wesley born |
| 1729 June 17 | John Wesley visits Charles at Oxford, Holy Club begins around this time |
| 1735 | John, Charles, and Bernard Ingham, Holy Club members, sail for Georgia |
| 1738 February 1 | John lands at Deal, England as George Whitefield is aboard ship for Georgia |
| 1738 February 7 | Wesley meets Peter Böhler |
| 1738 May 1 | Religious Society started, would become the Fetter Lane Society |
| 1738 May 4 | Peter Böhler leaves for Georgia |
| 1738 May 21 | Charles finds assurance of salvation |
| 1738 May 24 | John finds assurance of salvation |
| 1738 June 13 | John sets off for Herrnhut |
| 1738 Nov 30 | George Whitefield arrives in England, visits Fetter Lane several times in weeks following |
| 1739 January 1 | Fetter Lane Society experiences great outpouring of the Spirit |
| 1739 January 17 | Whitefield preaches to first crowd at Kingswood, Bristol |
| 1739 March 31 | Wesley arrives at Kingswood and preaches |
| 1739 April 3 | In Bristol Wesley organizes his first bands |
| 1739 May 9 | Wesley acquires land in Bristol to build meeting rooms |
| 1739 June 3 | Wesley holds the first meeting at New Rooms in Bristol |
| 1739 November | Wesley takes on the Foundery in Moorfields, London. |
| 1739 December | People in London appeal for Wesley to meet, starting Society in London |
| 1740 June | Foundery Society membership over 300 |
| 1740 July 20 | Wesley leaves the Fetter Lane Society |
| 1742 | Captain Hoy's suggestion gives rise to the class meetings |
| 1743 | Wesley's United Societies operating in London, Bristol, Newcastle and Kingswood |
| 1791 | Wesley dies |

Appendix B

ORDERS BELONGING TO A RELIGIOUS SOCIETY¹

1. To be just in all their dealings, even to an exemplary strictness: as Matt. 5:16, 20. Matt. 7:12.
2. To pray many times every day, remembering our continual dependence upon God, both for spiritual and temporal things. 1 Thess. 5:17.
3. To partake of the Lord's Supper at least once a month, if not prevented by a reasonable impediment. 1 Cor. 11:26. Luke 22:19.
4. To practise the profoundest meekness and humility. Matt. 11:29.
5. To watch against censuring others. Matt. 7:1.
6. To accustom themselves to holy thoughts in all places. Ps. 2, 3.
7. To be helpful one to another. 1 Cor. 12:26.
8. To exercise tenderness, patience, and compassion, towards all men. Titus 3:2.
9. To make reflections on themselves when they read the Holy Bible, or other good books, and when they hear sermons. 1 Cor. 10:11.
10. To shun all foreseen occasions of evil; as evil company, known temptations, &c. 1 Thess. 5:22.
11. To think often on the different estates of the glorified and the damned, in the unchangeable eternity, to which we are hastening. Luke 16:25.
12. To examine themselves every night, what good or evil they have done in the day past. 2 Cor. 13:5.
13. To keep a private fast once a month, (especially near their approach to the Lord's Table) if at their own disposal; or to fast from some meal when they may conveniently. Matt. 6:16. Luke 5:35.
14. To mortify the flesh with its affections, and lust. Gal. 5:19, 24.
15. To advance in heavenly-mindedness, and in all grace. 1 Pet. 3:8.
16. To shun spiritual pride, and the effects of it; as railing, anger, peevishness, and impatience of contradiction, &c.
17. To pray for the whole Society in their private prayers. James 5:16.
18. To read pious books often for their edification.
19. To be continually mindful of the great obligation of this special profession of religion, and to walk so circumspectly, that none may be offended or discouraged from it by what they see in them, nor occasion be given to any, to speak reproachfully of it.
20. To shun all manner of affectation and moroseness, and to be of a civil and obliging deportment to all men.

¹ An example of early society rules from *Orders Belonging to a Religious Society* (London: n.p., 1724), 4. Reproduced from Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory*, 38.

Appendix C

HORNECK'S RULES FOR THE FIRST RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES²

1. All that enter the Society shall resolve upon a holy and serious life.
2. No person shall be admitted into the Society until he has arrived at the age of sixteen, and has been first confirmed by the bishop, and solemnly taken upon himself his baptismal vow.
3. They shall choose a minister of the Church of England to direct them.
4. They shall not be allowed, in their meetings, to discourse of any controverted point of divinity.
5. Neither shall they discourse of the government of Church or State.
6. In their meetings they shall use no prayers but those of the Church, such as the Litany and Collects, and other prescribed prayers; but still they shall not use any that peculiarly belongs to the minister, as the Absolution.
7. The minister whom they choose shall direct what practical divinity shall be read at these meetings.
8. They may have liberty, after prayer and reading, to sing a psalm.
9. After all is done, if there be time left, they may discourse with each other about their spiritual concerns; but this shall not be a standing exercise which any shall be obliged to attend unto.
10. One day in the week shall be appointed for this meeting, for such as cannot come on the Lord's Day ; and he that absents himself without cause shall pay threepence to the box.
11. Every time they meet, every one shall give sixpence to the box.
12. On a certain day in the year. viz. Whit-Tuesday, two stewards shall be chosen, and a moderate dinner provided, and a sermon preached, and the money distributed (necessary charges deducted) to the poor.
13. A book shall be bought, in which these orders shall be written.
14. None shall be admitted into this Society without the consent of the minister who presides over it; and no apprentice shall be capable of being chosen.
15. If any case of conscience shall arise, it shall be brought before the minister.
16. If any member think fit to leave the Society, he shall pay five shillings to the stock.
17. The major part of the Society shall conclude the rest.
18. The following rules are more especially recommended to the members of this Society, viz.
To love one another. When reviled, not to revile again. To speak evil of no man. To wrong no man. To pray, if possible, seven times a day. To keep close to the Church of England. To transact all things peaceably and gently. To be helpful to each other. To use themselves to holy thoughts in their coming in and going out. To examine themselves every night. To give every one their due. To obey superiors, both spiritual and temporal.

² Reproduced from Simon, *Religious Societies*, 10-11. Citing Hone, *Eminent Christians*, 2:309-310.

Appendix D

RULES OF THE FETTER LANE SOCIETY³

IN obedience to the command of God by St. James, and by the advice of Peter Böhler, it is agreed by us,

1. That we will meet together once a week to “confess our faults one to another, and pray one for another, that we may be healed.”
2. That the persons so meeting be divided into several bands, or little companies, none of them consisting of fewer than five, or more than ten persons.
3. That every one in order speak as freely, plainly, and concisely as he can, the real state of his heart, with his several temptations and deliverances, since the last time of meeting.
4. That all the bands have a conference at eight every Wednesday evening, begun and ended with singing and prayer.
5. That any who desire to be admitted into this society be asked, “What are your reasons for desiring this? Will you be entirely open; using no kind of reserve? Have you any objection to any of our orders?” (which may then be read.)
6. That when any new member is proposed, every one present speak clearly and freely whatever objection he has to him.
7. That those against whom no reasonable objection appears, be, in order for their trial, formed into one or more distinct bands, and some person agreed on to assist them.
8. That after two months’ trial, if no objection then appear they may be admitted into the society.
9. That every fourth Saturday be observed as a day of general intercession.
10. That on the Sunday seven-night following be a general love-feast, from seven till ten in the evening.
11. That no particular member be allowed to act in any thing contrary to any order of the society: And that if any persons, after being thrice admonished, do not conform thereto, they be not any longer esteemed as members.

³ Wesley, *Works*, 1:92-93 Journal 1 May 1738.

Appendix E

MORAVIAN CHURCH DISCIPLINE⁴

In the present discipline of the Church of Hernhuth, all which is alterable at the discretion of the superiors, may be observed,

I. The officers of it.

II. The division of the people.

III. The conferences, lectures, and government of the children.

IV. The order of divine service.

- I. The officers are, 1. The Eldest of the whole Church; beside whom, there is an Eldest of every particular branch of it. There is also a distinct Eldest over the young men, and another over the boys; a female Eldest over the women in general, and another over the unmarried, and another over the girls. 2. The Teachers, who are four. 3. The Helpers (or Deacons). 4. The Overseers, (or Censors,) eleven in number at Hernhuth.

The Monitors, who are eleven likewise. 6. The Almoners, eleven also. 7. The Attenders on the sick, seven in number. Lastly, The Servants, or Deacons of the lowest order.

- II. The people of Hernhuth are divided, 1. Into five male classes, viz., the little children, the middle children, the big children, the young men, and the married. The females are divided in the same manner. 2. Into eleven classes, according to the houses where they live: And in each class is an Helper, an Overseer, a Monitor, an Almoner, and a Servant. 3. Into about ninety bands, each of which meets twice at least, but most of them three times a week, to “confess their faults one to another, and pray for one another, that they may be healed.”

- III. The Rulers of the Church, that is, the Elders, Teachers, Helpers, have a conference every week, purely concerning the state of souls, and another concerning the institution of youth. Beside which, they have one every day, concerning outward things relating to the Church.

The Overseers, the Monitors, the Almoners, the Attenders on the sick, the Servants, the Schoolmasters, the young men, and the children, have likewise each a conference once a week, relating to their several offices and duties.

Once a week also is a conference for strangers; at which any person may be present, and propose any question or doubt which he desires to have resolved.

⁴ Wesley, *Works*, 1:140-142 Journal 10 August 1738.

In Hernhuth is taught reading, writing, arithmetic, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, English, History, and Geography.

There is a Latin, French, and an English lecture every day, as well as an historical and geographical one. On Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, is the Hebrew lecture; the Greek on Tuesday and Thursday.

In the Orphan-house the larger children rise at five. (The smaller, between five and six.) After a little private prayer they work till seven. Then they are at school till eight, the hour of prayer; at nine, those who are capable of it learn Latin; at ten, French; at eleven they all walk; at twelve, they dine all together, and walk till one; at one, they work or learn writing; at three, arithmetic; at four, history; at five, they work; at six, sup and work; at seven, after a time spent in prayer, walk; at eight the smaller children go to bed, the larger to the public service. When this is ended, they work again till at ten they go to bed.

IV. Every morning, at eight, is singing and exposition of Scripture; and commonly short prayer.

At eight in the evening, there is commonly only mental prayer, joined with the singing and expounding.

The faithful afterwards spend a quarter of an hour in prayer, and conclude with the kiss of peace.

On Sunday morning the Service begins at six; at nine, the Public Service at Bertholdsdorf; at one, the Eldest gives separate exhortations to all the members of the Church, divided into fourteen little classes for that purpose, spending about a quarter of an hour with each class; at four, begins the Evening Service at Bertholdsdorf, closed by a conference in the church; at eight, is the usual Service; after which the young men, singing praises round the town, conclude the day.

On the first Saturday in the month the Lord's Supper is administered. From ten in the morning till two, the Eldest speaks with each communicant in private, concerning the state of his soul; at two, they dine, then wash one another's feet; after which they sing and pray; about ten, they receive in silence without any ceremony, and continue in silence till they part at twelve.

On the second Saturday is the solemn prayer-day for the children: The third is the day of general intercession and thanksgiving; and on the fourth is the great monthly conference of all the superiors of the Church.

Appendix F

RULES OF THE BAND-SOCIETIES DRAWN UP DECEMBER 25, 1738⁵

THE design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.”

To this end, we intend,

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.
4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.
5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.
6. To desire some person among us to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.

Some of the questions proposed to every one before he is admitted among us may be to this effect:

1. Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
2. Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ?
3. Have you the witness of God’s Spirit with your spirit, that you are a child of God?
4. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
5. Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
6. Do you desire to be told of your faults?
7. Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?
8. Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?
9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?
10. Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
11. Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?

Any of the preceding questions may be asked as often as occasion offers; the four following at every meeting:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?

⁵ Wesley, “Rules of the Band-Societies.”

3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?

Appendix G

DIRECTIONS GIVEN TO THE BAND-SOCIETIES

DECEMBER 25, 1744 ⁶

You are supposed to have the faith that “overcometh the world.” To you, therefore, it is not grievous,

- I. Carefully to abstain from doing evil; in particular,
 - 1. Neither to buy nor sell anything at all on the Lord’s day.
 - 2. To taste no spirituous liquor, no dram of any kind, unless prescribed by a Physician.
 - 3. To be at a word both in buying and selling.
 - 4. To pawn nothing, no, not to save life.
 - 5. Not to mention the fault of any behind his back, and to stop those short that do.
 - 6. To wear no needless ornaments, such as rings, ear-rings, necklaces, lace, ruffles.
 - 7. To use no needless self-indulgence, such as taking snuff or tobacco, unless prescribed by a Physician.
- II. Zealously to maintain good works; in particular,
 - 1. To give alms of such things as you possess, and that to the uttermost of your power.
 - 2. To reprove all that sin in your sight, and that in love and meekness of wisdom.
 - 3. To be patterns of diligence and frugality, of self-denial, and taking up the cross daily.
- III. Constantly to attend on all the ordinances of God; in particular,
 - 1. To be at church and at the Lord’s table every week, and at every public meeting of the Bands.
 - 2. To attend the ministry of the word every morning, unless distance, business, or sickness prevent.
 - 3. To use private prayer every day; and family prayer, if you are at the head of a family.
 - 4. To read the Scriptures, and meditate therein, at every vacant hour. And,
 - 5. To observe, as days of fasting or abstinence, all Fridays in the year.

⁶ John Wesley, *Works* 8:273-74.

Appendix H

THE NATURE, DESIGN, AND GENERAL RULES OF THE UNITED SOCIETIES IN LONDON, BRISTOL, KINGSWOOD, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE, &c.⁷

1. IN the latter end of the year 1739, eight or ten persons came to me in London, who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired (as did two or three more the next day) that I would spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come; which they saw continually hanging over their heads. That we might have more time for this great work, I appointed a day when they might all come together, which from thenceforward they did every week, namely, on Thursday, in the evening. To these, and as many more as desired to join with them, (for their number increased daily,) I gave those advices, from time to time, which I judged most needful for them; and we always concluded our meeting with prayer suited to their several necessities.
2. This was the rise of the United Society, first in London, and then in other places. Such a society is no other than “a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”
3. That it may the more easily be discerned, whether they are indeed working out their own salvation, each society is divided into smaller companies, called classes, according to their respective places of abode. There are about twelve persons in every class; one of whom is styled the Leader. It is his business, (1.) To see each person in his class once a week at least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require; to receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the poor. (2.) To meet the Minister and the Stewards of the society once a week; in order to inform the Minister of any that are sick, or of any that walk disorderly, and will not be reprov'd; to pay to the Stewards what they have received of their several classes in the week preceding; and to show their account of what each person has contributed.
4. There is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into these societies, a desire “to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins:” But, wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind; especially that which is most generally practised: Such is, the taking the name of God in vain; the profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work thereon, or by buying or selling; drunkenness, buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity; fighting,

⁷ Wesley, “Rules of the United Societies.”

quarreling, brawling; brother going to law with brother; returning evil for evil, or railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling; the buying or selling uncustomed goods; the giving or taking things on usury, that is, unlawful interest; uncharitable or unprofitable conversation, particularly speaking evil of Magistrates or of Ministers; doing to others as we would not they should do unto us; doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as the “putting on of gold or costly apparel;” the taking such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus; the singing those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God; softness, and needless self-indulgence; laying up treasures upon earth; borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.

5. It is expected of all who continue in these societies, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

Secondly, by doing good, by being, in every kind, merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as is possible, to all men; to their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison; to their souls, by instructing reproving, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine of devils, that “we are not to do good unless our heart be free to it.” By doing good especially to them that are of the household of faith, or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others, buying one of another; helping each other in business; and so much the more, because the world will love its own, and them only: By all possible diligence and frugality, that the gospel be not blamed: By running with patience the race that is set before them, “denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily;” submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should “say all manner of evil of them falsely for the Lord’s sake.”

6. It is expected of all who desire to continue in these societies, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

Thirdly, by attending upon all the ordinances of God. Such are, the public worship of God; the ministry of the word, either read or expounded; the supper of the Lord; family and private prayer; searching the Scriptures; and fasting, or abstinence.

7. These are the General Rules of our societies; all which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written word, the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these, we know, his Spirit writes on every truly awakened heart. If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul as they that must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways; we will bear with him for a season: But then if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.

JOHN WESLEY,
CHARLES WESLEY.
May 1, 1743.

Appendix I

FARTHER THOUGHTS ON SEPARATION FROM THE CHURCH.⁸

1. FROM a child I was taught to love and reverence the Scripture, the oracles of God; and, next to these, to esteem the primitive Fathers, the writers of the three first centuries. Next after the primitive church, I esteemed our own, the Church of England, as the most scriptural national Church in the world. I therefore not only assented to all the doctrines, but observed all the rubric in the Liturgy; and that with all possible exactness, even at the peril of my life.
2. In this judgment, and with this spirit, I went to America, strongly attached to the Bible, the primitive church, and the Church of England, from which I would not vary in one jot or tittle on any account whatever. In this spirit I returned, as regular a Clergyman as any in the three kingdoms; till, after not being permitted to preach in the churches, I was constrained to preach in the open air.
3. Here was my first irregularity; and it was not voluntary, but constrained. The second was extemporary prayer. This, likewise, I believed to be my bounden duty; for the sake of those who desired me to watch over their souls. I could not in conscience refrain from it; neither from accepting those who desired to serve me as sons in the Gospel.
4. When the people joined together, simply to help each other to heaven, increased by hundreds and thousands, still they had no more thought of leaving the Church than of leaving the kingdom. Nay, I continually and earnestly cautioned them against it; reminding them that we were a part of the Church of England, whom God had raised up, not only to save our own souls, but to enliven our neighbours, those of the Church in particular. And at the first meeting of all our Preachers in Conference, in June, 1744, I exhorted them to keep to the Church; observing, that this was our peculiar glory, — not to form any new sect, but, abiding in our own Church, to do to all men all the good we possibly could.
5. But as more Dissenters joined with us, many of whom were much prejudiced against the Church, these, with or without design, were continually infusing their own prejudices into their brethren. I saw this, and gave warning of it from time to time, both in private and in public; and in the year 1758 I resolved to bring the matter to a fair issue. So I desired the point might be considered at large, whether it was expedient for the Methodists to leave the Church. The arguments on both sides were discussed for several days; and at length we agreed, without a dissenting voice, “It is by no means expedient that the Methodists should leave the Church of England.”
6. Nevertheless, the same leaven continued to work in various parts of the kingdom. The grand argument (which in some particular cases must be acknowledged to have weight) was this: “The Minister of the parish wherein we dwell neither lives nor preaches the Gospel. He

⁸ Wesley, “Farther Thoughts on Separation.”

walks in the way to hell himself, and teaches his flock to do the same. Can you advise them to attend his preaching?" I cannot advise them to it. "What, then, can they do on the Lord's day, suppose no other church be near? Do you advise them to go to a Dissenting meeting, or to meet in their own preaching-house?" Where this is really the case, I cannot blame them if they do. Although, therefore, I earnestly oppose the general separation of the Methodists from the Church, yet I cannot condemn such a partial separation in this particular case. I believe, to separate thus far from these miserable wretches, who are the scandal of our Church and nation, would be for the honour of our Church, as well as to the glory of God.

7. And this is no way contrary to the profession which I have made above these fifty years. I never had any design of separating from the Church: I have no such design now. I do not believe the Methodists in general design it, when I am no more seen. I do, and will do, all that is in my power to prevent such an event. Nevertheless, in spite of all that I can do, many of them will separate from it: Although I am apt to think, not one half, perhaps not a third, of them.

These will be so bold and injudicious as to form a separate party; which, consequently, will dwindle away into a dry, dull, separate party. In flat opposition to these, I declare once more, that I live and die a member of the Church of England; and that none who regard my judgment or advice will ever separate from it.

JOHN WESLEY.
LONDON,
December 11, 1789.

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