

FORMATION FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP: WESLEYAN REFLECTIONS

Randy L. Maddox, Seattle Pacific University

*What a mystery is this! That Christianity should have done so little good
in the world! Can any account of this be given?*¹

The twentieth century opened with a mood of high optimism, at least in North America, about the potential impact of Christian witness and mission on our world. The best icon of this mood is surely the journal *Christian Century*, which was launched with this title at the turn of the century as an expression of the editor's conviction that we would witness the emergence of the millennial reign of God's justice and peace by the century's end. Needless to say, those who shared this hope were sorely disappointed as the century wore on.

Few would argue today that our world embodies the marks of God's promised rule. One is more likely to hear laments about the declining state of culture as a whole. Formal expressions of this lament in our North American context have often advocated religious communities as among the few remaining promising agencies for forming persons with an enduring commitment to the good of our larger society.² But honesty has required North American Christians to admit that few of our churches are doing any better than culture at large in nurturing an enduring character of moral integrity and concern for others.³ With John Wesley, we find ourselves puzzling: "Can any account of this be given?"

The purpose of this session is to consider answers of both Wesley and Saint Benedict to this question about the inefficacy of much Christian witness and mission, with an eye to the insights we might gain for forming Christian leaders today. While this grouping of Benedict and Wesley together might seem idiosyncratic, their similarities make them relevant mentors for our consideration. To begin with, both were leaders of "orders" within the church. By an "order," I mean a volunteer movement of Christians committed to disciplined spiritual formation, not just for their own benefit but as a means to renew the church and to increase the positive impact of the church on the world. This broader mission was central to monastic orders at their best, particularly the Benedictine order; and many have noted how the early Methodist movement transposed this mission to the lives of single and married Christians in their daily vocations.⁴ Wesley and Benedict have also both been commended for the wisdom evident in the guidelines they developed for spiritual formation within their respective orders, guidelines that navigate the polar dangers of quietism or sloth on the one side and enthusiasm or extreme asceticism on the other. Likewise, both Benedict and Wesley recognized the vital role of leaders at various levels within their orders and within the church as a whole, and the importance that these leaders not only possess generic leadership skills but also appreciate the dynamics of spiritual formation and be engaged in ongoing formation themselves.

For this sketch of Wesley's insights about formation for Christian leadership, I will take as a guide the sermon from which I drew the opening quote, a sermon

that Wesley wrote near the end of his long ministry titled “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity.”⁵ The sermon opens with Wesley’s charge that the reason Christian communities around the globe had done so little good in the world was that they were producing so few *real* Christians. He then identified three factors of typical church life that his experience in ministry had convinced him combine to account for this lamentable state: first, in too few churches did members attain any adequate understanding of Christian doctrine; second, many of those churches which provided members with doctrinal formation lacked corresponding provision of appropriate Christian discipline; and third, of churches which provided both doctrine and discipline, there remained in most a broad absence of the specific Christian practice of self-denial.

Observers of church life would likely agree that Wesley’s description remains broadly applicable today. What might be less clear is the point and perceptiveness of his diagnosis of this situation, or of his corresponding prescription for effectiveness in the church’s mission. What makes doctrine so significant? What does Wesley mean by discipline? And why did he highlight self-denial? Probing these questions may prove instructive for consideration of how our churches might nurture more faithful and effective leaders.

The Vital Role of Doctrine in Christian Life

The first question we must ponder is why Wesley identified doctrine as foundational to the formation of real Christian life/character. To comprehend this we need to recall that he imbibed through his Anglican tradition the early church’s appreciation of theology as a practical discipline.⁶ This appreciation recognizes that we humans are “meaning-seeking creatures.” We are not content for life merely to happen, we struggle to make sense of why it happens; and we do not typically act out of mere impulse, our crucial choices about how to act are guided by convictions about the ultimate nature and purposes of life. The pattern of these orienting convictions is our functional “worldview.” Thus, the early church understood the *primal* dimension of Christian theology to be the worldview that orients believers’ lives in the world. As Paul put it, Christians perceive things rightly and act appropriately only when they have the “mind of Christ” (Phil. 2). That this involves holistic dispositions, not merely intellectual convictions, is evident from Paul’s parallel emphasis on Christians nurturing the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5).

Paul’s appeal for Christians to emulate the “mind of Christ” reflects the reality that this orienting worldview is not unilaterally infused by God at one’s conversion. It must be cultivated, as part of the intentional process of growing in Christ-likeness. This need defines the second dimension of theology as a practical discipline—the task of *forming/reforming* a Christian worldview in believers. Since the worldview in question is holistic, this task has proven to involve a variety of activities aimed at invoking and shaping beliefs, affections, and character dispositions. The case of the early church is particularly revealing in this regard. Their theological energies were dominated by the task of forming a Christian worldview in new believers, and they pursued this task with a clear sense that the cultures within which they lived were bent on instilling quite different worldviews.

In this context they prized most highly as “theologians” those—both lay and clergy—who crafted such practical-theological materials as hymns, liturgies, catechetical orations, and spiritual discipline manuals. These materials established the rhythms and provided the deep narrative that served to instill Christ-likeness in believers’ hearts and minds.

Wesley’s self-understanding as a theologian reflects this early church model.⁷ His literary efforts focused on providing his Methodist people with the same types of practical-theological materials. For example, recognizing the role of “life-narratives” in forming and expressing one’s worldview, he particularly exhorted his Methodists to live in the story of Christ, and the stories of exemplary Christians (a rich set of which he provided for their reading), so that their orienting narrative might be reshaped in keeping with the pattern of Christ. Likewise, sensing the formative impact of those favorite songs that embed themselves in our memories and being, he carefully edited a series of hymnbooks as resources for sustaining and shaping Christian faith.

In this practical-theological work it is clear that Wesley devoted careful attention to more than just questions of what type of materials had most effective impact. He readily engaged as well the *normative* dimension of theology as a practical discipline. As a case in point, his diagnosis of the inefficacy of Christianity focused particular attention on the importance of cultivating a proper understanding of Christian convictions about our human condition and God’s gracious provisions for our need. His broad-ranging ministry convinced Wesley that a major reason why churches were nurturing so few *real* Christians was the prevalence of an inadequate notion of the “salvation” that Christianity proclaims. This salvation was too often restricted to the forgiveness of sins. On these terms, “making disciples” involves little more than encouraging unbelievers to exercise justifying faith.

Nothing was more central to Wesley’s life-long ministry than challenging this anemic conception of Christian salvation. He judged it to focus too one-sidedly on the theme of Romans 1–3, where our most basic human problem is the guilt by which we “fall short of the glory of God” and the crucial aspect of salvation is God’s unmerited gift of justification. It failed to do justice to another central biblical theme that can be represented by Romans 7–8, where the deepest impact of sin is our spiritual debilitation (“What I want to do, I cannot!”) and the key gracious gift of God is the empowering and healing presence of the Spirit. Wesley consistently tried to weave these themes together in his instruction on sin, grace, and salvation, as in the following quotes:

Two-fold Nature of Sin: Guilt and Disease

[Our sins], considered in regard to ourselves, are chains of iron and fetters of brass. They are wounds wherewith the world, the flesh, and the devil, have gashed and mangled us all over. They are diseases that drink up our blood and spirits, that bring us down to the chambers of the grave. But considered ... with regard to God, they are debts, immense and numberless.⁸

Two-fold Nature of Grace: Mercy and Power

By ‘the grace of God’ is sometimes to be understood that free love, that unmerited mercy, by which I, a sinner, through the merits of Christ am now reconciled to God. But in this place it rather means that power of God the Holy Ghost which ‘worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.’ As soon as ever the grace of God (in the former sense, his pardoning love) is manifested in our soul, the grace of God (in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit) takes place therein. And now we can perform through God, what to [ourselves] was impossible ... a renewal of soul after His likeness.⁹

Two-fold Nature of Salvation: Pardon and Healing

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.¹⁰

The general point of these quotes should be clear, except perhaps for the last line quoted. It is puzzling in part because modern readers think of “tempers” almost exclusively as emotional outbursts. Wesley is using the term here in a sense common in the eighteenth century, where “temper” referred to an enduring character disposition (toward good or evil actions). The remnant of this earlier meaning comes through when we speak today of tempered metal, which has been strengthened and given a characteristic shape. The line is also puzzling if we do not know that in the eighteenth century the word “conversation” referred to all one’s outward actions, not just one’s verbal discourse. Wesley is assuming here that our actions normally flow from our most characteristic inclinations or dispositions. As such, Christlike action in the world must be grounded in the transformation of our existing unholy tempers into holy tempers.

Thus, the first insight we might draw from Wesley is a deeper appreciation for the practical nature of theology in the life of the church. There is a broad assumption in our culture that moral character emerges naturally, not needing to be formed. Meanwhile, there has been a tendency in the academy to focus on the normative and apologetic dimensions of theology, also at the neglect of the formative dimension and its first-order forms. And the actual doctrinal teachings on salvation offered in our churches, across the theological spectrum, are often limited to the themes of Romans 1–3.¹¹ Together these influences seriously undermine the ability of our churches to raise up believers—and potential leaders—who appreciate the need for, and embrace responsively, the life-long journey toward full Christlikeness!

The Two-fold Contribution of Regular Participation in the Means of Grace

Wesley would be the first to insist that careful doctrinal formation alone cannot sustain this journey! Transformation into Christ's likeness is made possible only by God's empowering and renewing grace at work in our lives. That is why Wesley moves from emphasis on doctrine in his diagnostic sermon to insist that development of real Christians also requires discipline. The type of discipline Wesley had in mind is clear; he gave it official form as the three General Rules of his movement. All those who desire to seek salvation in its full biblical sense are exhorted to 1) do no harm, 2) do as much good as they can for others, and 3) regularly participate in "all the ordinances of God."¹²

The third exhortation reflects Wesley's conviction that regular participation in the means of grace is essential for nurturing Christian life. He repeatedly denounced the folly of those who expect growth in faith and holiness without regular participation in the means through which God has chosen to convey grace. He often explained this connection with an early Christian proverb: "The soul and the body make a [human]; the Spirit and discipline make a Christian." This proverb points toward the dual benefit that Wesley believed we derive from regular participation in the means of grace.

*Responsive Nature of Christian Life: The **Spirit** and Discipline make a Christian*

Wesley's early sermons are primarily reminders of the duty to live like Christ. In these sermons he reflects the model of spirituality he learned at his mother's knee and that was most broadly represented in the Anglicanism of his youth.¹³ This model identified the greatest obstacle to holy living as the *passional* dimension of human life—i.e., those emotional reactions, instincts, and the like that are not a product of our rational initiative or under fully conscious control. The normative corollary was that proper choice and action are possible only as we subject this *passional* dimension of life to rational control. This is admittedly not an easy task, but it was assumed that through exhortation and regular practice—empowered by grace—we could habituate an increased aptitude for maintaining righteousness.

As he sought to live out this inherited model of Christian spirituality Wesley became increasingly convinced of its inadequacy. He learned by hard experience that rational persuasion alone cannot resist, much less overcome and heal, irregular appetites and passions. As a result his consuming question became not "*What* would God have me do?" but "*How* can I do what I know God would have me do?" In particular, "How can I truly love God and others?" In the events leading up to Aldersgate Wesley was repeatedly reminded of the biblical theme that God's gracious acceptance precedes and provides the possibility of holiness on our part. Then, when he experienced a deep assurance of God's pardoning love at Aldersgate, he found himself enabled to love God and neighbor as he had so unsuccessfully longed to do. This experience of having "the love of God shed abroad in one's heart" became central to his mature model of Christian life.

Wesley's articulation of this mature model was aided by his embrace of the empiricist swing in eighteenth-century British philosophy. For empiricism truth is experienced receptively by the human intellect, rather than preexistent within it or imposed by reason upon our experience. In terms of the dynamics of human willing this philosophical conviction led to the parallel insistence that humans are *moved* to action only as we are experientially *affected*. To use an example, they held that rational persuasion of the rightness of loving others is not sufficient of itself to actually move us to do so; we are ultimately inclined and enabled to love others only as we experience being loved ourselves. Wesley's crucial application of this truth became his insistence that it is only in response to our *experience* of God's gracious love for us, shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that our love for God and others is awakened and can grow.

In this insistence Wesley was giving the abstract affirmation that grace is prevenient to holy living concrete embodiment as a model of the Christian life. Grace is identified not as some extrinsic "gift" but as the very presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The human will is seen not as a reservoir of inherent volitional power but as a capacity to be affected and to "reflect" what we experience. Thereby the freedom to live Christlike lives is grounded not in our own capacities but in God's empowering encounter. Yet our integrity or accountability is preserved because, while we do not have the capacity to self-generate love, we do have the capacity (what Wesley called "liberty") to stifle responsive loving.

The foundational assumption of Wesley's revised model of Christian life, then, was that this life is *responsive* in nature—not only at its beginning, but all along the journey. This comes through clearly in one of his most extended descriptions of the dynamics of the Christian life:

The life of God in the soul of a believer...immediately and necessarily implies the continual inspiration of God's Holy Spirit: God's breathing into the soul, and the soul's breathing back what it first receives from God; a continual action of God upon the soul, the re-action of the soul upon God; an unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart.... [But] God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul re-acts upon God. ... He first loves us, and manifests himself unto us ... He will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again; unless our love, and prayer, and thanksgiving return to him.¹⁴

A second insight Wesley offers us, then, is the importance of encouraging, and providing means for, the experience of this enlivening presence of the Spirit in our communities, if we hope to nurture believers—and leaders—who "reflect" God's love in their engagement with the world.

Formative Nature of Christian Life: The Spirit and Discipline make a Christian

To be sure, this reflection is not inevitable. Note in the passage just quoted how directly Wesley moves from the affirmation that grace is responsive to the insistence that it is also responsible—if we do not re-act, God will cease to act. This integral connection was crucial to Wesley’s mature model of Christian life, and he defended it vigorously against the tendency of some of his evangelical colleagues to cast divine grace and human responsibility in a polar relationship. As he reminded his followers, even Saint Augustine (who provided seeds of the tendency to this polarization in Western Christianity) insisted that “The God who made us without ourselves will not save us without ourselves.”

Wesley’s sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” based on Philippians 2:12–13, is his most extended effort to allay the fear of some strands of Western Christianity about emphasis on the “co-operant” nature of God’s gracious work in our lives.¹⁵ In this sermon he repeatedly underlines the primacy of God’s gracious initiative in the whole process of salvation: It is only because God is *already* at work in us, empowering and inclining us, that we *can* work out our salvation. But Wesley then rejects any suggestion that our working is an inevitable result of God’s grace: If we do not responsively put God’s gracious empowerment to work, God will cease to work. The ultimate reason for this is that, for Wesley, God is more fundamentally like a loving parent than like a sovereign monarch—God will not finally *impose* our obedience.

This reference to obedience provides occasion to probe further what Wesley meant by the “discipline” he identified as crucial to forming real Christians. In our present setting the word discipline most typically refers to the *punishment* one receives for lapses in obedience. The main exception is in the realms of athletics and music, where “discipline” is often used to refer to *practices* that one engages in regularly in order to develop the capacity or “freedom” for desired behaviors to flow forth naturally. Here the issue is not immediate reward and punishment but long-term impact. Failure to practice means increased difficulty (and less reliability) in attaining one’s desired goal. This sounds more like what Wesley intended when he argued that without “a thorough experience and practice” of the tenets of loving God, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and the like, all efforts toward a Christian life will be “utterly vain and ineffectual.”¹⁶

As this suggests, Wesley had more in mind than individual acts of obedience when he encouraged his followers to co-operate with God’s grace. He was particularly concerned that they engage in *formative practices* that could help provide greater “freedom” and reliability for holy actions. Here we need to underline one aspect of Wesley’s mature insights into the dynamics of human willing. While he insisted that our affections are responsive, he did not consider them to be simply transitory. On the contrary, repeated engagement naturally focuses and strengthens them into enduring dispositions toward similar response in the future (i.e., into either holy or unholy tempers). Accordingly, Wesley made clear to his followers that God does not typically infuse such holy tempers as love, patience, and meekness instantaneously; regenerating grace awakens in believers only their

“seeds.” For these seeds to strengthen and take shape they need continuing gracious energizing by God, but they also need to be exercised and improved by regular engagement in the practices of the Christian life.

Thus, the third insight that we might draw from Wesley, if we desire leaders who model and encourage attaining significant maturity of Christlikeness, is the importance of helping our communities appreciate the progressive “freeing” impact of formative spiritual disciplines.

*Wesley’s Balanced Means of Grace: The Spirit **and** Discipline make a Christian*

As a practical theologian, Wesley was not content with merely instructing his people in the doctrinal convictions of the empowering affect of the Spirit and the freeing effect of formative disciplines. He recognized the importance of providing concrete opportunities to experience the Spirit and to engage in formative practices, and that selection and design of these opportunities was central to his theological task.

The impact of Wesley’s mature convictions about Christian life at this level is clear. His earliest writings, operating out of his inherited “habituated rational control” model of moral choice, emphasized scripture reading, sermons, and prayer (all of which address us intellectually) as the means to insure Christian living. By contrast, lists of recommended means of grace after Aldersgate are both more extensive and more diverse—including items ranging from such universal Christian practices as fasting, prayer, eucharist, and devotional readings to more distinctively Methodist practices like class meetings, love feasts, and special rules of holy living. The balance of items on these later lists reflects Wesley’s bi-focal concern that his people not only experience the empowering presence of God but are also formed in the character of God. Their pattern was crafted to provide Wesley’s followers with both *Spirit* and *discipline*.

The degree of intentionality with which Wesley considered the effective balancing of the means of grace is particularly evident in his 1781 sermon “On Zeal.” While praising the broad eighteenth-century evangelical awakening for renewing religious zeal in Britain, this sermon offers Wesley’s perception that their zeal was not as beneficial as it ought to be because it was too often focused on peripheral matters, rather than on those most central to Christian life. As a corrective, Wesley offered the following sketch of the relative value of the various aspects of Christian life:

In a Christian believer love sets upon the throne, namely love of God and [other humans], which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers: long-suffering, etc. In an exterior circle are all the works of mercy, whether to the souls or bodies of [others]. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that these are real means of grace, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed works of piety: reading and hearing the word; public, family, private

prayer; receiving the Lord's Supper; fasting and abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one—the church.¹⁷

Wesley then exhorted his readers to devote more zeal to engagement in the various works of piety than to advocating their particular branch of the church, more zeal yet to works of mercy, even more zeal to the holy tempers, and their greatest zeal of all to love of God and neighbor.

Wesley's emphasis on the works of mercy in this passage deserves special attention. Note first his insistence that they are a *means of grace*. He recognized that they are more commonly viewed as duties, which we undertake because it is what God commands or because it helps others. Without denying these dimensions, Wesley called us to consider that we need to engage in works of mercy for our sake as well. They are another of the life-giving practices that God has graciously designed to empower us, give us the mind of Christ, and help shape our holy tempers!

Wesley not only places works of mercy among the means of grace, he assigns them a more immediate relation to forming holy tempers than works of piety! This relative assignment does not mean that he would easily acquiesce to forced choices between engaging in works of mercy over works of piety. The empowering and formative impact of both are essential to nurturing holiness. However it appears that he believed works of mercy make a unique contribution to well-rounded Christian formation, and was particularly worried that his followers were neglecting its benefit.

At least part of this unique contribution is that certain key virtues constitutive of the holy life are best awakened and strengthened into enduring patterns by works of mercy. Consider the example of compassion. We must usually experience hardship ourselves to be able to identify with the hardship of others. But we must also experience true suffering on the part of an other.¹⁸ It is not enough, for example, to send money dutifully in response to reported need. Authentic compassion can only take form through open encounter with those in need. This is why Wesley emphasized *visiting* the sick and needy even more than he did offering them aid. He recognized that failure to visit was a major cause of the lack of compassion that lay behind withholding aid.

In this light, Wesley would surely counsel us fourthly that Christian communities which encourage and model participation in a well-rounded and balanced set of the means of grace, specifically including works of mercy, will be much more effective in nurturing disciples—and future leaders—who emulate the compassion of Christ.

The Pivotal Place of Self-Denial in Discipleship to Christ

The glow of such high hopes provides an appropriate backdrop for returning to Wesley's diagnostic sermon, where it is clear that he had learned by sad experience that the provision of a carefully balanced set of the means of grace did

not guarantee the transformation of those in his societies. He charged that it was ultimately a lack of the specific practice of “self-denial” that hindered so many of his followers from becoming *fully* disciples of Christ.

To appreciate the pivotal role that Wesley assigns to practices of self-denial we need once again to consider his insight into human willing. We noted earlier that he came to evaluate the conception of the will as an inherent capacity to initiate action to be naive and misleading. His mature alternative equated the will with the “affections,” or our human capacity to be affected and to respond in kind. The obvious worry to raise about this alternative is determinism. Wesley’s way of acknowledging the impact that life experiences, formative influences, and our environment have upon us, without rendering us totally determined by these, was to insist that along with our responsive affections (i.e., our will) God has graciously endowed humans with “liberty.” By this he meant to refer to our modest but crucial capacity to inhibit specific responses of our will.

The inhibiting capacity of liberty is what makes humans morally and spiritually responsible for specific actions. It also makes us accountable for the dispositions or tempers that may underlie our actions (both by facilitating acting in certain ways and by constraining alternatives), since these tempers were formed by prior repeated instances of inhibiting or allowing responses.

It is crucial to note how Wesley distinguishes liberty from the “freedom” we need to live the Christian life. Liberty is simply our graciously gifted ability *not* to act on our impulses. It provides at most *freedom from* the total determinism of unholy tempers; it has no inherent power to initiate alternative holy acts. The *freedom for* these alternative responses comes through our affections as we experience God’s further gracious gift of loving encounter. And yet liberty has a role to play here as well—we can inhibit our response to these encounters and stifle their character-transforming effect, or we can welcome them and allow them to form progressively the holy tempers that provide us with more consistent and enduring *freedom for* holy acts.

Wesley’s conviction of the importance of self-denial relates to this role of liberty in relation to our dispositions. His sermon on “Self-Denial” stakes out perceptively our situation. When we begin to engage the spiritual life we find that we are not starting on pristine terms. We are already prone to clannishness, greed, sloth, and other unholy tempers; and we recognize that these gain increasing ascendancy over us as we allow them to be expressed. For Wesley, self-denial is basically exercising our gracious capacity of liberty to resist these unholy tempers.

Wesley is quite careful to make the point that neither self-denial nor the stronger language of “taking up the cross” should be taken to imply practices like tearing our flesh, or wearing iron girdles, or anything else that would impair our bodily health. They do not involve deprecating our true human nature but resisting the distorted inclinations that have come to characterize our lives through various influences. As Wesley focused it, we “deny our own will *where it does not fall in with* the will of God.”¹⁹ We resist expressing our unholy tempers, in order to prevent their further strengthening and, more importantly, to make room for reflecting instead the life-transforming love of God and neighbor that we encounter in the means of grace. Given Wesley’s conviction that our own sense of well-being flows

from this love of God and neighbor—true happiness is inseparably united to true holiness—self-denial can be seen as most truly a form of self-care!

Having defined self-denial, Wesley moves on to stress how integral it is to effectual participation in the means of grace. Those who will not resist at all their unholy tempers, in response to God's awakening overtures, neglect the means of grace and squander their potential revitalizing power. Newborn Christians who do not continue to resist unholy tempers that remain in their lives often fade in their engagement of the means of grace, dramatically curtailing and some times forfeiting their renewing affect. And the many Christians who resist only selective unholy tempers tend to engage the means of grace in a haphazard manner, preventing their full transformation into Christ-likeness. A specific example Wesley highlights is how little we are likely to engage in works of mercy until we begin to curb intentionally the cravings we have nurtured for "luxuries" in clothing, food, and the like. It is this connection between self-denial and participation in the full range of the means of grace that leads Wesley to charge that if anyone is less than fully Christ's disciple, it is always owing to the lack of self-denial.

If self-denial is this crucial, how can we help it become a more consistent characteristic of our own lives and those of our fellow disciples? Part of Wesley's response is to stress again the empowering effect of *practicing* self-denial. His pastoral advice was that young Christians ought not to despair when they recognize that they lack universal self-denial. Rather they should begin practicing some type of self-denial. As they live in this practice they will find God's grace increasing their facility, and they will be able to broaden it to other areas.

While recognition of the progressive nature of the journey is helpful, Wesley would be the first to protest limiting one's advice to this admonition. It could encourage a very individualistic and isolated spirituality! By contrast, one of Wesley's most central pastoral convictions was that authentic spiritual formation cannot take place "without society, without living and conversing with [others]."²⁰ This is what led Wesley to create corporate structures to provide his Methodist people with mutual support for their spiritual journey. The most basic structure was the class meeting, and one of its central values was the balance of encouragement and accountability it provided; it served as a concrete embodiment of God's gracious probing work that sensitizes us to remaining unholy tempers and God's corresponding gracious assuring work that enables our responsive self-denial and the resulting increase of holiness in heart and life.

One final insight that we might take from Wesley, then, is that Christian communities which provide intentional corporate support for the progressive journey of becoming sensitive to and resisting our distorted dispositions will be more likely to nurture disciples who come to experience true freedom and joy, and who contribute to the good and the joy of those around them. If anything, the need for this support is even greater in our consumerist society than it was in Wesley's day. The potential benefit of raising up leaders who appreciate and foster such supportive communities is greater as well!

Endnotes

1. Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” §3, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, edited by Frank Baker et alia (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff), 4:87. This set will be referred to hereafter as *Works*.

2. See, among others, Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper, 1985); Reginald W. Bibby, *Mosaic Madness: The Poverty and Potential of Life in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1990); and Robert Bellah, et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

3. On mainline churches see Steve Tipton’s chapter (focused on United Methodism), “The Public Church,” in Bellah, et al., *Good Society*, 179–219; and Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods. The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1987). For similar evaluation of evangelical churches see Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

4. See in this regard the proceedings of a joint Benedictine-Methodist conference on the theme of sanctification: *La Santificazione nelle tradizioni Benedettina e Metodista*, edited by Bruno Corsani & Reginald Gregoire (San Pietro in Cariano: Gabrielli Editori, 1998). The majority of essays from this conference are available in English translation in *The Asbury Theological Journal* 50.2–51.1 (1995–96).

5. Sermon 122, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” *Works* 4:86–96.

6. For more details on the following summary see Randy L. Maddox, “Recovering Theology as a Practical Discipline: A Contemporary Agenda,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650–72.

7. Cf. Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley - Practical Theologian,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 122–47.

8. Sermon 26, “Sermon on the Mount VI,” §III.13, *Works* 1:586.

9. Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Spirit,” §§15–16, *Works* 1:309–10.

10. *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Pt. I*, §3, *Works* 11:106.

11. This is a key emphasis of Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*.

12. See *Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, *Works* 9:69–73.

13. For more exposition of this model (illustrated from his mother’s teachings) and of Wesley’s eventual alternative to it, see Randy L. Maddox, “A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley’s ‘Heart Religion’,” in “*Heart Religion*” in the *Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, edited by Richard Steele (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 3–31.

14. Sermon 19, “The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God,” §III.2–3, *Works* 1:442.

15. Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” *Works* 3:199–209.

16. *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part I*, §III.7, *Works* 11:128–9.

17. Sermon 92, “On Zeal,” §II.5, *Works* 3:313.

18. For a particularly insightful analysis of this dynamic (in a more specific context), see Richard B. Steele, “Unremitting Compassion: The Moral

- Psychology of Parenting Children with Genetic Disorders,” *Theology Today* 57 (2000): 161–74.
19. Sermon 48, “Self-Denial,” §I.6, *Works* 2:243 (emphasis added).
 20. Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount IV,” §I.1, *Works* 1:533–34.