

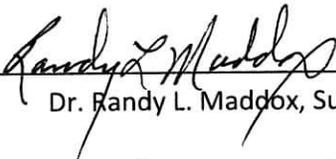
Common Bound:  
The Small Groups of Methodism

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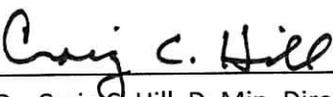
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2016

ABSTRACT

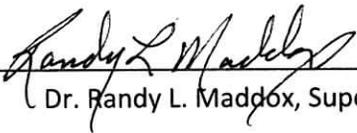
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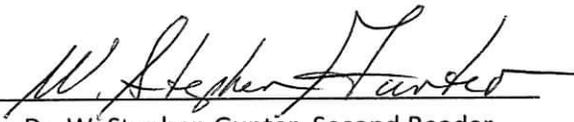
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## **Abstract**

The system of small groups John Wesley established to promote a proper life of discipleship in early Methodist converts was, in many respects, the strength of the Methodist movement. Those who responded to Wesley's initial invitation to "flee the wrath to come" were organized into large gatherings called "societies," which were then subdivided into smaller bands, class meetings, select societies, and penitent bands. The smaller groups gave Wesley the opportunity, through a system of appointed leaders, to keep track of the spiritual progress of every member in his movement, which grew to tens of thousands by the time of his death in 1791. As Methodism shifted from renewal movement to institutional church in the nineteenth century, however, growth slowed, and participation in such groups declined rapidly. By the early twentieth century, classes and bands were virtually extinct in every sector of Methodism save the African-American tradition. In recent years, scholars in various sectors of the Wesleyan tradition, particularly David Lowes Watson and Kevin Watson, have called for a recovery of these small groups for purposes of renewal in the church. There is no consensus, however, concerning what exactly contributed to the vitality of these groups during Wesley's ministry.

Over the last century, sociological studies of group dynamics have revealed three common traits that are crucial to highly functioning groups: interdependence created by the existence of a common goal, interaction among group members that is "promotive" or cooperative in nature, and high levels of feedback associated with personal responsibility and individual accountability. All three of these were prevalent in the early Methodist groups. Interdependence existed around a shared goal, which for Wesley and the Methodists was holiness. That interdependence was cooperative in nature; individuals experienced the empowering grace of God as they each pursued the goal in the company of fellow pilgrims.

Finally, the groups existed for purposes of feedback and accountability as individuals took responsibility both for themselves and others as they progressed together toward the goal of holy living. Wesley seemed to instinctively understand the essential nature of each of these characteristics in maintaining the vitality of the movement when he spoke of the importance of preserving the “doctrine, spirit and discipline” of early Methodism. Analysis of some of the present-day attempts to restore Wesley’s groups reveals frequent neglect to one or more of these three components. Perhaps most critical to recovering the vitality of the early Methodist groups will be reclaiming the goal of sanctification and coming to a consensus on what its pursuit means in the present day.

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# 1. A Plain Account of Wesley's Small Groups

*"That with regard to these little prudential helps we are continually changing one thing after another, is not a weakness or fault, as you imagine, but a peculiar advantage which we enjoy."*  
John Wesley<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 The Rise of the Methodist Small Groups

In 1742, John Wesley made the decision that every Methodist under his care would participate in a small group. Small groups had been influential in Wesley's spiritual journey from his days as an Oxford fellow thirteen years before to his missionary excursion to Georgia in the mid-1730s, and the first Methodists had been sharing intense spiritual fellowship in small groups patterned after those belonging to the Moravian Brethren since shortly after Wesley's Aldersgate experience in 1738. In 1742, however, Wesley decided that what had previously been voluntary would become obligatory. In order to keep membership in a society, Methodists would be required to attend a class meeting. These classes, first developed for purposes of collecting an offering to retire debt on a meeting house, were weekly gatherings of ten to twelve<sup>2</sup> Methodists sharing fellowship and being queried by a lay leader as to the state of their spiritual well-being. The mandatory class meeting participation instituted by Wesley would remain in place among Methodists for nearly one hundred and fifty years. The fruit of such a requirement was substantial; the class meeting became such an important part of the

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §II.7, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. by Frank Baker (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff.), 9:262 (hereafter cited as *Works*).

<sup>2</sup> William Walter Dean has done extensive study on the approximate size of the Methodist Class Meeting. On the basis of surviving class records, Dean estimates the average size of the membership of each class to be "about twenty" with a corresponding average weekly attendance of "eleven to twelve," in *Disciplined Fellowship: The Rise and Decline of Cell Groups in British Methodism* (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Iowa, 1985), 276. See also David Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Instructional Groups* (Ph.D. dissertation: Indiana University, 1980), 132. Wesley also identified "eleven" as the number that each class leader originally took responsibility for when the classes were first established in Bristol in *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §II.3, *Works* 9:260.

Methodist revival that it later came to be called “the germ cell” of Methodism<sup>3</sup> and “the nursery of Methodistic revival power”<sup>4</sup> – effectively synonymous with the vitality of the movement itself.<sup>5</sup>

At first, compulsory class meeting participation was met with resistance. Wesley had to defend his decision against allegations that the requirement was demanded by neither Scripture nor precedent. In response, Wesley argued for obligatory small group participation on the basis of prudence. Wesley, in following the influences of the Moravians and the Anglican Religious Societies, mandated a method of growing disciples that had worked in his own experience – leveraging the influence of the small group for promoting holiness. This “little prudential regulation” of requiring weekly small group participation became such a value to Wesley that he extolled its benefit as beyond conception.<sup>6</sup> Wesley later referred to the class meetings together with the bands as the “sinews” of the Methodist societies.<sup>7</sup> These groups put flesh on Wesley’s theological perspective by reinforcing his teaching with concrete means of application, and through a system of appointed leaders, Wesley was able to provide spiritual oversight to every member of the Methodist movement.

Less than a decade after Wesley’s death, membership of the Methodist societies exceeded one hundred thousand,<sup>8</sup> with eighty-five thousand members in England and Wales.<sup>9</sup>

David Lowes Watson points out that the population of England and Wales at the end of the

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<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Murray, *The Methodist Class Meeting* (London: Robert Culley, 1882), in *Restoring the Wesleyan Class Meeting*, ed. by James B. and Molly D. Scott, (Dallas: Provident Publishing, 2008) 67.

<sup>4</sup> John Atkinson, *The Class Leader: His Work and How to Do It* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1837), in *Restoring the Wesleyan Class Meeting*, 115.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §11.7, *Works* 9:262.

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, Letter to Thomas Maxfield, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. by John Telford, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 4:194 (hereafter cited as *Letters*).

<sup>8</sup> Howard Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 63.

<sup>9</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 131.

eighteenth century was in excess of nine million, so one can deduce that the membership of the societies never exceeded one percent of the total population during what was likely the peak period of class meeting participation. The influence of Methodism, however, swelled far beyond its membership, both among the masses who heard Methodist preaching and among the upper-crust of English society who became intrigued by the polemical nature of the movement.

Most early Methodist converts came from among the English working classes. It was the time of the Industrial Revolution, and the movement found the most momentum in areas near burgeoning industrial centers where the population was growing rapidly.<sup>10</sup> Because the Methodist brand of Christianity brought power for daily living to those on the fringes of society who were otherwise at the mercy of adverse social conditions, scholars like Elie Halévy have credited the influence of Wesley and the Methodists in helping England avoid the type of violent revolution which swept France near the turn of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Others have noted that Britain's nineteenth century societal reforms may also have been impacted by Methodism, if for no other reason than that reforming organizations included structures often strongly resembling the class meeting.<sup>12</sup> The "little prudential helps" of gathering regularly in a small group became such a profound incubator of personal change that they may have changed the course of history for the nation credited as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution.

For Wesley, small groups were the best means of recovering "primitive Christianity." In other words, sharing life in common with a group of fellow Christians was the best way to recreate the type of community cultivated by the apostles and first converts to Christianity as recorded in the book of Acts. Wesley wasn't the first to believe this; his love of groups as

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Elie Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England*, tr. by Bernard Semmel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); see David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 137-138.

<sup>12</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 138-140.

instruments for promoting holiness descended at least in part from Philipp Jakob Spener and the Pietistic movement of the seventeenth century. Spener became convinced that *collegia pietatis*, or “gatherings of piety” where fellow believers met to read Scripture and to encourage one another in faithful living, could be instruments for renewal in the church. Spener and the Pietism of Continental Europe inspired Anthony Horneck in establishing Religious Societies in England in the late 1670s,<sup>13</sup> and they likewise motivated Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf to create a system of small groups at Herrnhut, the community he founded in the 1720s. Wesley, in turn, was profoundly influenced by the Anglican Religious Societies and the small group system crafted by Zinzendorf, both of which molded his belief that small groups of Christians, or “little churches” meeting as *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*, could bring about renewal in the church.<sup>14</sup>

Wesley came to identify “the first rise of Methodism” with the establishment of a small group in November of 1729 when he and three others began meeting together at Oxford.<sup>15</sup> This “first rise” bore resemblance to the movement in its fullness in the 1740s in that a group of individuals met regularly to hold one another accountable to specific behaviors compatible with the life of piety. However, though the group’s aspirations were similar to later Methodist groups, the means of attaining that to which they strived were different. Wesley’s understanding of salvation at Oxford was undeveloped; he had yet to receive the later enlightenment to come through his interaction with the Moravians. The obedience Wesley demanded at Oxford was borne from obligation rather than from loving obedience; self-discipline among the Oxford Methodists was intense, arguably too intense, and turnover was

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<sup>13</sup> Kevin Watson briefly reviews Pietism and its influence on Anglican Religious Societies in *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley’s Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 17-20.

<sup>14</sup> David Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Instructional Groups* (Ph.D. dissertation: Indiana University, 1980), 163-164.

<sup>15</sup> John Wesley, *A Short History of the People Called Methodists*, §9, *Works* 9:430.

high. The group came under criticism for their extreme behavior,<sup>16</sup> and scorn from fellow Oxford students eventually led to the coining of the term “Methodists.” The Holy Club disbanded when Wesley left Oxford,<sup>17</sup> but this “first rise” of Methodism paved the way for future manifestations of the pursuit of holiness in community. After his evangelical conversion in 1738, Wesley’s groups reflected a more mature understanding of salvation in which obedience sprang from a joyful response to the grace of God rather than from self-discipline alone.

Wesley thus knew from personal experience that a small group could be a powerful tool in promoting spiritual well-being. The groups were the “form” that provided opportunity for the “power” of God to work in the souls of individuals.<sup>18</sup> Wesley was able to utilize small groups, originating in various places and for varying purposes, to fit them into his theological framework, and to use them to help individuals move further along the way of salvation. At every turn, Wesley was concerned with the prudential value of these structures. Would the groups be effective in helping converts grow in holiness? If so, they were used. If not, they were discarded.<sup>19</sup>

## **1.2 Wesley’s System of Small Groups**

The structures of Wesley’s system specifically designed to facilitate intimate community in small groups were the class meetings, the band meetings, the trial bands, the select societies, and the penitent bands.<sup>20</sup> There were also gatherings designed for larger groups, which included

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<sup>16</sup> William Walter Dean, *Disciplined Fellowship: The Rise and Decline of Cell Groups in British Methodism* (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Iowa, 1985), 71.

<sup>17</sup> Dean, 78-79.

<sup>18</sup> Wesley described the Methodist societies as a group of individuals “having the form and seeking the power of godliness,” in *The Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies*, §2, Works 9:69.

<sup>19</sup> Henderson, 152.

<sup>20</sup> The “select societies” were also referred to as “select bands.”

the united societies, watch nights, love feasts, and letter days.<sup>21</sup> The society was the most prominent of these large groups, meeting regularly for open-air services during which attendees were invited to respond to the preached word with no initial commitment beyond an expressed desire “to flee from the wrath to come.”<sup>22</sup> Such respondents provided the newest recruits to enter Wesley’s small group system of discipleship. The fact that considerably less documentation survives of the large group meetings as compared to that which remains from class meetings, bands, and select societies indicates that the small groups held a more prominent place in the structures which made up early Methodism than the larger groups did.<sup>23</sup>

In *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, Wesley elaborates on the intent and organization of the classes, bands, trial bands, penitent bands, and select societies. The class meetings and bands were to serve as the most important fixtures among the groups of early Methodism. Trial bands were a temporary probationary group for newcomers seeking membership in the society, and penitent bands served a rehabilitative purpose for those who had experienced a falling away and wished to be restored to the community. The following provides a bit of background on the origination and purposes of the bands, class meetings, select societies, and penitent bands.

### **1.2.1 The Bands**

The Methodist bands, first established at the Fetter Lane Society in London in May of

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas R. Albin, “‘Inwardly Persuaded’ Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism,” in *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. by Richard B. Steele (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 38.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §1.8, *Works* 9:257.

<sup>23</sup> Albin, 52.

1738,<sup>24</sup> predated the class meeting by about four years. The bands were voluntary, likely contributing to their lower numbers of participation as compared to the classes.<sup>25</sup> The bands were also more intense, giving group members an opportunity to “pour out their hearts without reserve” and to speak openly of temptations and failures in thought, word, and deed. Wesley saw these meetings as a means to fulfill the command of James 5:16: “Confess your faults to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.”<sup>26</sup> To speak of their faults openly and honestly “without reserve” would create pause in less serious participants; thus these groups were set aside for those who were further along in the journey of holiness. Wesley considered the forming of bands to be of critical importance for vitality in the life of the society.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas class meetings consisted of men and women meeting together, bands were divided according to sex and occasionally according to season of life: older or younger, married or single. Justification was an expectation for those who participated in band meetings, another distinction from the classes, as members were to be progressing further along the way of salvation. Usually the groups consisted of five to seven participants per meeting.<sup>28</sup>

The inspiration for the band meetings came from Count Zinzendorf and the Moravian Brethren. Wesley’s first attempt at a band was during his missionary excursion to Georgia after

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<sup>24</sup> Dean, 150, 172.

<sup>25</sup> Dean speculates that there was never more than one-fourth of Methodists who were involved in a band meeting in *Disciplined Fellowship*, 164.

<sup>26</sup> John Wesley, *Rules of the Band Societies*, Works 9:77; *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §VI.3, Works 9:267; Dean, *Disciplined Fellowship*, 150.

<sup>27</sup> Wesley wrote to Methodist preacher Edward Jackson: “You cannot be too diligent in restoring the bands. No society will continue lively without them,” in Letter to Edward Jackson, January 6, 1781, *Letters* 7:47. Wesley wrote to William Simpson “No circuit ever did or ever will flourish unless there are bands in the large Societies,” in Letter to William Simpson, April 26, 1788, *Letters* 8:57. Wesley also likely had a preference for the bands because of the sense of spiritual equality among band members (see Dean, 127).

<sup>28</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley’s Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 68-69.

encountering a group of Moravians on a rough trip across the Atlantic. Wesley had observed their confident faith and careful piety, strengthened through their regular band meeting. Though his trip to Georgia did not meet with the fruitfulness he had hoped, the residual influence of the Moravians continued upon his return to England, where a friendship with Peter Böhler, a member of the Brethren, helped Wesley find an experience of justifying faith. Wesley later identified the creation of the first band in Georgia in 1736 as the “second rise” of Methodism and the founding of the Fetter Lane Society with its bands in May of 1738 as the “last rise.”<sup>29</sup>

### 1.2.2 The Class Meeting

One of the first places the young Methodist movement found fruit was in the city of Bristol. In 1739 George Whitefield began preaching in the notorious port city and in the neighboring slums of Kingswood where he found a significant hearing among the coal diggers and artisans. Later that same year, Whitefield invited Wesley to be his successor in the burgeoning evangelistic ministry and it was there that Wesley famously first agreed to the “more vile”<sup>30</sup> duty of preaching to the masses along the highways and in the fields. In 1741, as the number of Methodist converts continued to grow, the society in Bristol took out a loan to construct a new meeting space, a project Wesley financed with his own money.<sup>31</sup>

In discussing how to pay the debt on this “New Room,” a member of the society identified as “Captain Foy” suggested that each member of the society contribute a penny a

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<sup>29</sup> Wesley, *A Short History of the People Called Methodists*, §9, *Works* 9:430.

<sup>30</sup> John Wesley, April 2, 1739, *The Journal of The Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, standard ed., 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1909-1916), 2:172 (hereafter cited as *Journal*).

<sup>31</sup> Dean, 173.

week toward the building until the debt was paid in full.<sup>32</sup> When the capability of those with lesser means to pay such an offering was questioned, those present each agreed to call on eleven other members, collect a penny from each, and personally pay the offering of any unable to give. This weekly call for a collection became an opportunity for pastoral oversight. Upon visiting the homes of society members, leaders were able to discern quickly whether any among the society were failing to “live as he ought,” or becoming a “disorderly walker.”<sup>33</sup> Wesley, the prudential pastor, immediately seized upon the potential of this tool to aid in spiritual formation. Rather than assigning leaders to visit the homes of eleven society members weekly, members would gather once a week for a meeting during which a penny toward the needs of the society would be paid and each would give an account as to the state of their living. These were the “class meetings” that became mandatory for Methodists everywhere, effectively becoming a subdivision of the larger Methodist societies.

Not to take the place of the band meetings, which were already present in the societies, the class meetings required participation but not justification. Persons could become members of a class simply by expressing a desire “to flee the wrath to come” and by making a commitment to keep the *General Rules* of the society (a commitment to which they were held accountable at each meeting).<sup>34</sup> Thus, the class meetings became not only a tool of pastoral oversight but also a primary means of evangelism in the society. In fact, more than half of the

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<sup>32</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §II.3, *Works* 9:260. Wesley does not identify Captain Foy by name until 1787 in “Thoughts upon Methodism,” *Arminian Magazine* 10 (1787): 101.

<sup>33</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §II.1-3, *Works* 9:260-261.

<sup>34</sup> John Wesley, *The Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies*, §4-6, *Works* 9:70-73.

recorded conversion experiences of the early Methodists took place in association with a class meeting.<sup>35</sup>

### 1.2.3 The Select Societies

When Wesley's groups are considered as concentric circles (with the class meetings as the outermost loop where seekers enter into membership and experience justifying faith and band meetings as one loop enclosed for those justified members more seriously pursuing holiness), the select societies form an innermost circle, set aside especially for those who had either experienced entire sanctification or were earnestly seeking after it.<sup>36</sup> These groups were for those who "outran the greater part of their brethren" and "continued in the light of God's countenance" that they should have a community from which to receive spiritual counsel.<sup>37</sup>

In a class meeting, discussion was initiated and led by a class leader assigned by Wesley or one of his preachers who questioned members individually as to the state of their souls. The class leader played a crucial role in the functioning of the class meeting. In a band, leadership rotated among members, with the leader of each meeting serving as a facilitator in providing the first example of personal confession. The select societies, in contrast, had no leaders; they were considered to be a community of equals. The barriers of gender and age present in the bands were removed. The extensive *General Rules* for the classes, condensed for the bands, were reduced to only three in the select societies, absolute confidentiality being first among

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<sup>35</sup> Dean cites the results of his research of biographical accounts of the early Methodists: "more than half [of accounts of conversions dated before 1820] happened either in a class meeting, following a class meeting, or under the influence of a class leader," in *Disciplined Fellowship*, 303.

<sup>36</sup> See diagram, Albin, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §VIII.1-2, *Works* 9:269.

them.<sup>38</sup>

The number of participants in the select societies was smaller than that of the classes and bands, yet, for Wesley, the significance of these groups was undiminished. Wesley believed the select societies would become a permanent part of each society.<sup>39</sup> It is speculated that Wesley reserved these groups for the spiritual leaders of the movement, not least among those being Wesley himself, that he might have a “select company” to whom he might “unbosom” his heart and receive spiritual support.<sup>40</sup>

#### **1.2.4 The Penitent Bands**

Ever the prudential pastoral theologian, Wesley had a special group for those who had succumbed willfully or unknowingly to sin. These were to be separated from the rest of the society to receive special attention in preparation to be restored to the community. All of the hymns, prayers, and exhortations of the penitent bands were adapted for the particular circumstances of those who were experiencing rehabilitation, in order that their healing would be facilitated. From the spiritual seeker to the new convert to the mature spiritual leader to the backslider, Wesley had designed a group for every potential member of the Methodist movement.

### ***1.3 The Decline of the Methodist Small Groups***

While the class meetings and bands were a “peculiar advantage” in the Wesleyan method of disciple-making, maintaining faithful participation among the constituency was a

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<sup>38</sup> Albin, 48; Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §VIII.3, Works 9:270.

<sup>39</sup> Dean, 184.

<sup>40</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §VIII.2, Works 9:270.

challenge. It is estimated that, even at the point of highest participation, no more than one quarter of the members of a Methodist society participated in a band meeting. William Walter Dean estimates that, by the end of the eighteenth century that number had likely fallen to one in ten.<sup>41</sup> Sustained participation in the mandatory class meetings also proved a challenge. After an examination of surviving class meeting records, Dean estimates that the average size of a Methodist class meeting was about twenty members. However, according to the same records, based on the percentage of members attending on a weekly basis, the average weekly attendance of a class was only eleven to twelve.<sup>42</sup>

In America, Methodism evolved differently than it did in England, though, at least at first, the American version of Methodism looked quite similar to its British progenitor. Class meetings and bands were established by the circuit riders on the frontier of the American wilderness. Just as in Britain, the small groups were considered a primary reason for the vitality of the Methodist movement in America, and, by the year 1810, the number of class meetings in America was reported to be in excess of 14,000.<sup>43</sup> In 1798, Bishops Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury identified the class meetings as “the pillars of our work” and their “universities for the ministry.”<sup>44</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the class meeting was in decline in America, and compulsory class attendance came to be gradually abolished in the various branches of American Methodism.<sup>45</sup> It is estimated that by the year 1844, bands had

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<sup>41</sup> Dean, 164.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>43</sup> Charles W. Ferguson, *Methodists and the Making of America: Organizing to Beat the Devil* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1971), 70.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church in America: with Explanatory Notes*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1798), §II.II, 147-148.

<sup>45</sup> Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 251.

disappeared altogether in America.<sup>46</sup> The exception was in the African-American tradition, which held on to the class meetings long after they had been abandoned in other Methodist traditions.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, in Britain, band meetings were in rapid decline by the end of the eighteenth century. By the middle part of the nineteenth century, the original band meeting had completely disappeared in Methodism.<sup>48</sup> Discussion about how to restore the bands had already begun among Methodists at least as early as 1786<sup>49</sup> and continued for another fifty years or more<sup>50</sup> before abandonment. In the nineteenth century, Methodist meetings still referred to as “bands” more frequently denoted the “public bands,” larger gatherings of Methodists assembled for the purposes of sharing religious experience.<sup>51</sup> As the nineteenth century progressed, voices of protest against mandatory class meeting participation became louder.<sup>52</sup> As Methodism made the transition from renewal movement to established church, pressures rose to release Methodists from the “chains”<sup>53</sup> of this membership requirement as a means of becoming more “universal,”<sup>54</sup> or appealing to a broader section of society. It was believed that this change would open the gates to a flood of potential new members. The stalling of membership growth in Wesleyan Methodism in the latter part of the nineteenth century only strengthened these voices. By 1889, after three straight years of membership decline, the Conference Committee on Church Membership effectively removed faithful class meeting participation from the

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<sup>46</sup> Ferguson, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Norwood, 373.

<sup>48</sup> Dean, 168.

<sup>49</sup> Wesley, “Of Separation from the Church,” *Conference Minutes and Conference Journal, 1786, Works* 10:618.

<sup>50</sup> “Old Methodism,” *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 10 (November 1836): 835-836.

<sup>51</sup> Dean, 168-170.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Hughes, *The Condition of Membership in the Christian Church, Viewed in Connection with the Class-Meeting System in the Methodist Body*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1873), 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

membership requirements of the Wesleyan Connexion.<sup>55</sup> Though class meetings continued to meet in the intervening decades, they became little more than fellowship meetings with hardly a resemblance to their original design.<sup>56</sup>

With the exception of the African-American Methodist tradition, the small groups which provided Wesley the “peculiar advantage” that suited his pastoral heart and provided the “prudential helps” to lead persons along the way of salvation are virtually non-existent in mainline Methodism in England and in America today. In the last decades of the twentieth century, considerable conversation began on bringing back the class meeting in Wesleyan/Methodist circles, including a specific proposal by David Lowes Watson to reestablish the groups in the form of Covenant Discipleship Groups.<sup>57</sup> The conversations about class meetings and bands have not abated in recent years, coinciding with a renewed emphasis on the power of small groups to promote positive change in the church and in society at large. The defining qualities of Wesley’s groups and the aspects of their functioning that would be important to restore in any attempt to recover the classes or bands, however, have not come into universal agreement. The following chapter considers some of the scholarly work of the last forty years on the subject.

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<sup>55</sup> Dean, 349.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>57</sup> David Lowes Watson, *Accountable Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985).

## 2. Growing Interest in the Methodist Groups

*“The class meeting was where they came to share the bumps and bruises of this encounter, to comfort and strengthen one another, and to provide a mutual accountability for the task in hand.” David Lowes Watson<sup>1</sup>*

*“The basic pattern of the [class] meeting was that simple. People were essentially giving testimony to their experience of God over the past week.” Kevin M. Watson<sup>2</sup>*

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the denominational decline that had been a part of British Methodism for several decades spread to America.<sup>3</sup> After the creation of The United Methodist Church at the union of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968, membership loss became the norm for American Methodists. For half a century, Methodists in the United States have speculated on how to return to the glory days of a growing movement, marked by increasing membership rolls and an expanding influence in culture. These cries for renewal are not dissimilar to those of John Wesley in the eighteenth century. Wesley desired to bring life to an institutional church devoid of vigor through a return to what he called “primitive Christianity.” Among students and admirers of Wesley today, conversations continue on how vitality can be restored to the movement he started through a return to primitive Methodism.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lowes Watson, *Accountable Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984), 19 (emphasis original).

<sup>2</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Wilmore: Seedbed, 2014), 26-27.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Turner notes that the slowing of the growth of Methodism in Britain in the latter part of the nineteenth century was followed by actual decline in the early part of the twentieth century in “Methodism in England, 1900-1932,” in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Vol. 3, ed. by Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1983), 321. Frederick A. Norwood notes trends of decline in the American church in the first half of the twentieth century in *Church Membership in the Methodist Tradition* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1958). The Bishops of the ME Church in America were already lamenting signs of “decay” including the “considerably disused” class meeting at the turn of the twentieth century, according to *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, ed. by David S. Monroe (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1900), 59-60.

In the last forty years, the small group has been rediscovered as an effective instrument of disciple-making in the church. Like the *collegia pietatis* of the days of Philipp Spener, the popular small group tends to meet in homes,<sup>4</sup> though it is generally spoken of in terms of building Christian community rather than of cultivating piety. With the advent of megachurches in the 1980s, the small group was introduced as a means of building and maintaining relationships in the church, often replacing rather than working alongside the traditional curriculum-based Sunday School class. As a result, many churches don't build classroom space anymore – large spaces are designated for weekend worship gatherings, and participants expect to find “biblically functioning community”<sup>5</sup> in their weekly home-group meeting.

Pastors and scholars in the Wesleyan tradition have been calling for the recovery and reinstitution of the small group meetings of early Methodism for the last three or four decades. Those in the stream of Wesley have in the class meetings and bands specific examples in history toward which to point when it comes to small groups as examples of cultivating piety. It is believed by many of these pastors and scholars that the early Methodist groups can be reintroduced in the present day, with a similar kind of fruitfulness when it comes to disciple-making. Not all of these pastors and scholars are in agreement, however, when it comes to what made the early Methodist groups vital and which aspects of their historical identity should be recovered in the twenty first century.

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<sup>4</sup> David Lowes Watson comments on the home groups of English Congregationalism in *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Donahue & Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 12.

## **2.1 Recent Study of Early Methodist Small Groups**

In 1980, Howard Snyder published *The Radical Wesley*, a call for church leaders to reconsider John Wesley and the unique contributions his life, methods, and theology bring to the conversation of church renewal. Snyder identifies the Methodist small groups as the key component in the effectiveness of Wesley's method and the "secret of his radicality."<sup>6</sup> The class meetings and bands provided practical means to live out the implications of the gospel in community – an opportunity to "function biblically as a church," through bearing one another's burdens and sharing encouragement in close fellowship.<sup>7</sup> Beyond sharing in *koinonia*, Snyder identifies discipline as the "primary purpose" of the class meeting and the secret of its power.<sup>8</sup> Only a group bound by "serious covenant commitment," says Snyder, can sustain the rigor necessary to stand against the dominant corrupting influences of the prevailing social climate. Furthermore, he points out that this kind of discipline was "no less scandalous" in Wesley's day than it would be in ours.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, emphasizing rather than avoiding the contrast between Methodists and the prevailing culture is a vital component of the health of the movement. Small groups thus become necessary not only for the church but also for society at large as a proper witness to the gospel.

David Lowes Watson takes the conversation a step further in *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* by tracing the development of Wesley's belief in the power of the small groups as instruments of renewal. As a dedicated Anglican, Wesley never set out to create a new denomination but rather to reform the institutional church through *ecclesiolae*, or little

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<sup>6</sup> Snyder, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-150.

churches, firmly anchored within Anglicanism as *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*.<sup>10</sup> Like Snyder, Watson emphasizes covenant discipleship as the principal leavening agent of the groups. It was a commitment to mutual accountability in the context of covenant community that gave the class meeting its transforming power. Watson presents a model by which the accountability of the class meetings could be reintroduced to present-day churches through *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* meeting as “Covenant Disciple Groups.” A detailed plan for developing and implementing these groups is described in a companion edition, *Accountable Discipleship*.

In the 1980s, William Walter Dean and David Michael Henderson published separate doctoral dissertations on the small groups of Methodism. Henderson presents Wesley’s system of interlocking groups as an example of educational expertise in *John Wesley’s Instructional Groups*. Dean reflects on the nature of accountability in the development and subsequent decline of the Methodist groups in *Disciplined Fellowship*, with analysis of hundreds of surviving records of Methodist group members in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain. These records give insight into what life was like in these groups, how they changed, and, potentially, what contributed to their decline.

The most recent work published on the early Methodist small groups has come from Kevin M. Watson, who released separate books on the class meetings and on the bands in 2014. Kevin Watson perceives some conflation between the classes and bands in the scholarly analysis in recent years. The discipleship component of the class meeting has been overemphasized to the detriment of the fellowship component according to Kevin Watson, resulting in a diminished emphasis on the bands, which he believes to be the “key communal support structure... most

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<sup>10</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 6.

helpful for growth in holiness” in Wesley’s system.<sup>11</sup> Kevin Watson identifies the neglect of the bands in favor of the class meeting as a “significant gap in Wesleyan studies.”<sup>12</sup> Kevin Watson’s work on the bands shapes his proposal of how the class meeting could be recovered in *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*.

Over the last thirty years, David Lowes Watson and Kevin Watson stand as bookends in scholarly attempts to reintroduce, in their case, the Methodist class meeting in the present day. These unrelated Watsons are united in their appreciation of Wesley’s system and the belief that these small groups could be instruments of restoring vitality to the church. There are differences in their approaches, however. These differences seem to arise from conflicting interpretations of the defining objective of the groups, or at least of how those objectives were made manifest in their functioning. Exploring these distinctions prior to consideration of what might be recoverable from these groups today is a worthy task.

## ***2.2 Proposals for Reintroducing the Class Meeting***

David Lowes Watson defines accountability as the key characteristic of the Wesleyan class meeting. Watson says, “It was precisely accountability which the class meetings sought to foster.”<sup>13</sup> He says that providing a structured system of accountability in making disciples was the unique and preeminent contribution of the class meeting: “it was this *purpose* [accountability], rather than any affect it might have had within the Methodist movement or on society at large, which constitutes [the class meeting’s] real significance.”<sup>14</sup> Those who were members of the class meetings were pursuing a life of obedient discipleship beyond a particular

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<sup>11</sup> Kevin Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 62.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>13</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 123.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

religious experience. They were seeking ways to connect inward devotion to Christ to outward acts of holy obedience. The class meetings existed to foster this kind of prudential, real-world discipleship through a systematic means of mutual accountability.

David Lowes Watson's conviction that accountability was the preeminent attribute of the class meeting is revealed in the thrust of his proposal to recapture them as "Covenant Discipleship Groups." According to this model, *ecclesiolae* are defined by a covenant, or the set of promises that bind group members together. The only religious experience members must have in common is their mutual recognition of personal weakness – an awareness of an inability to live as obedient disciples of Jesus Christ on their own. This common need binds the community together, not unlike the groups of Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers today, where members hold one another accountable to help every other member of the group overcome a common problem. Every member of a Covenant Discipleship Group is held accountable according to their promise to abide by the group covenant. Watson says explicitly, "Covenant groups can and frequently do function without an intensive experience. Their purpose is accountability."<sup>15</sup>

In Covenant Discipleship Groups, a drafted covenant establishes the parameters of the community and serves as the prudential guidelines for the life of obedient discipleship. Watson acknowledges this as a difference between his Covenant Discipleship Groups and the class meetings. In the classes, members did not draft their own covenant but were examined weekly by an assigned class leader according to their spiritual well-being in light of the rules of the society, in a type of catechism.<sup>16</sup> The early Methodist groups were covenant groups in that they were bound according to the particular rules assigned to them, but none of them developed

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

their own rules. The bands had their *Rules of the Band Societies*,<sup>17</sup> and class meetings were governed by the *General Rules* of the society. It was the *Rules* which served as the “initial referent”<sup>18</sup> to which the class members must give an account. The 1743 *General Rules* were both specific and extensive. In their most basic form, they existed only as three: do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God. Members could have their membership privileges (as represented in a quarterly-issued class meeting ticket) revoked by a failure to keep the *General Rules*. Thus the *Rules* served as the primary binding agent of the community that was early Methodism. David Lowes Watson proposes that his present-day manifestation of *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* be similarly bound by mutual accountability to a written covenant outlining the principles of faithful discipleship.

Kevin Watson has a different approach. He believes the decline in the class meeting to be due to what he sees as a shift away from sharing personal experiences of the life of faith toward information-driven curriculums. Kevin Watson acknowledges that accountability was an important part of Wesley’s system of groups but believes that the practice of close accountability fit more appropriately with the bands than with the class meetings; thus he doesn’t believe his re-envisioned class meeting should be a place where “judgments about your life are being made.” He recognizes the negative connotations associated with the word “accountability” in today’s culture and does not advocate a return to a system in which a lack of faithful attendance places one’s membership in the group in jeopardy.<sup>19</sup> Thus, he leans away from David Lowes Watson’s understanding of the class meeting primarily as a source of accountability and suggests instead that the group serve as a place for the sharing of religious

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<sup>17</sup> Wesley, *Rules of the Band Societies*, Works 9:77-78.

<sup>18</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 107.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 68.

experience: “in a class meeting, it is not the group’s job to tell you about your relationship with God. Rather, you are telling the group about your experience from the past week.”<sup>20</sup>

Both Kevin Watson and David Lowes Watson seem to be in agreement that the band meeting was more intense than the classes, in that confessions of a more personal and confidential nature were shared among members.<sup>21</sup> David Lowes Watson diverges in identifying the bands as more experiential in focus and the classes as fundamentally catechetical.<sup>22</sup> The primary driver of the catechism was the class leader, who was responsible for examining group members every week. The class leader was not making arbitrary judgments; the standard of examination was the *Rules* by which each member was to gauge his or her behavior. The focus of weekly conversation was the behavior of the individual, not the *Rules* themselves. It was an exercise in practice, not in information-gathering, with the weekly life of the class member and present state of their soul as the primary object of study. It is not difficult to imagine that such a weekly examination would have a profound influence on the class member’s spiritual development.

Even though the rules-governed class advocated by David Lowes Watson doesn’t reflect the typical curriculum-driven groups that Kevin Watson speaks against in his version of the class meeting, discussion questions in covenant groups seem more intentional and potentially confrontational than simple weekly queries of well-being. David Lowes Watson describes the flow of conversation in the class meeting as atypical of present-day small groups in that the class leader interviews the members of the class directly in the presence of the other group

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Watson: “the focus of the band meeting was weekly confession of sin,” in *The Class Meeting*, 68. David L. Watson: “The purpose of meeting together [in bands] was to provide the mutual confession and encouragement conducive to advanced spiritual growth,” in *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 118.

<sup>22</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 121-122.

members,<sup>23</sup> and the flow is from class leader to class member rather than from class member to class member or around a particular topic of conversation as might be expected in a more experientially-focused group.<sup>24</sup> The more unstructured conversations typical of the kind of groups advocated by Kevin Watson could be imagined to have been more common in the bands than in the class meetings, where rules were simpler, and leadership rotated among the various members of the group.<sup>25</sup>

Though resembling the bands in structure, Kevin Watson's reimagined class meetings are not primarily confessional. Yet he does not entirely reject the place of accountability. This is exhibited through what he calls "shepherding"<sup>26</sup> on the part of the class leader, who checks on members of the class when they are absent and makes sure every member has a chance to answer the question "How is your life in God?" during group meetings.<sup>27</sup> What is missing from Kevin Watson's version of the class meeting is the concept of governing rules that define the boundaries of the group and give members practical means by which to live out the gospel during the week as revealed in David Lowes Watson's proposed group covenant.

Kevin Watson states that attention to such levels of accountability might be destructive to his version of the class meeting: "class meetings are not accountability groups; they are not places where people confess their deepest sins to one another."<sup>28</sup> Thus Kevin Watson's reimagined class meeting serves an introductory function, with a purpose of helping individuals

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<sup>23</sup> David L. Watson describes the bluntness of these exchanges in *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 111-115.

<sup>24</sup> See a diagram of the flow of conversation in a Covenant Discipleship Group as compared to a typical small group in David L. Watson, *Accountable Discipleship*, 74; see also Dean, *Disciplined Fellowship*, 177-178.

<sup>25</sup> Kevin Watson acknowledges the differences in the flow of the class meetings and bands in *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 68-69.

<sup>26</sup> Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 97-102.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

discover and respond to God’s work in and among them without serving as an “accountability group.” This raises an important question: Is an accountability group exclusively a place where persons “confess their deepest sins to one another?” Confessing “deepest sins” sounds more appropriate to a restored version of the band meetings; however, eliminating accountability altogether would seem to destroy the heart of what the class meeting was about.

### ***2.3 Hypotheses on the Decline of the Class Meeting***

David Lowes Watson argues that it was the movement away from accountability, a “neglect of the works of obedience” and toward “a self-preoccupation with religious experience,” that initiated the decline of the class meeting.<sup>29</sup> In this respect, it would seem that the re-envisioned class meeting that Kevin Watson perceives would be precisely what David Lowes Watson decries as a class meeting which has lost its disciplinary focus and thus its transforming power. David Lowes Watson quotes anonymous letters from a Methodist leader prior to 1790 that identify the content of class meetings as heavily dependent on and ultimately governed by the *General Rules* of the society: “The purpose of the meeting is – to enquire after the soul’s Prosperity to see that each Member walk by the Rules of the Society... The duty of a class leader is to observe if his People walk by these Rules.”<sup>30</sup> Material from the nineteenth century indicates a shift away from attention to outward works of obedience and the *Rules* toward self-preoccupation and “sanctimonious platitudes.”<sup>31</sup> The material of the class meetings became repetitive and largely sentimental. The catechetical emphasis was lost, and the meeting

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<sup>29</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 145.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-219.

<sup>31</sup> These words come from an American minister Charles L. Goodell writing about his childhood experience in a class meeting in *The Drillmaster of Methodism: Principles and Methods for the Class Leader and Pastor* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1902), 139-140.

became largely a source of “effusiveness” and “empty formalism.”<sup>32</sup>

William Walter Dean traces a similar pattern of movement away from accountability in the classes in *Disciplined Fellowship*. Dean notes that, after Wesley’s death, there was a shift in focus from evangelism to a more “conservatory”<sup>33</sup> function in which more attention was given to personal encouragement among class members than to accountability to specific behaviors. Maintenance of religious zeal had always been a function of the class meeting, helping to stoke the fires of personal devotion to prevent the individual embers from growing cold. Yet while conservation had been a function of the class meeting from its inception, this was not its primary *purpose*, which had always been holiness pursued under the oversight of a loving community. David Lowes Watson similarly notes that neither evangelism nor personal growth was the primary purpose of the class meeting.<sup>34</sup> These functions were natural outgrowths of the primary expression of the class meeting as an instrument of accountability for living the life of obedient discipleship.

Dean says this “conservatory” function began to take greater precedence in the classes as time passed.<sup>35</sup> With the evangelistic role of the class meetings effectively lost, this task was shifted to the after-preaching Sunday evening prayer meetings.<sup>36</sup> Increasing emphasis on religious experience and away from the applicability of piety to daily living is reflected in the relocation of the classes from homes to the newly constructed Methodist chapels. By the middle of the nineteenth century, all of the society activities had been moved to the chapels. A chapel-

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<sup>32</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 146.

<sup>33</sup> Dean, 298ff.

<sup>34</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 148-149.

<sup>35</sup> Dean, 300.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 313-315.

centered society life led to a shift in focus from Christian fellowship to public worship.<sup>37</sup> The undercurrent of these changes was a movement away from an understanding of holiness as a life of obedience to Christ through a specific set of outward behaviors to an inward knowledge of Christ through particular religious experiences alone. While Wesley understood and proclaimed this inward experience, its pursuit was never the primary purpose of the classes, and Dean explains the effects of the shift: “Once spiritual experience rather than a continuing pursuit of holiness became the focus of the class meeting, dynamic fellowship was difficult to maintain.”<sup>38</sup> By the time the call came in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to abandon participation in a class meeting as a formal requirement for Methodist membership, what had originally been the primary engine of transformation in the Wesleyan revival had become a mere shadow of its former self.

It seems that the ethos of the early Methodist groups, especially in Britain, was primarily driven and maintained by the extraordinary discipline of their founder. Once John Wesley was gone, the levels of accountability upon which he had insisted (and found difficult to maintain even during his own lifetime) were impossible to hold. Andrew Goodhead sees the decline of the class meeting in Britain as inevitable – a development Wesley could not have foreseen and thus could not have prevented.<sup>39</sup> He argues that the class meeting as Wesley envisaged it was by nature a single-generation invention. After the first generation, the groups became subject to “totemism” in which the successes of the classes in the initial generation led to their veneration in every successive one. They became in essence objects to be preserved for their own sake, and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Goodhead, *A Crown and A Cross: The Rise, Development and Decline of the Methodist Class Meeting* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), xix.

the purpose for which they had been founded was lost.<sup>40</sup> Goodhead identifies residual totemism as the primary reason why many in the Wesleyan tradition believe the resurrection of the class meeting will be a cure-all for Methodist ills today.<sup>41</sup>

Goodhead also identifies “routinization of charisma,” a phrase coined and first explained by sociologist Max Weber, as a reason for the decline of the class meeting. In routinization, a movement that is birthed by a charismatic leader or set of leaders becomes subject to institutionalizing forces due to the inherently unstable nature of the movement in its most rapidly expanding phases. In the Methodist movement, this is reflected in a blurring of the sharp lines between the Methodist societies and the surrounding culture in nineteenth century Britain. An initial strength of the Methodist movement was its egalitarian emphasis; members from all strata of society were effectively on a level playing field in Wesley’s system – everyone was equal in the sight of God. As Methodism took on institutional qualities, and as membership in a society became a more socially acceptable status, complaints began to surface about the mixed company of the classes.<sup>42</sup> It should also be pointed out that British society had changed considerably from the middle of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century, resulting in a much more positive public perception of the Methodists. Some scholars speculate that the change in British society was due at least in part to the superficial success of the evangelical revival (which includes Methodism) reflected in a changing cultural ethos.<sup>43</sup>

In “totemism” and “routinization of charisma,” the fundamental purpose of the classes is lost for the sake of another objective, even if the objective is the preservation of the groups themselves. Goodhead identifies the onset of routinization among Methodists as the moment

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 233ff.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Edward White, “The Decline of the Class Meeting,” *Methodist History* 40, no 4 (July 2002): 210.

<sup>43</sup> Dean references several studies on this matter in *Disciplined Fellowship*, 366.

when “organization replaced movement.”<sup>44</sup> The genius of Wesley’s organizational scheme notwithstanding, there is an important emphasis here. Methodism existed for *movement*. Headway was always to be made in a particular direction toward a particular goal. Perhaps the decline of the Methodist small groups was inevitable, as Goodhead asserts, and perhaps there was nothing Wesley could have done to alter the eventual pattern of decline. Or, it may be that the greater fault was that at some point the end goal was lost and Methodists forgot why the class meeting was so necessary in the first place. Subsequent peripheral objectives took the place of the primary one.

Prior to considering whether or not the Methodist groups could be recovered in the present day, it might be helpful to consider their defining qualities in light of what we know from studies on the behavior of groups. What characteristics define a group’s effectiveness? What have we learned about how small groups function that can aid in our understanding of the effectiveness of the Methodist small groups for growing disciples of Jesus Christ? The following chapter is devoted seeking answers to such questions in light of sociological research of the last hundred years.

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<sup>44</sup> Goodhead, xx.

### 3. Insight from Studies in Group Dynamics

*“The truly committed cooperative learning group is probably the most productive tool humans have.” David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson<sup>1</sup>*

In the middle of the twentieth century, interest was aroused in the theory of group dynamics. The western world was occupied with threats of communism after the defeat of the Nazis in the Second World War, and desire was growing to gain an understanding of how groups of people behaved, not only out of intellectual curiosity but also from concerns for the survival of democratic society.<sup>2</sup> Kurt Lewin, a German-born sociologist who immigrated to the United States in the 1930s, was the pioneer of studies in group behavior and is generally considered the father of social psychology. Lewin defined a group not by the “phenotypical similarities” of its members<sup>3</sup> but by its commonality of purpose, or a shared goal. Lewin understood groups as socially interdependent entities in which the outcome of each member is influenced by the performance of every other member of the group.<sup>4</sup>

The insight provided by Lewin and those who followed him in the field of group dynamics can be applied both on a large scale in terms of understanding the actions of nations and societies and on a smaller scale in terms of gaining knowledge about how small groups can be effective tools for accomplishing tasks or influencing change in individuals. One of Lewin’s understudies, Morton Deutsch, continued his work with further experimentation into the nature of group interdependence. Deutsch refined Lewin’s social interdependence theory with his

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<sup>1</sup> David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” in *Theory and Research on Small Groups*, ed. by R. Scott Tindale, et. al. (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>2</sup> David W. Johnson and Frank P. Johnson, *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science*, ed. by Dorwin Cartwright (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 145.

<sup>4</sup> David W. and Roger T. Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” 11.

cooperative/competitive categorization of group functioning. Groups defined by cooperative interdependence work together to accomplish a common group goal; their interaction and orientation is positive, defined by what Deutsch calls “promotive” interdependence. Interdependence is promotive in the degree to which one member obtaining his or her goals is positively correlated to others attaining their goals.<sup>5</sup> In groups with competitive, or negative interdependence, on the other hand, members compete with one another for a singular goal. Deutsch and subsequent researchers have demonstrated the superiority of cooperative over competitive interdependence in achieving results. David and Roger Johnson have performed further research on group behavior in light of cooperative interdependence theory with a particular emphasis on the effectiveness of groups as tools for use in education. The Johnsons, among others, emphasize individual accountability as a necessary component of cooperative interdependence.

The early Methodist small groups could be understood as cooperatively interdependent entities. They existed for the sake of behavior change consistent with a particular ideal held in common by every member. Studies in group dynamics have been applied in every sphere of human activity from politics to business to sports teams. The specific applicability of these principles to Wesley’s groups and to building disciples in the church today will be examined later, but first, it will be helpful to consider insights gained in effective group functioning from Lewin and the sociologists who followed him using three distinguishing criteria as guideposts: (1) groups are interdependent entities defined by common goals, (2) cooperatively interdependent groups are superior to competitively interdependent groups in achieving results, and (3) individual accountability is critical in maintaining group health.

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<sup>5</sup> Morton Deutsch, “Cooperation and Conflict Resolution: Implications for Consulting Psychology,” *Consulting Psychology Journal* 53, no 2 (Spring 2001): 77.

### **3.1 Common Goals**

According to Kurt Lewin, groups are not static entities defined by the similar characteristics of their members. Rather, groups are “dynamic wholes” with properties “different from their parts or from the sum of their parts.”<sup>6</sup> Census data may group persons according to income, marital status, or ethnic background, but this sort of categorization alone does not create a socially functioning group. More than similarities of type or kind, it is interdependence that binds members of a group together. For example, a family made up of a husband, wife, and baby consists of members of considerable difference in kind, yet they make a single unit,<sup>7</sup> and in that interdependent unit, any change in the state of an individual member affects the state of every other member. This dynamic quality of the group indicates a common end objective rather than a static trait as the single most binding group trait. Groups exist for the sake of movement in a particular direction, so when the logic of Lewin’s theory is followed, though he never explicitly says so, a group’s primary existence is for purposes of accomplishing a goal.

Where Lewin never plainly defines a group by any other trait than interdependence, Morton Deutsch takes the next step in identifying a common objective as the fundamental group characteristic: “A psychological group exists (has unity) to the extent that the individuals composing it perceive themselves as pursuing promotively interdependent goals.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, social interdependence cannot be understood as existing without individuals holding goals in common. Even Lewin acknowledged that predicting group behavior, part of the fundamental

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<sup>6</sup> Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science*, 146.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>8</sup> Morton Deutsch, “A Theory of Cooperation and Competition,” *Human Relations* 2, no 3 (July 1949): 136.

effort of group theory, would be impossible without taking into account the goals of the group.<sup>9</sup>

In individuals, goals are developed as a result of “some internal system in tension,”<sup>10</sup> or need within the individual, connected to the perception of a resolution associated with the attainment of a particular state or objective. Thus, it would be a common need, or perception of a need, that binds group members together to share a common goal. An individual may also adopt a group goal for purposes of assimilation into the group, even if he or she does not immediately share in the perception of a common need. Regardless, research has shown that those who embrace group goals can pursue their accomplishment with a greater sense of fervency than those who pursue the accomplishment of individual goals alone.<sup>11</sup> This is interesting considering that group goals, which exist for the attainment of a more desirable state for the group, do not always coincide with a more desirable state for the individual. Thus, “the group goal is not the simple sum of personal goals, nor can it be directly inferred from them.”<sup>12</sup> The tendency of individuals to devote themselves with greater enthusiasm to accomplishing group goals over personal goals seems to be characteristic of the fundamental social nature of human beings; we desire not only to achieve goals but also to share in the joy of their accomplishment in community, or in Lewin’s terms, to share the joy of resolving the tension that led to the establishment of the goal.

If every group exists for pursuit of a common goal, some groups are more explicit than others in setting them. Group researcher Alvin Zander cites a 1963 study of 197 business firms where ninety percent of the organized groups within those firms set goals. The more

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<sup>9</sup> Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science*, 198.

<sup>10</sup> Murray Horowitz, “The Recall of Interrupted Group Tasks: An Experimental Study of Individual Motivation in Relation to Group Goals,” *Human Relations* 7, no 1 (February 1954): 4.

<sup>11</sup> Kurt Lewin, “The Dynamics of Group Action,” *Educational Leadership* 1 (January 1944): 198.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore M. Mills, *The Sociology of Small Groups* (Englewood Hills, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 81.

competitive the business, the more likely the groups were to set goals,<sup>13</sup> presumably because of the higher level of tension present within those systems. Circumstances hostile to survival demanded the establishment of clear goals. According to David and Frank Johnson, “One of the most important aspects of group effectiveness is the group’s ability to define its goals and achieve them successfully.”<sup>14</sup> When group goals are embraced by individual members to the extent that their personal goals are adjusted to align with the goals of the group, group functioning is promoted. To the extent that members do not embrace group goals, functioning is inhibited. Not surprisingly, group members whose personal goals are homogeneous with the group are usually happier with the group than those whose goals are at odds with the group.<sup>15</sup>

Goal-reaching success in groups tends to breed more success. In pursuing an explicit objective, knowledge, experience, and confidence increase as progress is made toward accomplishing goals. Those groups with a history of success tend to have better communication, healthier relationships, and higher levels of individual commitment to reaching the group goal.<sup>16</sup> For healthy functioning, individuals must know the goals of the group, the actions that should be taken to help the group accomplish its goals, the ways in which their behavior can contribute to reaching the goals, and the specific criteria by which to determine whether or not the goals have been reached.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically, when groups fail to reach their goals, the tendency is stronger among members to raise or maintain the original goal level than to lower it to match previous group performances. Presumably, the reason for this is because failing groups are more motivated to

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<sup>13</sup> Alvin Zander, *Motives and Goals in Groups* (New York: Academic Press, 1971), 28.

<sup>14</sup> David W. and Frank P. Johnson, 132.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>16</sup> Mills, 84-85.

<sup>17</sup> David W. and Frank P. Johnson, 164.

immediately ease the dissatisfaction associated with failure, and the satisfaction of reaching an even more difficult goal would result in a greater sense of accomplishment, compensating for the disappointment of the failure. This is likely a result of the almost universal sense that the more difficult a goal is to achieve, the more satisfying its ultimate attainment will be. It is generally accepted that the most worthy goals will be the most difficult to accomplish.<sup>18</sup> Given that groups under stress tend to have greater clarity about their goals,<sup>19</sup> it can be said that the more important a goal, the more likely group members will strongly coalesce in support of its achievement given the greater amount of resistance to its accomplishment. This sense of solidarity, which sociologists call “cohesion,” promotes group functioning and reduces cognitive dissonance among group members. The group member who is making progress toward a difficult goal experiences dissonance when faced with the options of either relieving the stress of continued progress toward the goal by quitting the group or continuing in light of the potential fulfillment to be obtained upon reaching the goal. Group participation helps relieve this cognitive dissonance by providing members encouragement to continue pressing toward the goal and by giving them opportunity to persuade others within the group as to the worthiness of the goal’s attainment.<sup>20</sup> Each member thus has the opportunity to relieve internal tension associated with the goal by both receiving and giving encouragement in a group setting.

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<sup>18</sup> Zander, *Motives and Goals in Groups*, 20-23.

<sup>19</sup> David C. Korten, “Situational Determinants of Leadership Structure,” in *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. by Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 356.

<sup>20</sup> Leon Festinger and Elliot Aronson, “Arousal and Reduction of Dissonance in Social Contexts” in *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*, 133.

### ***3.2 Cooperative Interdependence***

When individuals take action to accomplish goals within an interdependent system, that action can be categorized in three different ways. The individual can act in a way that influences other group members positively, negatively, or not at all. According to Morton Deutsch, the type of interaction among group members is a function of the state of interdependence within the group. Cooperatively interdependent group members influence one another positively; their behavior promotes goal accomplishment among fellow group members. Competitively interdependent group members, on the other hand, perceive the ability of others to reach their goals a threat to reaching their own. As a result, they interact oppositionally; their behavior inhibits other group members from accomplishing goals. Individualistic group members do not function in a way that influences other members at all. They are unconcerned with whether or not others reach their goals, and any sense of interdependence is absent. Of the three, Morton Deutsch, David and Roger Johnson, and a host of other group researchers advocate the superiority of cooperative interdependence, or promotive interaction, in maximizing the potential of groups to promote positive human functioning.<sup>21</sup>

According to David and Roger Johnson, investigation of the impact of these three types of social interdependence on overall achievement is “the longest standing research tradition within American social psychology.”<sup>22</sup> Over a period of ninety-five years, more than 375 experimental studies representing a host of different variables (categorized broadly into achievement, relational health, and psychological well-being) have been conducted to study the effects of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic interaction. An extensive review of these

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<sup>21</sup> David W. and Roger T. Johnson, “Social Interdependence: Cooperative Learning in Education,” in *Conflict, Cooperation and Justice: Essays Inspired by the Work of Morton Deutsch* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 209.

<sup>22</sup> David W. and Roger T. Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” 15.

experiments reveals without hesitation that cooperative, or promotive, interaction is consistent with a higher effort to achieve, more positive interpersonal relationships, and greater psychological health.<sup>23</sup>

Groups with this promotive interaction are more cohesive, and studies show that cohesive groups are more effective in accomplishing goals than are non-cohesive groups.<sup>24</sup> Groups defined by positive relationships, with strong cohesive forces, tend to be less tolerant of deviance from group norms, and the synergy created by positive interaction accelerates the group toward the goal at a rate unattainable without cooperation. Furthermore, cohesive groups are able to retain members and exert greater influence on individual members than groups without sufficient cohesion.

Though cohesive in nature, groups defined by promotive interaction are not without confrontation and controversy. The challenging of fellow group members' reasoning is a necessary component of healthy functioning. Superficial agreement rather than needful contradiction would be inconsistent with cooperative interdependence.<sup>25</sup> The commitment of a cooperatively interdependent group is toward a common objective; the mutual attention to the accomplishment of the objective, not an obligation to maintain unity, is what binds members together and creates cohesion. The primary source of tension within an effectively functioning group, therefore, should be the lack of resolution of the goal rather than a lack of perfect like-mindedness. In experiments with task-oriented groups, Murray Horowitz found that individuals with a healthy commitment to the group goal were more interested in interrupted tasks, or that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 14. A meta-analysis of 122 different studies in 1981 produced similar findings in David W. Johnson, et. al., "Effects of Cooperative, Competitive and Individualistic Goal Structures on Achievement: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 89, no 1 (1981): 47-62.

<sup>24</sup> Mills, 83.

<sup>25</sup> David W. and Roger T. Johnson, "Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory," 13.

which was lacking from making progress towards the goal, than in maintaining agreement among group members. Those Horowitz described as “deviant members” were more likely to place a higher priority on maintaining agreement among group members at the cost of proper attention to the group goal.<sup>26</sup>

In a competitive context, controversies degenerate into win-lose confrontations, which become destructive toward reaching the goal. In a cooperative environment these controversies are problems to be solved on the way to accomplishing the primary objective. An environment where healthy confrontation and challenge occurs, especially where the primary objective is personal behavior change as with the early Methodist groups, should be accompanied by mutual reinforcement, which, within a promotive environment, leads to an increase in what researchers have called “mutual liking.”<sup>27</sup> In a study on the developmental sequence of therapeutic small groups, Bruce Tuckman defines the first activity of the therapeutic group as an “orientation to the task,” where the group discovers its “ground rules” in accomplishing the specific task for which it has been established. After a phase of initial resistance and emotional adjustment, the group begins a phase of developing cohesion, where “harmony is of maximum importance.”<sup>28</sup> Some sense of “unity,”<sup>29</sup> or an environment of mutual acceptance is essential at this phase for healthy group functioning.

Promotive interaction invites a “process of acceptance” rather than the “process of rejection” more common with oppositional or individualistic interactions.<sup>30</sup> The atmosphere of

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<sup>26</sup> Horowitz, 3-38.

<sup>27</sup> Sheldon D. Rose, “Group Methods,” in *Helping People Change: A Textbook of Methods*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. by Frederick H. Kanfer and Arnold P. Goldstein (New York, Pergamon Press, 1986), 443.

<sup>28</sup> Bruce W. Tuckman, “Developmental Sequence in Small Groups,” *Psychological Bulletin* 6, no 6, (June 1965): 386.

<sup>29</sup> Tuckman, 389.

<sup>30</sup> David W. and Roger T. Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” 19.

acceptance inherent within a cooperatively interdependent group leads to healthier relationships which are important for human functioning and overall well-being. Recovery groups have taken advantage of the power of cooperative interaction to promote behavior change in the lives of participants. Research by D’Alelio and Murray among groups of individuals receiving treatment for anxiety disorders found that the most helpful component of the group experience, beyond specific practices of coping with anxiety, was a feeling of connectedness with others – “seeing that others were going through the same thing.”<sup>31</sup> Researchers have found that the experience of recovering alcoholics in witnessing the transformation of fellow alcoholics in AA groups is a key component by which those members develop faith that they too can be freed from their addictive behavior.<sup>32</sup> In an analysis of Alcoholics Anonymous from 1958, Harrison Trice points out that, “[The alcoholic] does not feel alone in his efforts to remain sober; all around him are living, breathing examples that the group purpose is within individual reach.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, a 1994 Harvard study revealed that the presence of supportive relationships in promoting positive behavioral adjustment can be as powerful an influence for personal change in the life of an individual as a major personal crisis can be. According to the study, those who experienced life change were more likely than those who didn’t to mention the role of other people and to have a system of supportive relationships in place.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, fear of social stigmatization often keeps potential participants from the needed social support provided by Alcoholics Anonymous or other recovery groups. While

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<sup>31</sup> William A. D’Alelio and Edward J. Murray, “Cognitive Therapy for Test Anxiety,” *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 5, no 3 (1981): 299-307.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2012) 83-89.

<sup>33</sup> Harrison M. Trice, “Alcoholics Anonymous,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 315 (January 1958): 113.

<sup>34</sup> Todd F. Heatherton and Patricia A. Nichols, “Personal Accounts of Successful Versus Failed Attempts at Life Change,” *Personality and Psychology Bulletin* 20, no 6 (December 1994): 664-675.

recovering addicts recognize they need the help of a group, they fear being labeled and subsequently rejected by those present at the meetings.<sup>35</sup> This underscores the need for an atmosphere of acceptance and creating a space for belonging, especially in a therapeutic group like AA in which membership is defined by a common weakness.<sup>36</sup> As tools for individual therapy, “groups generate a sense of community, belonging, support, acceptance, and assistance that eases the pain associated with therapeutic exploration and encourages risk-taking in achieving goals.”<sup>37</sup> A feeling of acceptance among group members encourages the spirit of openness which must occur in order to facilitate behavior change in an individual member of a therapeutic group.<sup>38</sup>

David and Frank Johnson believe that “probably the most underrated factor in the maintenance of psychological health is friends.”<sup>39</sup> Studies have shown that “referent power,” that is, the stimulation of a desire within a group member to imitate the behavior of a perceived peer, can be more significant in influencing their behavior than “coercive power,” associated with the threat of punishment.<sup>40</sup> It would seem that individuals are more highly motivated to change by the possibilities of success, as they are modeled by friends in a cooperatively interdependent group, than they are by a fear of punishment or a desire to avoid failure.<sup>41</sup>

Participation in cooperatively oriented groups leads to better functioning, higher self-esteem, and improved overall well-being of group members. Experiments have demonstrated

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<sup>35</sup> N. Peter Johnson and Gregory L. Phelps, “Effectiveness of self-help groups: Alcoholics Anonymous as a prototype,” *Family & Community Health* 14, no 1 (April 1991): 24.

<sup>36</sup> Charles E. Thompson and William P. Kolb, “Group Psychotherapy in Association with Alcoholics Anonymous,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 110, no 1 (July 1953): 29-32.

<sup>37</sup> Morton A. Lieberman, Martin Lakin, and Dorothy S. Whitaker, “The Group as a Unique Context for Therapy,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* 5, no 1 (1968): 29-36.

<sup>38</sup> David W. and Frank P. Johnson, 420.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

<sup>40</sup> Zander, *Motives and Goals in Groups*, 168.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

that cooperatively interdependent groups are superior to competitive groups in coordination of member efforts, diversity of group member contributions, attentiveness to fellow members, orderliness, mutual comprehension of communication, favorable impression of the group, favorable impression of group functions, and, perhaps most importantly, achievement in terms of results.<sup>42</sup> Harrison Trice identifies the strength of cooperatively interdependent Alcoholics Anonymous groups as their simple pragmatism.<sup>43</sup> Like Wesley with the early Methodist groups, he recognizes their fundamental advantage as the ability to accomplish what they were designed to do.

### **3.3 Individual Accountability**

In spite of the value of the cooperatively-functioning interdependent group, these groups are inherently difficult to maintain. Morton Deutsch identifies the “fragile state” of the truly cooperative community: “The inherent tendency of such communities is to break down; it takes sustained effort to prevent this from happening.”<sup>44</sup> David and Roger Johnson assert the primary reason this “most effective tool” available to human beings is not utilized properly is a lack of discipline.<sup>45</sup> Creating effective cooperative groups is hard work; it requires intentionality and leadership. The basic elements of cooperation must be guarded and properly maintained. Therefore, after positive interdependence, the Johnsons indicate “individual and group accountability” as the key component in maintaining effective cooperative groups.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Morton Deutsch, “The Effects of Cooperation and Competition upon Group Processes,” in *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*, 481-482.

<sup>43</sup> Trice, 115.

<sup>44</sup> Morton Deutsch, *Distributive Justice: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 44.

<sup>45</sup> David W. and Roger T. Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” 23.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

Accountability is a means to promote personal responsibility among group members. A lack of individual accountability leads to reduction in feelings of personal responsibility.<sup>47</sup> Accountability helps individuals to feel that they are making contributions toward the achievement of group goals and that their contributions matter. This diminishes what social psychologists call “free riding,” or “the social loafing effect,” in which group members refuse to take responsibility for participating meaningfully in the group and fail to make contributions toward the accomplishment of group goals according to their ability.

Before a group can establish a system of accountability, however, it must first clarify a set of expectations. In fact, the most basic definition of a group, according to some, is a collection of individuals with interactions governed by a fundamental set of values or norms.<sup>48</sup> Group norms are beliefs held in common as to what is acceptable behavior for members of the group. All groups have norms, whether explicitly stated or not.<sup>49</sup> Dentler and Erikson posit that the appearance of deviant behavior helps group members speak more clearly about previously held but unstated norms. In other words, examples of what should not be done help the group to clarify what should be done.<sup>50</sup> Norms define the boundaries of the group by clarifying what is acceptable and what is non-acceptable behavior. These norms can be consistent with goal-directed behavior in cooperatively interdependent groups to establish a proper standard of performance to help group members make progress toward the goal.<sup>51</sup>

In order to promote behavior consistent with norms, groups will develop rewards or

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>48</sup> Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn W. Sherif, *An Outline of Social Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 144.

<sup>49</sup> David W. and Frank P. Johnson, 424.

<sup>50</sup> Robert A. Dentler and Kai T. Erikson, “The Functions of Deviance in Groups,” *Social Problems* 7, no 2 (Autumn 1959): 98-107.

<sup>51</sup> Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, “Motivational Processes in Groups: Introduction,” in *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*, 411.

punishments to promote compliance and inhibit deviant behavior. In an experimental study cited by Cartwright and Zander, group members were more likely to follow practices approved by their groups if negative consequences ensued from deviant behavior.<sup>52</sup> Studies show that communication is likely to increase between group members and the deviant member as the frequency of breaking group standards increases, especially when those standards hold a high priority for the group. Communication tends to decrease once it is believed that such communication will not be effective in persuading the deviant member to comply with group norms. In that case, punishments could result in redrawing the boundaries of a group such that the deviant member is excluded. The higher the level of cohesiveness among group members, the more likely a deviant member will be excluded.<sup>53</sup>

Accountability to group expectations can only be accomplished through accurate and consistent communication concerning member behavior in conjunction with group norms. For example, David and Roger Johnson identify feedback as a key component of promoting individual responsibility in educational groups.<sup>54</sup> Experimental study shows that the more feedback an individual student receives in a cooperative learning group, the more likely he or she will achieve, and the higher the level of achievement will rise among all group members. The correlation between individual accountability and cooperative learning is substantial.<sup>55</sup> Evaluation of the behavior of individuals against standard criteria is a key component in educational and self-help or therapeutic groups. Typically members of therapy groups share self-evaluations including past failures and recent successes after following the suggested steps

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<sup>52</sup> Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, "Pressures to Uniformity in Groups: Introduction," in *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*, 145.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> David W. and Roger T. Johnson, "Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory," 29.

<sup>55</sup> Julie Archer-Kath, David W. Johnson, and Roger T. Johnson, "Individual versus Group Feedback in Cooperative Groups," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 134, no 5 (1994): 681-693.

of therapy.<sup>56</sup> The value of individual feedback is likely one of the primary reasons why studies show that individual accountability is improved in groups of smaller size.<sup>57</sup>

In order for such feedback to be effective, group members must first have bought into the standards set by the group. The norms of a group represent personal power relinquished by group members in order to participate in the group. They represent a sort of contract, or covenant, between the members and the group. Group members will internalize the norms of a group and submit to them to the degree they perceive a connection between the norms and the established purposes of the group. David and Frank Johnson also indicate a general willingness among group members to support norms that the members themselves have helped to establish. Further, the potential of group norms to influence the behavior of members is maximized when they are embodied, or lived out by other members of the group. Immediate and consistent enforcement of norms when they are violated is also a necessity if those standards are to be respected and considered binding by members of the group.<sup>58</sup>

This kind of accountability raises the expectation among group members that they must fulfill their responsibility to contribute to the accomplishment of the group goal.<sup>59</sup> This guards against “social loafing,” which can destroy cooperation and rid the group of its power. When negative group behaviors are not dealt with effectively and immediately, the influence of groups to effect change in the lives of individuals is forfeited.<sup>60</sup> In a group charged with the responsibility of influencing the behavior of members for positive change, the behavior of individual members must be measured against some standard for purposes of providing specific

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<sup>56</sup> N. Peter Johnson and Gregory L. Phelps, 24,

<sup>57</sup> David W. and Roger T. Johnson, “Cooperative Learning and Social Interdependence Theory,” 27.

<sup>58</sup> David W. and Frank P. Johnson, 428-429.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 400-401.

<sup>60</sup> Rose, 443.

feedback. Otherwise, the influence of the group is lost.<sup>61</sup> With lack of accountability, the performance (or absence thereof) of an individual member is unidentifiable, and, as a result, “there can be no causal relation between response and outcome.”<sup>62</sup> Studies have shown that, when people and animals are exposed to situations in which there is no causal relationship between their responses and subsequent outcomes, whether positive or negative, a feeling of helplessness ensues. This helplessness can lead to loss of motivation, severe depression, and even death.<sup>63</sup> Far from being a source of anxiety, therefore, individual accountability appears to be a necessity for healthy life functioning. Its absence should be a source of great concern.

### ***3.4 Application to Wesley’s Groups***

Thomas R. Albin systematizes the characteristics of the early Methodist small groups into three broad categories. First, each group had a “formational focus.” They existed to form disciples in the classic Christian faith. The groups were catechetical in this sense; there was an instructional bent inherent within them. Along with teaching on the basic Christian doctrines, there was practical guidance in the classes and bands in how to live out these teachings in everyday life, as manifested by the establishment and enforcement of the *General Rules*. This is what Albin calls the “praxeological context” of the Methodist groups. Wesley’s groups melded right believing and right living; orthodoxy was held together with orthopraxy, each mutually reinforcing the other. Thirdly, there was the “affective focus,” or the kindling of right feeling in encouragement towards the love of God and neighbor. Along with orthodoxy and orthopraxy there was orthopathy. It was the integration of these three that gave the groups their formative

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 448.

<sup>62</sup> Kipling Williams, Stephen Harkins, and Bibb Latané, “Identifiability as a Deterrent to Social Loafing: Two Cheering Experiments,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 40, no 2 (February 1981): 309.

<sup>63</sup> Martin E. P. Siegelman, *Helplessness* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1975).

power.<sup>64</sup>

It is not difficult to perceive how Albin's three basic elements of the Methodist small groups fit, albeit broadly, into the theory of groups developed by Lewin, Deutsch, the Johnsons, and others as outlined above. The "formational focus," or doctrinal function of the groups, relates to their ultimate purpose, or goal, of forming Christian disciples. The "affective focus" stimulates right feeling, and, though Wesley would define the spirit of these groups in terms of agape Christian love rather than mere cooperation, the feeling could be characterized as the "mutual liking" developed through the promotive interaction of cooperative interdependence as group members learn to depend upon God and one another. Finally, all of these systems existed in an atmosphere of accountability. The *General Rules* provided the norms, or the "praxeological context," where the ideals of doctrine and spirit of cooperation were fleshed out in a set of stated expectations for everyday living. These three elements together formed a sort of tripod of vitality upon which Wesley's structure of small groups stood, the removal of any leg of which would result in the collapse of the entire system. Indeed, Wesley seemed to have foreseen this danger himself and explicitly spoke of it.

In his piece "Thoughts upon Methodism," Wesley addressed his fears about the future of the movement he had founded. He expressed that his greatest concern for the Methodist movement was not that it should disappear from the world's stage (at the time Methodism existed only in Europe and America) but that it should become a "dead sect" with "a form of religion" without transforming power. What was the key to keeping the engine of Christian discipleship that was the Methodist revival moving forward? For Wesley, it was preserving "the

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<sup>64</sup> Albin, 45-46.

doctrine, spirit and discipline” present in the movement from its earliest days.<sup>65</sup> In the succeeding paragraphs of “Thoughts upon Methodism,” Wesley identified the doctrine of Methodism as the classic Christian faith as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and passed down through the centuries in the church. Wesley’s lens through which he understood the end purpose of the Christian faith as received from the apostles was the renewal of the mind in the pattern of Christ and the restoration of the *imago dei* upon the human soul, “in righteousness and true holiness.”<sup>66</sup>

The following chapters will elaborate on the three key elements (identified by group theory, Thomas Albin, and Wesley himself) that were foundational for the Methodist small groups and were significant in making them catalysts for change in the lives of their members. They include the *doctrine*, or goal of the groups; the cooperative interdependence, or *spirit* of the groups as experienced by participating members; and the *discipline* of the groups, apparent through an atmosphere of individual accountability. In chapter four, we’ll see that the critical *doctrine* of the Methodist groups was the vision of Christian discipleship which Wesley had from his earliest years of ministry, namely, “holiness of heart and life.” Chapter five will examine the cooperative component of the Methodist groups; if holiness was the goal which created an atmosphere of social interdependence, grace was the cooperative engine upon which the system ran, pervasive in the classes and bands as an affective *spirit* of promotive interaction with God and other Christians. Finally, Wesley’s dynamic understanding of grace corresponding with the responsibility it demands, which was enforced through individual accountability, or the *discipline*, of Wesley’s groups, will be explained in chapter six.

The early groups of Methodism were *common bound*. They were bound for a common

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<sup>65</sup> John Wesley, “Thoughts upon Methodism,” §1, *Works* 9:527.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, §2.

goal, in that they all had a sense of trajectory; efforts were oriented toward a particular end in pursuing holiness. They were bound together in community, sharing in life and grace as a group of fellow pilgrims, cooperating with God and one another, and receiving strength for their shared journey. Finally, their community was defined by clear boundaries; they were bound in covenant with one another, the *General Rules* governing the bounds of their common life, ultimately distinguishing “the people called Methodists” from the rest of society.

The unique contribution of this study is to invite a reconsideration of the three elements of doctrine, spirit, and discipline in a recovery of vital disciple-making in the church today. John Wesley understood and incorporated all three of these aspects into his system of small groups, and he knew each of them to be of critical importance for the vitality of his movement. Remove the goal of holiness, cooperative grace, or the discipline of accountability from the small groups of Methodism, and the Methodist revival never would have occurred. The ministry of John Wesley touched the lives of tens of thousands of people during his lifetime and may have changed the course of history for a nation. What could the recovery of these three elements of small group ministry do for the church of the twenty first centur

## 4. The Goal of Holiness

*“This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.” John Wesley<sup>1</sup>*

Generally, May 24, 1738, is touted as the birthdate of Methodism. It was on that date that John Wesley experienced his evangelical conversion at a society meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. However, thirteen years earlier there had been a similar epiphany in Wesley’s spiritual consciousness that had as much, if not more, of an influence on his development. In 1725, while a fellow at Oxford and preparing for orders, Wesley read *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living* and *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying* by Anglican Bishop Jeremy Taylor. Taylor’s books powerfully impressed upon the young Wesley the call to ethical perfection in the religious life. Reading Thomas à Kempis the following year, the importance of a “religion of the heart,” consisting of “simplicity of affection and purity of intention,” and coinciding with a proper Christian ethic was even more strongly emphasized for Wesley.<sup>2</sup> Upon reading William Law’s *A Practical Treatise upon Christian Perfection* and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, Wesley was further convinced of the need for the surrender of one’s entire being to God as an act of mature devotion. Law’s works were influential enough that some, according to Wesley, later identified Law as the “parent” of Methodism. Wesley refuted this claim but still acknowledged that it had “some truth in it.”<sup>3</sup> Wesley was persuaded through Law that the essence of the religious life consisted of a moral perfection of ethical behavior wedded with proper inward temperament. Ultimately the writings of Taylor, à Kempis, and Law could not provide Wesley

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley on Christian perfection in a Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, September 15, 1790, *Letters*, 8:238.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, as Believed and Taught by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, from the Year 1725 to 1765*, §2-3, *Works* 13:136-137.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, “On God’s Vineyard,” §1.2, *Works* 3:504.

the means to attain this end (that would come later through the influence of Peter Bohler and the Moravians), but they pointed him in a distinct direction. In other words, they gave him a goal. The end of the religious life, as interpreted by Wesley, became holiness. This perspective never changed throughout the rest of Wesley's life, and it provided the impetus for the movement birthed from his teaching.

Wesley believed holiness to be the supreme state of human existence, the telos toward which all religious effort was to be expended. "The great end of religion," he said, "is to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness sustained by the sin of our first parent."<sup>4</sup> Wesley identified the goal of the Holy Club, the first small group who came to be called "Methodists," as holiness: "In 1729, two young men, in reading the Bible saw they could not be saved without holiness... They saw likewise, that men are justified before they are sanctified; but still holiness was their point."<sup>5</sup> Wesley believed the promotion of holiness to be the primary purpose of the movement from which that group at Oxford sprung and the defining characteristic of all who identified with it. The Methodists were "a people who profess to pursue holiness of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God."<sup>6</sup> In later answering as to the purpose of the itinerant preachers who made up the early Methodist connexion, Wesley said that they had been raised up "to reform the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land."<sup>7</sup>

This thrust of Methodism was birthed in part from the influence of high church

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<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, "Original Sin," §III.5, *Works* 2:185.

<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, *Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. John and Charles Wesley, and Others* (1770) (commonly called the *Large Minutes*), *Works* 10:875.

<sup>6</sup> John Wesley, *Advice to the People Called Methodists*, *Works* 9:123.

<sup>7</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1763), *Works* 10:845.

Anglicanism upon Wesley from his days in his parents' rectory at Epworth. Wesley's father Samuel and mother Susanna were raised Puritans, but rejected Puritan Calvinism in their late teens to embrace the Arminianism common to early eighteenth century high-church Anglicans.<sup>8</sup> This Arminian bent was reflected in the Anglican Religious Societies of the day, with their emphasis on personal responsibility and reformatory behavior.<sup>9</sup> Josiah Woodward and Dr. Anthony Horneck, leaders of the Anglican societies of the late seventeenth century, identified the chief designs of their respective groups as to "promote real Holiness of Heart and Life,"<sup>10</sup> and to impress upon all of their members "a holy and serious life."<sup>11</sup>

In many respects, the Arminianism of Wesley was a reaction against what he perceived as a tendency toward antinomianism in the predominant Protestant Calvinism of his day. Wesley's theological roots found nourishment from streams of Christian tradition (including Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy) that were broader than Puritanism and continental Pietism. Wesley held tightly to core Protestant doctrines like justification by faith and *sola scriptura*, but he also emphasized the necessity of works to accompany saving faith. Thus, the life of faith for Wesley and the Methodists became a progressive journey toward a more perfect obedience. Wesley's Arminianism meant that the pilgrim was responsible to make progress and that one's status among the "elect" could not be taken for granted. Salvation was a process, not

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<sup>8</sup> For perspective on the dominant position of Arminian influence in high-church Anglicanism in the late seventeenth century, see Rosalie L. Corie, *Light and Enlightenment: A Study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminians* (Cambridge: University Press, 1957), 21-24.

<sup>9</sup> *The Societies for the Reformation of Manners* was a parallel movement with purposes of maintaining a proper ethic among British citizenry. Wesley had some interaction with these groups; see D. L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 71-72; and Dean, *Disciplined Fellowship*, 41-44.

<sup>10</sup> Josiah Woodward, *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Religious Societies in the City of London, &c., and of their Endeavours for Reformation of Manners*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Printed and Sold by J. Downing, 1724), 111.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Horneck, *Several Sermons upon the Fifth of St. Matthew; Being Part of Christ's Sermon on the Mount: To which is added, The Life of the Author, by Richard, late Lord Bishop of Bath and Wells*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2 Vols., (London: Jeremiah Batley, 1717), viii.

only an event, and the disciple that was not progressing along the way of salvation toward the ultimate goal of complete obedience risked falling away. The understanding of an ultimate goal in the form of entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, formed a critical piece of Wesley's understanding, and became a unique contribution of Methodist theology in Christian tradition.

#### **4.1 The Ultimate Goal: Christian Perfection**

It is one thing to aim at a goal of perfection; it is another to have an expectation of hitting it. From his earliest days of ministry, heavily influenced by the writings of William Law, John Wesley believed that perfection in love, or entire sanctification, was attainable in this life. Wesley never deviated from this perspective throughout his ministry. In the last years of his life, Wesley wrote this of Christian perfection: "This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up."<sup>12</sup>

The claim that perfection was attainable in this life raised vehement objections in Wesley's day, as it would be expected to in ours. Wesley was surprised at the level of opposition this doctrine brought, with claims that "there is no perfection on earth," and objections that the teaching brought dishonor to Christ.<sup>13</sup> It was the latter allegation that bothered Wesley the most since he never deviated from the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in the merits of Christ alone. Far from dishonoring Christ, Wesley believed this doctrine properly extolled the present power of the living Christ by declaring that Christ reigning in human hearts could bring the complete subjugation of sin in the mortal body. In clarifying his claims on the subject,

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<sup>12</sup> Wesley, Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, September 15, 1790, *Letters* 8:238.

<sup>13</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §11, *Works* 13:146.

Wesley asserted that Christian perfection “does not imply an exemption either from ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptations.”<sup>14</sup> Neither was it the attainment of a state from which one could never fall. It was simply obedience to the command of Scripture to love God with all of one’s heart. Wesley recounted a conversation he had had with Dr. Edmund Gibson, the Bishop of London, in which he had questioned Wesley on his teaching on perfection by pressing him to explain what he meant by it. After receiving clarification from Wesley, Dr. Gibson was reported to have said: “Mr. Wesley, if this be all that you mean, publish it to all the world.”<sup>15</sup>

Harald Lindström has identified three definitive points of view on Christian perfection in Wesley, reflecting the influence of Jeremy Taylor, William Law, and Thomas à Kempis. Respectively, they include: purity of intent, the imitation of Christ, and love of God and neighbor.<sup>16</sup> Purity of intent for Wesley meant full devotion of the heart to God, with all actions springing from the love of God. This meant following after the example of Christ, whose outward acts and inward tempers were always in a state of complete obedience to the will of the Father. In this sense, Christian perfection was a full restoration of the *imago Dei* lost at the fall. This ideal was not to be found alone living a solitary life but to be experienced in community, as only living in community could give the pilgrim specific opportunity to practice the love of God and neighbor in daily life.

William Law was pessimistic that true perfection could be attained in this life. He believed instead that it was an act completed at death; all one could do in this life was to make progress towards it. Wesley seemed to have adhered to this view until 1738. After Aldersgate, Wesley shifted, proclaiming that entire sanctification was available to Christians immediately in

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<sup>14</sup> John Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” §1.9, *Works* 2:104.

<sup>15</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §12, *Works* 13:146.

<sup>16</sup> Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (London: Epworth, 1946), 129ff.

the same manner in which justification was received, by faith. This gift came to be called a “second blessing”<sup>17</sup> or a “second change.”<sup>18</sup> Wesley was convinced there were members of his societies who had experienced this “full salvation,” though there is evidence he applied a healthy degree of skepticism to those who gave witness to such, especially if they appeared too quickly to claim it.<sup>19</sup> While Wesley believed that entire sanctification occurred in an instant and was a gift given by grace through faith, he frequently spoke of it in terms of a prolonged process of maturation, comparing it to the development of a child along the journey of growth to adulthood.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in his sermon “On Christian Perfection,” Wesley reaffirmed the instantaneous nature of the gift and the certainty of God’s promise to fulfill it while at the same time admonishing his hearers to continue to “press towards the mark” – insinuating the possibility of a protracted process.<sup>21</sup>

Wesley believed the gift of perfection was to be found in the context of community as Christians encouraged one another further along the way of salvation toward the ultimate goal. It should be noted that, for Wesley, perfection was never a static state but always provided opportunity for further growth. Thus by no means were those who had attained the goal exempt from further pursuit of holiness. Wesley asserted that “how much soever any man has attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to ‘grow in grace,’ and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Savior.”<sup>22</sup> The community environment where this advancement could be encouraged, regardless of whether one was a newborn babe

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<sup>17</sup> John Wesley, Letter to Thomas Olivers, March 24, 1757, *Letters*, 3:212.

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley, “The Repentance of Believers,” §I.20, *Works* 1:346.

<sup>19</sup> see Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 182.

<sup>20</sup> John Wesley, Letter to John Fletcher, March 22, 1775, *Letters* 6:146; see also “Christian Perfection,” §I.8, *Works*, 2:104.

<sup>21</sup> Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” §II.30, *Works* 2:121.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, §I.9, *Works* 2:104-105.

or a mature believer in Christ, was provided by Wesley in the progressively tiered gatherings of the small groups of early Methodism.

## **4.2 Social Holiness**

In *Preface to Hymns and Other Sacred Poems*, John and Charles Wesley reject in the strongest of terms the precept that holiness is to be cultivated as an individual venture apart from Christian community: “‘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.”<sup>23</sup> Scholarship in recent years has ventured to pair Wesley’s advocacy of social holiness with “social justice” to the point that social holiness has come to be perceived as separate from personal holiness, leading to the coining of a new phrase “personal and social holiness.”<sup>24</sup> Andrew Thompson, however, has recently demonstrated that the social holiness of which Wesley speaks relates to working out the implications of holiness in the context of community and is thus inseparable from personal holiness.<sup>25</sup> In fact, to disconnect social holiness from personal holiness seems anathema to the words of Wesley in the *Preface* since there he explicitly declares there exists “no holiness, but social holiness.” When Wesley uses the phrase “personal holiness,” it is to distinguish the holiness of persons from the holiness of God, not from social holiness. This is why the phrase “personal and social holiness” was never used by Wesley.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John Wesley, *Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), §5, *Works* 13:39.

<sup>24</sup> See extensive references to contemporary usage of social holiness and the phrase “personal and social holiness” in Andrew C. Thompson, *John Wesley and the Means of Grace: Historical and Theological Context* (ThD Dissertation: Duke University, 2012), 215 n110.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew C. Thompson, “From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition,” *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 141-172.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 165; *John Wesley and the Means of Grace*, 223-224.

Wesley's promotion of "social holiness" was intended to contrast his approach from that of those whom he identifies in the *Preface* as the "mystic divines."<sup>27</sup> The identity of these mystics is unclear though it can be speculated that they included Bishop Jeremy Taylor and William Law, who both had such a profound influence on Wesley in the development of his understanding of holiness as the end of the religious life. Law's perception of holiness, while denigrating the value of human works, exalted the merit of human intentions, a point of view which, according to Wesley, still based "the ground of our acceptance... in ourselves."<sup>28</sup> Wesley's trouble with this mystical understanding was that it was not accompanied by an appropriate appreciation of justification by faith.

Also included among these mystics would be St. Anthony and the Desert Fathers of the ancient monastic movement, who advocated a life of solitude separated from ordinary society for the sake of holiness. Wesley identified this manner of pursuing holiness as "opposite to that prescribed by Christ." Wesley says, "[Christ] commands to build up one another. They advise, 'To the desert! to the desert! and God will build you up.'"<sup>29</sup> These seem to be the so called "holy solitaries" against whom Wesley rails. Clearly, when Wesley explicitly stated there is "no holiness, but social holiness," he meant that the goal of holiness, if it is to be pursued, must be pursued in community – in the context of other Christians pursuing the same goal. The common goal creates the community. Apart from the goal, there is no community. In this sense, the members of the Christian community reflect Kurt Lewin's defining characteristic of group identity: interdependence, or the pursuit of a common goal.

Wesley's model of social holiness may have been influenced by the system of

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<sup>27</sup> Wesley, *Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), §1, *Works* 13:36.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, §2, *Works* 13:37.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, §3, 320. Andrew Thompson notes these points in *John Wesley and the Means of Grace*, 226-227.

community advocated by French nobleman and Catholic, Monsieur de Renty. Wesley may have been introduced to de Renty by his father Samuel, who was also an admirer. Wesley was so taken by de Renty that he edited and published a biographical sketch of his life.<sup>30</sup> De Renty, like Wesley, was strongly affected by reading Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* while in his twenties, and like Wesley, he devoted himself to the pursuit of the life of piety, especially through appropriate good works, and encouraged his countrymen to do the same. Perhaps what was most intriguing about de Renty was the method he employed toward this end. De Renty fostered a community in which the pursuit of holiness could be maintained through intensely personal small groups.<sup>31</sup> Michael David Henderson notes that de Renty's emphasis on growth in holiness through good works served as a counterbalance to the introspection of the mystics. Most of the Anglican Societies focused on careful attention to individual piety, but de Renty's groups focused almost exclusively on acts of service, especially on behalf of the poor. Perhaps Wesley gravitated toward de Renty because of his disdain for what he perceived to be the self-centered pseudo-piety of the "holy solitaires" who neglected the sanctifying gift of community.<sup>32</sup>

Philip Jacob Spener, Anthony Horneck, and Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf were de Renty's successors in advocating the pursuit of "social holiness" through sharing community in small groups. Spener's *collegia pietatis*, or "gatherings of piety," were the forerunners of both the Anglican Societies of Horneck and the Moravian *banden* of Zinzendorf. Both of these institutions were prototypes of the Methodist groups, establishing the primitive structure of the Methodist societies and bands respectively. Wesley's imitation of de Renty and others in

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<sup>30</sup> Jean Baptiste de Saint Jure, *An Extract of the Life of Monsieur de Renty*, ed. by John Wesley (Bristol: 1760).

<sup>31</sup> See Henderson, 42ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

method, coupled with the progressive view of salvation with sanctification as the defining objective garnered from the English mystics, became reflected in the system of small groups around which the Methodist movement was built. Groups existed for those who were beginning the journey of holiness and for those further along the road; there was even a group for those nearing the goal of entire sanctification. This is reflected in Wesley's non-sequential presentation of the groups in *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*. The bands, which were the first to emerge, are presented after the class meetings, presumably because of their proximity to the ultimate goal of entire sanctification. The language of journey is present throughout Wesley's description of the members of the groups in *A Plain Account*, from those who desired "to flee the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins"<sup>33</sup> by joining the society and subsequently the class meeting, to those who "outran the greater part of their brethren"<sup>34</sup> in the select societies. At every point, the journey toward holiness was sustained by community.

### ***4.3 Inward and Outward Holiness***

The holiness the early Methodists pursued was of both an inward and an outward nature. It was not confined to outward behaviors only but also consisted of a transformation of the heart. Holiness for Wesley, as for the mystics, began with the proper intention of the heart. The perfection that William Law advocated was a purity of intent: "we have not that perfection, which our present state of grace makes us capable of, because we do not so much as *intend* to have it."<sup>35</sup> Early on, proper inward tempers formed the basis of Wesley's understanding of

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<sup>33</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §8, *Works* 9:257.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, §VIII.1, *Works* 9:269.

<sup>35</sup> William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (London: Printed for William Innys, 1729), 27.

holiness,<sup>36</sup> a perspective he did not deviate from later in life, identifying holy tempers as “the very essence” of all religion.<sup>37</sup> It was from the heart, the seat of intentions, from which all thoughts, words, and actions flowed.<sup>38</sup> Christian perfection was for Wesley that state of soul where “the humble, gentle, patient love of God, and our neighbor” ruled “our tempers, words, and actions.”<sup>39</sup> The one who reached perfect love attained to a place where no affections existed contrary to love; indeed love ruled all their tempers.<sup>40</sup>

The “holiness of heart and life” that defined the Methodists included inward tempers and outward behaviors.<sup>41</sup> It was out of respect for the outward component of holiness that Wesley rejected the Quietism and Antinomianism he witnessed among the Moravian Brethren, leading to a final break from them in the days of the Fetter Lane Society. Wesley considered works a necessary component of holiness – corresponding with an appropriate juxtaposition of “inward and outward righteousness.”<sup>42</sup> When asked the question, “Are works necessary to continuance of faith?” Wesley responded, “Without doubt, for a man may forfeit the free gift of God, either by sins of omission or commission.”<sup>43</sup> Continuance on the journey toward entire sanctification required a consistent pattern of obedience. Obedience was to be complete: a “universal obedience; in keeping all the commandments; in denying ourselves, and taking up our

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<sup>36</sup> In his 1733 sermon, Wesley defined “The Circumcision of the Heart,” as a “habitual disposition of soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness,” §1.1, *Works* 1:402. Kenneth Collins points out that Wesley uses the terms “disposition” and “temper” interchangeably in “John Wesley’s Topography of the Heart: Dispositions, Tempers and Affections,” *Methodist History* 36, no 3 (April 1998): 165.

<sup>37</sup> John Wesley, “On Charity,” §III.12, *Works* 3:306.

<sup>38</sup> 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*, ed. by Richard Steele (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 17.

<sup>39</sup> John Wesley, *Brief Thoughts on Christian Perfection*, §1, *Works* 13:199.

<sup>40</sup> John Wesley: “There is no mixture of any contrary affections: all is peace and harmony after [entire sanctification],” in “On Patience,” §10, *Works* 3:176.

<sup>41</sup> Wesley, *Advice to the People Called Methodists*, *Works* 9:123ff.

<sup>42</sup> Wesley, “On Perfection,” §1.8, *Works* 3:75.

<sup>43</sup> John Wesley, *Minutes of Some Late Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesleys and Others* [also known as the *Doctrinal Minutes* (1749)], “Conversation the First,” *Works* 10:780.

cross daily.”<sup>44</sup> Wesley believed that “outward righteousness” could stimulate proper inward attitudes as much as vice versa. Obedience to the commandments was for Wesley a sort of progress gauge on the path toward entire sanctification. This was reflected in Wesley’s praise for the law, which he said was “the glory and joy of every wise believer”<sup>45</sup> and God’s gift “to keep us alive”<sup>46</sup> or growing in holiness. Wesley described his somewhat unique and balanced perspective of holiness as being as “tenacious of inward holiness as any Mystic, and of outward, as any Pharisee.”<sup>47</sup>

The commandments of the law were codified for Methodists in what came to be called *The General Rules of the United Societies*. They were what Kevin Watson calls a “practical guide for holiness,”<sup>48</sup> providing specific criteria by which progress toward their common goal was made achievable. The *Rules* reflected Wesley’s emphasis on a comprehensive holiness that reflected outward obedience and appropriate inward attitudes, consistent with God’s self-revelation in Scripture and in “every truly awakened heart.”<sup>49</sup> Attentiveness to the *General Rules* was required to avoid sins of commission in explicit acts of disobedience and to avoid sins of omission in the neglect of positive acts of obedience. Also included was proper attention to the means of grace, defined broadly as “the ordinances of God.”<sup>50</sup> Thus Wesley’s *General Rules* were concisely three: Do no harm, do good, and attend upon the ordinances of God. The *General Rules* were overarching and applied to every Methodist in every society. They were enforced at the level of the class meeting. The bands and select societies also had applicable and

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., “Conversation the Second,” 10:791.

<sup>45</sup> John Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Property, and Use of the Law,” §II.6, *Works* 2:10.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., §IV.3, *Works* 2:16.

<sup>47</sup> Wesley, “On God’s Vineyard,” §I.8, *Works* 3:507.

<sup>48</sup> K. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 74.

<sup>49</sup> Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, §7, *Works* 9:73.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., §6.

enforceable rules setting parameters for the behavior of group members. The rules provided practical means by which Methodist group members could track their progress toward their common goal. These rules will be discussed in further detail in chapter six.

#### **4.4 A Peculiar People**

A common observation of the early Methodist movement was that there existed a strong sense of egalitarianism among its members. The British caste system was broken in the Methodist societies; members were treated equally, mirroring the equality all share in the sight of God. This sense of equality was represented in the backless benches upon which every member sat, regardless of wealth or position in society.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, this pervasive equality which was so important to Wesley did not last forever. By the nineteenth century the challenges of mixed company in the Methodist meetings came to the forefront, though this had not been the case in the early days.

Perhaps this sense of equality was prevalent and easier to maintain in the youngest days of the revival because Methodists were laser-focused on the goal of holiness. Members of the societies were bound together in pursuit of a common objective; the tension created within members by the sense of need for holiness was greater than the tension between members resulting from their diverse social backgrounds. It was the tension created by striving after a yet-to-be-achieved common goal that created cohesion among the members of the Methodist small group meetings, binding them together as an interdependent system. In addition, there was a certain social stigma associated with the identity of "Methodist." That stigma carried with it a conventional rejection by those of common society, yet this sense of rejection by the outside

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<sup>51</sup> Wesley, "Thoughts upon Methodism," §4, *Works* 9:528.

world only served to strengthen group cohesion and solidify the importance of faithful group participation. The tension created by the loss of cultural acceptance was less strong among the Methodists than that associated with the potential loss of failing to reach the goal of holiness.

Evidence shows that indeed early Methodists experienced progress in holiness through their participation in the Methodist groups. Wesley identified the fruit of the class meetings immediately as instruments to keep wayward pilgrims on the holiness path: “Many disorderly walkers were detected. Some turned from their evil ways.”<sup>52</sup> Methodists put aside habits like excessive drinking, wife-beating, cursing, Sabbath-breaking, gambling, and quarreling. Wesley, among others, recorded instances of those in the groups who seemed to have experienced “perfect love,” or attained a state of entire sanctification.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, reformation among those who were counted as Methodists was generally taken for granted. One of Wesley’s greatest fears was that the movement would lose its edge, and one day it would be impossible to distinguish the Methodist from the typical member of British society.<sup>54</sup> The fact that within a hundred years slavery would be abolished, prohibition would gain steam, and other social reforms would be put in place to assist the poor is proof that perhaps the Methodists were not ineffective in their goal of spreading “Scriptural holiness across the land.” The success of the movement, however, may have ironically helped contribute to its decline; as the tension between Methodists and the larger society was lessened, cohesive strength, interdependence, and the laser-like focus on the goal of holiness so typical of its earliest days was lost.

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<sup>52</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §II.3, *Works* 9:261.

<sup>53</sup> e.g. a visit to a select society in Sheffield: John Wesley, March 30, 1764, *Works* 21:449.

<sup>54</sup> In 1865, James H. Rigg observed: “The novelty of Methodism has passed away; its reproach has greatly abated, and what persecution remains is too petty, and withal too partial, to fan the flame of zeal or enthusiasm,” in *The Methodist Class Meeting* (London: Elliot Stock, 1865).

## ***4.5 Recovering a Goal***

One of the strengths of Wesley's system was that he was able to motivate the Christian convert to keep pressing forward beyond justification. There was something more to be gained from acceptance into the fellowship than an entrance ticket. Justification was an essential step, but it was not the telos of the journey of holiness. Members of the Methodist small groups were joined by a commitment toward a common goal more than they were by a common experience. This was especially true of the class meetings, where the only requirement for membership was a probationary period and an expressed desire to "flee the wrath to come." Members of the bands and select societies were generally considered to be further along in the road, but even in their case, it was progression towards a goal, not a common experience, that bound group members together.

Dean speculates that the disappearance of the select societies and the bands within a generation of Wesley's death was due to a shift from understanding Christian perfection as "pursuit of a goal" to the "attainment of an experience."<sup>55</sup> The same was true for the class meeting in its gradual decline throughout the nineteenth century: "Once spiritual experience rather than a continuing pursuit of holiness became the focus of the class meeting, dynamic fellowship was difficult to maintain."<sup>56</sup> Methodist converts were not without profound spiritual experiences along the journey, but the purpose of the experiences was to empower members of the community towards temperamental and behavioral modification. Methodists could not rest easy or pride themselves upon reaching a certain experience along the journey. The necessity of pressing toward the goal meant always moving forward or otherwise risking a falling away.

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<sup>55</sup> Dean, 191.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

Methodists were easily able to advocate the importance of making progress in the way of salvation. Interpreted through their Arminian lens, the ominous possibility of falling back and potentially falling away was always a real one. This helped to stir a sense of tension within members, continually urging them ahead. It was not, however, primarily a sense of fear that urged the Methodists forward. Methodists did not gather out of a sense of need for radical self-discipline and denial of the flesh for fear that the fires of damnation constantly awaited them. More than from fear, Methodists were motivated by a sense of possibility burgeoning from a profoundly positive experience of God. This was an interactive God, a cooperative God, present in their midst, permeating the community with a spirit of grace. Wesley and the Methodists discovered that faith in this gracious, empowering God would bring them to their goal.

## 5. Cooperative Grace

*“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.’” John Wesley<sup>1</sup>*

Wesley described the Methodists as a group with “the form and seeking the power of godliness.”<sup>2</sup> If the form of Methodism was in small groups seeking the goal of holiness, grace was the empowering resource that enabled group members in this pursuit. This perspective on grace was fleshed out in Wesley’s own life, as he journeyed from a place of despairing of ever reaching the ends he pursued to a place of confidence and vigorous fruitfulness. Grace was the leveling agent, applied to every member and based upon every member’s need for it. It was also the agent of possibility, enabling members to receive what they were striving for, even instantaneously.<sup>3</sup> The journey of holiness became a journey of grace, with grace as both the preparative and present power that bound every member of the Methodist community to God and to one another. Grace was present at every stage; setting out was in response to grace, grace provided strength through the ongoing process of sanctification, and by grace would the final goal be achieved. Grace was the engine upon which the Methodist system ran, fueling the warm-hearted spirit pervasive in the societies, bands, and class meetings.

Wesley’s understanding of grace, like much of his theology, was developed from diverse influences in Christian tradition. Grace for Wesley was not simply a divine characteristic through which the merits of Christ were applied to the individual in order to place them in right standing with God. It was certainly that, though it was also much more. For Wesley, grace was an active

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” §15, *Works* 1:309.

<sup>2</sup> Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, §2, *Works* 9:69.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §III.16-18, *Works* 2:168-169.

agent, empowering the community, allowing members to take responsibility for the shaping of their destinies and progression on the way of holiness. Grace was something to be experienced, the activity of God at work in the lives of individuals, impressing upon them the conviction that God loved them and desired their well-being, as expressed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Wesley held these two perspectives in tension – at least one scholar has noted that in his writings Wesley refers to grace as an agent of *pardon* and *power* in an almost equal amounts.<sup>4</sup> Thus, for Wesley, grace was not simply about the forgiveness of sins; it was also about power for daily obedience to the law of Christ. It was grace that strengthened members of the community to overcome the obstacles and frequent stumbling along the journey towards perfection. Grace was conveyed through, to use Deutsch's terms, promotive interaction among the members of the community, and specifically in the Methodist context, in the societies, classes, and bands. The cooperative interdependence of the Methodist groups was not limited to members cooperating with one another to reach a goal; through grace, Methodists experienced the active, cooperative presence of God in their midst.

### **5.1 The Warmed Heart**

Missing from the writings of William Law, so formative in the development of Wesley's doctrine of holiness and of Christian perfection, was the expectancy of divine initiative. Law and the mystics emphasized the importance of human effort to attain the perfecting of proper inward tempers, particularly through personal self-discipline. Missing in Law was the reliance upon God which was characteristic of an Augustinian conception of grace. Wesley, never

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<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Hillman, *Grace in the Preaching of Calvin and Wesley: A Comparative Study*, (Ph.D. thesis: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1978), 27-37.

denying the significance of human responsibility, came to perceive holiness as the work of God within the life of the believer, initiated and completed by grace working through faith, not by human effort alone. Though the sanctifying work was not to be accomplished by human good works, neither was it to be attained without it. The Christian had responsibility to exert effort towards the appropriate ends of holiness; this was to be done in cooperation with, not apart from, proper reliance upon the grace of God.<sup>5</sup>

The deficiency of Wesley's initial understanding of how to accomplish the goal of holiness was made manifest in his encounters with Moravian Brethren from Herrnhut on his missionary excursion to Georgia. Wesley observed the exemplary behavior of the Moravians during the trip across the Atlantic, submitting to duties without complaint and exhibiting an overall spirit of humility. The strongest witness to Wesley from the Moravians, however, was the peace they exhibited in the midst of a violent storm at sea.<sup>6</sup> Wesley came to realize that these members of the Brethren had reached a place of confidence in God that he had yet to attain. This created a crisis of confidence within Wesley. Conversations with the Moravians convinced him that they had an assurance grounded in faith; they were convinced of their acceptance by God through trusting in the merits of Jesus Christ alone. This was evidenced through their testimony to a witness within their own spirit, an assurance given by the Holy Spirit that they had been saved from their sins. This concept of assurance was not alien to Wesley. In fact, it was something his father Samuel had dramatically impressed upon him in the last words from his

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<sup>5</sup> See David L. Watson's discussion on this in *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 44-47.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley notes his impressions of the Moravians on the journey across the Atlantic in his journal: January 25, 1736, *Journal* 1:142-143.

deathbed.<sup>7</sup>

Upon his return to England, Wesley began seeking this experience of assurance in earnest. His English Moravian friend Peter Böhler assisted him by giving witness to the living nature of justifying faith. Böhler told Wesley that faith was a confidence in the grace of God – grace that was active to impart the righteousness of Christ in the life of believer on the basis of the merits of Christ alone. This sense of pardoning grace would be experienced as the empowering love of God was applied directly to the heart of the one who believed in response to their faith. This new understanding of salvation by grace through faith was so salient for Wesley that it led to a recoil from the teachings of Law and the mystics that had been so instrumental in his initial development of a doctrine of holiness. He later referred to the writings of the mystics as “nothing like that religion which Christ and His apostles lived and taught.”<sup>8</sup> Wesley’s search for assurance eventually found success, famously at a society meeting on Aldersgate Street in May of 1738, where he experienced the inward witness for which he had so longed. He found illumination while hearing read the words of Martin Luther as he described faith as “a work of God in us” and a “living, unshakable confidence in God’s grace.”<sup>9</sup>

After Aldersgate, Wesley’s expectation for the Christian life had not changed – the goal was still pursuit of perfection in love. The change was the realization of a source of power for the journey in the form of Christian assurance, a confidence in the grace of God applied through faith. Wesley perceived this immediately, noting later in his journal that he had reached a new

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<sup>7</sup> The words Wesley records as spoken by his father Samuel on his deathbed: “The inward witness, son... that is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity,” in a Letter to ‘John Smith,’ March 22, 1748, §6, *Works* 26:289.

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, January 24, 1738, *Journal* 1:420.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, *Preface of the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library (Accessed September 20, 2015), [http://www.ccel.org/l/luther/romans/pref\\_romans.html](http://www.ccel.org/l/luther/romans/pref_romans.html).

place of success in his battles with temptation.<sup>10</sup> David Lowes Watson says that the greatest change for Wesley after Aldersgate was not in providing him an expectation of immediacy in regards to the transformation accompanying the ascendant journey of holiness – he already had that. Instead, what was new for Wesley was an awareness that this work was of divine initiative and not accomplished on the basis of human effort. It was a “significantly new understanding of grace”<sup>11</sup> for Wesley, and this spirit of expectation became pervasive throughout the movement birthed from his experience.

## ***5.2 Cooperative Grace***

Early on, Wesley and the Methodists were accused of “enthusiasm” because of their testimony of the active power of God at work in their midst. The grace they proclaimed and shared was the active agency of God, cooperating with them through the Holy Spirit to accomplish the goals God had established for them. The Methodists were not passive participants in the grace of God; grace empowered them to act in accordance with God’s wishes, functioning as a source of encouragement in the community. Since grace did not overpower them but instead was faithfully present to help them, they were thus responsible for their progress along the journey.<sup>12</sup> They could make no excuses; God’s gracious presence was powerful enough to enable them to live obediently. God was present in the community as a consequence of grace, and that presence, for Wesley, was synonymous with the presence of the

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<sup>10</sup> Wesley noted in his journal immediately after the experience that before he had been “fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace,” and frequently failing; afterwards, Wesley identifies himself as “always the conqueror,” in: May 24, 1738, §16, *Works* 18:250. This was not to be Wesley’s consistent experience post-Aldersgate; the gift Wesley received at Aldersgate was assurance, not entire sanctification.

<sup>11</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Wesley: “Yet his influences are not to supersede, but to encourage, our own efforts,” in *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, Philippians 2:13 (London: Epworth Press, 1976), 731.

Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

The primary means by which progress in the way of holiness was worked out in the life of the community was in the societies, classes, and bands. In addition to taking responsibility for their own progress, in the small groups, the Methodists took responsibility for one another's progress. "Doing good" was the second of the *General Rules* and one of the key components of holiness; the small groups gave immediate opportunity to do good on behalf of others by encouraging them in their pursuit of perfection. The cooperative nature of grace was experienced as Christians conveyed grace to one another through mutual encouragement and accountability in the context of community.

The support of others in the community was considered essential for continued progress toward the goal of Christian perfection. This was the reason Wesley was so outspoken against the concept of "holy solitaires" in the *Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems* and the reason Methodists sang "nourish us with social grace" at quarterly love feasts.<sup>14</sup> A sense of the importance of cooperation in community is reflected in a prayer Wesley set aside for the society meetings:

Help us to help each other, Lord,  
Each other's cross to bear;  
Let each his friendly aid afford,  
And feel his brother's care.  
Help us to build each other up,  
Our little stock improve;  
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,  
And perfect us in love.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 119-120.

<sup>14</sup> Wesley, *Hymns*, #507, st. 1, *Works* 7:698.

<sup>15</sup> Wesley, *Hymns* #489, st. 3-4, *Works* 7:677.

The members of Wesley's groups were at different places along the way of salvation, but what bound them together, at least initially, was a common sense of need. No level of attainment was required to enter the Methodist society. All that was necessary was simply an awareness of one's need for holy community to avoid the disaster of "the wrath to come." After initial acceptance into the fellowship, members were bound together by what David Lowes Watson identified for his Covenant Disciple Groups as an "inability to be obedient disciples." The qualifying characteristic of membership in Watson's groups, like Wesley's, was "recognition of weakness" due to the residual influence of "inbred sin" in the life of the believer.<sup>16</sup> Wesley believed in the power of grace to transform even though, ironically, he taught the more progress that one made on the way of holiness, the more one became aware of how far short of the goal he or she fell.<sup>17</sup> This was all the more reason for believers to encourage one another to continue pressing forward. Thus, Wesley's groups were essentially therapeutic in nature; their goal was the therapy of the soul, what Wesley saw as "the proper nature of religion."<sup>18</sup> This rehabilitation was an effort to restore individuals to their proper places as image-bearers of God, and to replace the corrupting influence of sin common to their Adamic nature. Members of the Methodist groups were cooperating with the healing activity that God was already performing in the lives of persons through the work of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. It was for this reason that the class meetings in both Britain and America, though highly disciplinary in design with accountability as a primary component, are identified with interaction of a supportive rather than pejorative nature.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> David L. Watson, *Accountable Discipleship*, 97-98.

<sup>17</sup> Wesley: "The more we grow in grace, the more do we see of the desperate wickedness of our own heart," in "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: I," §I.13, *Works* 1:482-483.

<sup>18</sup> Wesley, "Original Sin," §III.3, *Works* 2:184, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 144-145.

<sup>19</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 116; Ferguson, 72-73.

Consistent with grace as the enlivening agent of the Methodist groups was awareness that the goal of holiness was not to be attained by proper attention to duty but through loving obedience in response to God's gracious activity. Love was considered the highest state of obedience for the Christian; it was the essence of Christian perfection for Wesley.<sup>20</sup> Such love was possible only from a heart that had been transformed by grace. Entire sanctification, defined in terms of perfect love, could not be sought after without selfless concern that others would similarly attain to it. Perfection was not an individual prize belonging to one above all others to be competitively pursued. By its nature, love for Wesley was cooperative, recognizing its dependence upon God and others. Perhaps for this reason Wesley identified humility as one of the chief indicators of progress toward entire sanctification, equating perfect love with perfect humility.<sup>21</sup> Love and humility were definitively intertwined: "Nothing humbles the soul so deeply as love: It casts out all 'high conceits, engendering pride...' it abases us before both God and man; makes us willing to be the least of all, and the servants of all."<sup>22</sup> Wesley stated that "there is no disposition... which is more essential to Christianity than meekness."<sup>23</sup> Humility for Wesley was a proper state of awareness of complete dependence upon God – acknowledgment that the place in which one stood, one stood by the supportive grace of God alone.<sup>24</sup>

With an emphasis on the cooperative nature of grace, Wesley was able to hold in tension the awareness that, while grace is pervasive and available to every human being, it is

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<sup>20</sup> Wesley: "Faith working or animated by love is all that God now requires of man," in *Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection*, Works 13:97.

<sup>21</sup> Wesley, "On Patience," §10, Works 3:176.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, "On Charity," §1.4, Works 3:296.

<sup>23</sup> Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount: IV," §1.3, Works 1:534.

<sup>24</sup> Wesley: "Who is able to think one good thought, or to form one good desire, unless by that Almighty power which worketh in us both to will and to do according to his good pleasure? We have need, even in this state of grace, to be thoroughly and continually penetrated with a sense of this," in "Of the Church," §22, Works 3:53-54.

also resistible. As a result, every individual is held responsible according to how they respond to it. The path of salvation for the early Methodists was a journey of grace through which they experienced God as the active initiator, and that initiation required a response. The gracious, cooperating God who acted to redeem human beings and to restore in them the *imago Dei* marred by sin invited a cooperating response from those who would aspire to reflect that gracious character. In this respect, one can see a type of divine humility at work, making space for others in community and helping them, though not without their permission and participation. This gracious, cooperative, promotive interaction that defined the interdependence of the Methodist groups reflected God's own interaction with the community. The support and encouragement experienced among group members in the societies, classes, and bands became means by which the grace of God was conveyed to members of Wesley's groups.

### **5.3 A Prudential Means**

As the Methodist groups were tangible means to keep pilgrims on the journey of holiness, they became proper means of grace in Wesley's system. While Wesley argued for the necessity of his groups on the basis of prudence, particularly in the case of the class meeting, he saw them as more than practical tools of discipleship. After establishing bands in a village outside of Bristol, Wesley wrote in his journal, "How dare any man deny this to be (as to the substance of it) a means of grace, ordained by God?"<sup>25</sup> Wesley defined the means of grace as "outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end – to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying

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<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, April 4, 1739, *Works* 19:47.

grace.”<sup>26</sup> In his sermon “Means of Grace,” Wesley identifies the “chief means of grace” as prayer, searching the Scriptures, and the Lord’s Supper.<sup>27</sup> However, in the *Large Minutes*, Wesley adds fasting and Christian conference to the list of the “instituted means” established in the New Testament.<sup>28</sup> For Wesley, Christian conferencing was holy conversation, carried out “in grace,” in order to “minister grace to the hearers.”<sup>29</sup> In this sense, the Wesleyan small groups, particularly the bands, could be described as Christian conferencing.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Wesley goes a step further to identify the classes and bands together as “prudential means” of grace<sup>31</sup> – not specifically introduced in the New Testament but nonetheless a “means of drawing near to God.”<sup>32</sup>

Andrew Thompson points out that, from Wesley’s understanding, “all the means are either communal or are dependent on community support for their sustainability.”<sup>33</sup> The means of grace could not exist without the presence of a supportive, cooperative community, just as there could be no holiness, in Wesley’s mind, without social holiness. Daniel Castelo identifies the “formation of friendship” as the critical element of the Methodist groups. According to Castelo, Wesley’s vision of holiness carried with it a foundational understanding that friendship

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<sup>26</sup> Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” §II.1, *Works* 1:381.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1763), §I.4-5, *Works* 10:856-857.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, §I.5, *Works* 10:857.

<sup>30</sup> The bands were identified as one of the “best means of grace” for urging believers “on toward perfection,” in *Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. and the Preachers in Connexion with him, Containing the Form of Discipline Established Among the Preachers and People in the Methodist Societies* (Portadown: George Wilson, 1851), 43, Duke University Rubenstein Collection.

<sup>31</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1763), §II, *Works* 10:857.

<sup>32</sup> Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §II.4, *Works* 3:205-206. In a letter to his brother Samuel, Wesley stated, “[A]s to prudential means, I believe this rule holds of things indifferent in themselves: whatever I know to do me hurt, that to me is not indifferent, but resolutely to be abstained from; whatever I know to do me good, that to me is not indifferent, but resolutely to be embraced,” in a Letter to the Revd. Samuel Wesley, Jun., November 17, 1731, *Works* 25:322.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Thompson, “‘To Stir Them Up to Believe, Love, Obey’ – Soteriological Dimensions of the Class Meeting in Early Methodism,” *Methodist History* 48, no 3 (April 2010): 172.

had a moral component, a premise dating back to the days of Aristotle.<sup>34</sup> From this perspective, the friendships developed in the Methodist groups were means of grace in and of themselves, facilitating proper “self-awareness and self-understanding” necessary for growth in holiness.<sup>35</sup> Such self-knowledge could not happen apart from a community of friends as surely as humility could not be cultivated without the interaction that close acquaintance would require. The dangers Wesley identified for those who had reached the goal of Christian perfection, couched as “advices,” were, first, “to watch and pray continually against pride,” and second, to “beware of that daughter of pride, enthusiasm.”<sup>36</sup> Both of these could potentially involve attitudes trending toward isolation, or denial of one’s need for community.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Wesley’s initial attraction to the model he observed among the Moravians was that their bands downplayed individual achievement for the sake of promoting collective interaction.<sup>38</sup> From the perspective of Deutsch and the group theorists, traits that would trend towards isolation or undue attention to the individual member at the expense of collective group effort would be consistent with a competitive interdependence that inhibits healthy group functioning. Methodists had to fight, often with decreasing success, against the “corrosive influence” of such individualism creeping into the church from the culture, particularly later in the United States.<sup>39</sup>

Wesley identified the groups he launched as means by which Methodists could “watch over one another in love.”<sup>40</sup> Love was the preeminent characteristic of holiness, so self-denying

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel Castelo, “Perfecting One Another: Friendship and the Moral Implications of Wesley’s Small Groups,” *The Asbury Journal* 64:1 (2009), 7-8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>36</sup> Wesley, *Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection*, *Works* 13:111-112.

<sup>37</sup> Castelo, 17n53.

<sup>38</sup> Henderson, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Randy L. Maddox, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” in *Methodism in its Cultural Milieu*, ed. by Tim Macquiban (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1994), 135ff.

<sup>40</sup> Wesley, *Advice to the People Called Methodists*, *Works* 9:125.

love that values the success of a friend above one's own would be typical of a group in pursuit of perfection. Indeed, Wesley believed that the loving atmosphere of Christian community would "more effectually provoke" Christians "to love, holy tempers, and good works."<sup>41</sup> The small groups provided specific opportunity to express and receive love from other Christians in the context of a group meeting as members shared their religious experiences and encouraged one another.<sup>42</sup> Again, this was particularly the case with the bands; their format was more unstructured, and conversations were less formal than those in the classes. Furthermore, in the bands, group members interacted with one another as leadership rotated among group members while, in the classes, individual members were interrogated by the class leader. Band members reported feeling the support of a loving community and finding "comfort" from their band meetings.<sup>43</sup> The atmosphere was one of trust and understanding.<sup>44</sup> That Wesley only allowed visitors to attend a meeting a maximum of three times without making some commitment to the society (and, even in that case, visitors were only allowed at every other meeting) indicates that the close fellowship of the group was something Wesley may have been careful to protect.<sup>45</sup>

Wesley's confidence in his groups as a means of grace was revealed in his singular and almost exclusive expectation of class members to be faithful in their attendance. Those who attended the meetings would have God's grace working on them in the context of an

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<sup>41</sup> Wesley, "On Zeal," §11.5, *Works* 3:313.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Goodhead writes that the Enlightenment "allowed a worldview to develop offering individuals expression for the first time," which opened the door for the "personalized religious experience characterized by Pietism and Puritanism," forerunners of Methodism, in *A Crown and a Cross*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Band member Sarah Barber to Charles Wesley: "I knew I was ungodly... then I hoped and found great comfort and indeed the band was of great service to me for I was never sent away without some comforts," in Sarah Barber, Letter to Charles Wesley, May 1740, Early Methodist Volume, John Ryland University Library (Methodist Archives), quoted in Goodhead, 169.

<sup>44</sup> Henderson, 146-147.

<sup>45</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1753), *Works* 10:847.

encouraging, supportive environment. Those who simply made the effort to show up would be the recipients of cooperative grace. However, class meetings and bands without an emphasis of the goal of holiness, the witness of the spirit, and the responsibility to “watch over one another in love” would lose their power to transform. It was as effective agents of God’s cooperation with humanity toward the telos of holiness that Wesley indicates groups like the bands became means of grace, “ordained by God.” They were not ends themselves but existed to advance the goal of holiness.<sup>46</sup>

Members of Wesley’s groups experienced the power of God at work in their midst in their own lives and in the lives of their fellow group members. Wesley has since been identified by some as the “father of experiential religion.”<sup>47</sup> Even if an excess of attention to experience at the expense of daily obedience contributed to the decline of the Methodist groups as some maintain, the place of experience cannot be rejected in considering what made the Methodist groups vital. The Methodists experienced the gracious power of God at work in their midst, assuring them that their sins were forgiven and empowering them to live in loving obedience through the Holy Spirit. Andrew Thompson identifies grace as the “true agent of transformation,” not only for individual believers, but also for a community modeling God’s redemptive justice to the world.<sup>48</sup> Wesley believed that Methodists transformed by grace would become “a means of God’s gracious redemptive presence in society at large.”<sup>49</sup>

Methodists were propelled forward on a journey of holiness by the gracious

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<sup>46</sup> Wesley: The means of grace were “ordained, not for their own sake, but in order to the renewal of your soul in righteousness and true holiness,” in “The Means of Grace,” §V.4, *Works* 1:396-397.

<sup>47</sup> Henderson, 150.

<sup>48</sup> Thompson, *John Wesley and the Means of Grace*, 242.

<sup>49</sup> Maddox, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” 134.

intervention of God. They received grace from expressions of encouragement and support from fellow pilgrims in their groups and were motivated by grace to carry their identity as leavening agents out into the world. The spirit of cooperation that members shared in the Methodist groups corresponded with the encouragement they were receiving from God through grace. Holiness was never an independent objective for the Methodist groups; it was to be interdependently pursued through life in community. The goal of Christian perfection, defined by self-emptying love, was a cooperatively (rather than an independently or competitively) pursued venture. Love bound the members of the Methodist small groups together in community, and it was love that led them to place priority on the discipline of accountability in order to preserve the integrity of their fellowship.

## 6. The Discipline of Accountability

*“Every man in my band is my monitor, and I his. Else I know no use of our being in a band.” John Wesley<sup>1</sup>*

As distinctive as its doctrine of holiness and spirit of grace was a pervasive sense of discipline in the Methodist movement. The discipline of the Methodists modeled the ethos of its disciplinarian founder – indeed the name “Methodist” carried with it the stigma of Wesley’s seemingly fanatical attentiveness to order and accountability. Though Wesley matured from a place of understanding self-discipline alone as the means to attain holiness, he never deviated from his insistence on the place of discipline in the life of faithful discipleship. Wesley quoted more than once the saying, “The soul and body make a man; but spirit and discipline make a Christian.”<sup>2</sup> Wesley wrote to Adam Clarke to “Be exact in every part of discipline”<sup>3</sup> – the same words he had written in an earlier letter to John Mason.<sup>4</sup> Wesley also requested Francis Asbury in America to keep “a strict attention to discipline.”<sup>5</sup> Wesley’s mark on history, including his leadership style and the movement he left behind were made distinctive by the value he placed on orderliness.

### 6.1 “By-laws”

Wesley’s tendency toward the meticulous was inherited from his mother. Susanna Wesley structured her activities so that she could converse individually with each of her children

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley, Letter to James Hutton, November 26, 1738, *Works* 25:591.

<sup>2</sup> Wesley, Letter to Adam Clarke, January 3, 1787, *Letters* 7:362; and “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity,” §7, *Works* 4:90.

<sup>3</sup> Wesley, Letter to Adam Clarke, November 9, 1787, *Letters* 8:22.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley, Letter to John Mason, November 3, 1784, *Works* 7:247.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Asbury, October 10, 1772, in Wesley, *Letters* 5:341.

at least once per week (only ten of her seventeen survived infancy). She believed the first task of parenting to be the subjugation of the will. This was to be done through rule and proper correction. Susanna demanded strict accountability of her children for their behavior. In a letter to her son John in 1732, recounting her method of their upbringing, she listed “by-laws” for ruling the household, which included allowing no sinful action to go unpunished and immediately commending acts of obedience, particularly when those acts were contrary to the will of the child.<sup>6</sup> Though she believed “no willful transgression ought ever to be forgiven children, without chastisement,” Susanna refused to spank her children when they confessed their faults and vowed to amend their behavior.<sup>7</sup> An atmosphere of honest confession and immediate feedback was typical, if not foundational, to the atmosphere of Wesley’s childhood, and the leadership style of Susanna Wesley influenced his approach to pastoral ministry. This was particularly reflected in the methods he set in place for governing the groups he founded and advocated so strongly.

Susanna believed that discipline was essential in promoting “future happiness and piety” in the life of the child.<sup>8</sup> The objective of discipline was obedience, and the fruit of obedience was happiness and holiness. Her attention to immediate feedback regarding the child’s behavior could be considered consistent with the type of individual accountability essential for healthy group functioning as outlined in chapter three. For Susanna Wesley, accountability fostered proper obedience which prepared the children for a life of cooperating with God and produced in them the fruit of piety and happiness. Discipline encouraged the children to avoid the pitfalls of competitive interdependence and the oppositional interaction

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<sup>6</sup> John Wesley, August 7, 1742, *Works* 19:291.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 288, 290.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

consistent with self-will. Let it be noted that the subjugation of the wills of the Wesley children appeared by no means to diminish their resolve once they reached adult life. The tempering influence of Susanna's discipline seemed to have focused their desires such that their capabilities to accomplish the ends they sought were increased rather than decreased. William Walter Dean notes that this discipline "left little room for fear, indecision, and self-doubt, and allowed them to devote enormous amounts of energy to the pursuit of their goals."<sup>9</sup> Since the Methodist movement came to model the strictly structured environment in which Wesley was raised, the positive effects of the accountability of the Wesley household reverberated far beyond the walls of the Epworth parish rectory.

For the Methodists, everything was regulated. Feedback was not only encouraged; it was required for everyone from society members to itinerant preachers. At the center of the web of accountability was Wesley himself, constantly prodding the Methodists to be consistent in working towards the ends for which they had been founded. For all practical purposes, Wesley was the Methodist Connexion.<sup>10</sup> He set the rules, he carried the authority, and he applied the discipline that he believed was necessary to keep the movement vital. Whatever Wesley lacked in charisma, he overcame through order and discipline. The meticulousness which he applied to regulating his own life, a daily routine described by David L. Watson as "almost superhuman," he expected his followers, and particularly his preachers, to emulate.<sup>11</sup> Wesley kept extensive records of his daily activities, and attention to proper documentation became a sort of self-accountability. His demand for accurate and consistent record-keeping extended to his assistants and helped reinforce an atmosphere of accountability throughout the

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<sup>9</sup> Dean, 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 3.

movement. Though Methodists numbered in the thousands, Wesley was able to keep tabs on the state of virtually every soul through his uniformly applied system of record-keeping.

Wesley attributed his remarkable energy and longevity to the disciplined nature of his daily living. In his sermon “The More Excellent Way,” preached while Wesley was in his middle-eighties, he describes the way of love and holiness as an orderly life. In this sermon Wesley identifies the more excellent way of living as a proper ordering of ordinary things like sleeping, eating, spending money, and conversing with others.<sup>12</sup> Wesley believed that attention to proper practice could facilitate the formation of the inward tempers consistent with holiness.<sup>13</sup> Discipline in this sense freed persons to attain to the fruitfulness of the obedient life by training the will through a “universal self-denial” consistent with aspiring “after the heights and depths of holiness” and of “leaving the first principles of the Gospel of Christ, to go on to perfection.”<sup>14</sup> For Wesley, as surely as there could be no holiness without grace, there could be no perfection without discipline.

## **6.2 For Conscience’s Sake**

Wesley exhorted his preachers to keep the *Rules* of the societies “not for wrath, but for conscience’s sake.”<sup>15</sup> For the Methodists, discipline was practiced not as a means to avoid divine punishment but in response to God’s grace. In Wesley’s early adult years, this understanding was undeveloped. The Holy Club of Oxford was a group of young men zealous to attain the goal of holiness; missing was a proper understanding of grace. The Moravians contributed to

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<sup>12</sup> Wesley, “The More Excellent Way,” §I-VI, *Works* 3:267-277.

<sup>13</sup> Wesley maintained that “works of mercy” helped to “exercise all holy tempers,” and to “continually improve them,” in “On Zeal,” §II.5, *Works* 3:313.

<sup>14</sup> Wesley, “The More Excellent Way,” §5, *Works* 3:265.

<sup>15</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1753), *Works* 10:854.

Wesley's understanding of discipline by providing a positive internal foundation to the "strictness of life"<sup>16</sup> for which the Methodists were to be known. As a result, the disciplined life of the mature Wesley flowed from a sense of abundance rather than of lack, "from a sense of God's approval and love, rather than the imposition of such a life on a recalcitrant nature."<sup>17</sup> Methodist discipline was to be invigorating, not enervating. Grace set people free to keep the law, and proper obedience to the law of God was the mark of one who had been set free.

Though Wesley's concept of grace was influenced by the Moravians, he frowned on some of their methods of discipline. One of Wesley's grievances with Zinzendorf was in his secretive approach to applying accountability.<sup>18</sup> The Moravians had a practice in which feedback could be provided blindly; one could receive feedback from another member of the group but have no idea from whom the feedback came. It was this sort of veiled accountability, or discipline applied apart from an open relational context, that eventually turned Wesley from the Fetter Lane Society.<sup>19</sup> He believed that, since those who had experienced justification in the Methodist societies were holding one another accountable in response to the gracious love of God that had been freely shed abroad in their hearts, the motive behind accountability was always to be caring concern and support. Discipline was the chief means by which Methodists "watch[ed] over one another in love."<sup>20</sup> Thus, there was no reason for it not to be conducted in "childlike openness, frankness, and plainness of speech," rather than under a canopy of

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<sup>16</sup> Wesley, *Advice to the People Called Methodists*, Works 9:126.

<sup>17</sup> Dean, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Wesley: "Zinzendorf loved to keep all things close: I love to do all things openly," in *Large Minutes* (1770), Works 10:899.

<sup>19</sup> A letter from James Hutton described the concealment associated with the feedback of the bands at Fetter Lane in John Wesley, Letter from James Hutton, November 23, 1738, Works 25:586.

<sup>20</sup> Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, §2, Works 9:69; *Advice to the People Called Methodists*, Works 9:125.

secrecy.<sup>21</sup> The high expectations held by the Methodists were expressions of their regard for one another in desiring the holiness and happiness that comes with a life of fruitful obedience. This kind of life could only be lived out face-to-face, consistently meeting and speaking openly with other Christians who shared a stake in their success. This was the purpose of the Wesleyan small groups. They were the most effective, practical means of maintaining proper discipline in the Methodist Connexion.

In these small groups, Methodists met with one another face-to-face and were queried as to the state of their souls. A class leader was instructed to “carefully inquire how every soul in his class prosper[ed],” which included attention to the *General Rules* and to whether the individual member was growing “in the knowledge and love of God.”<sup>22</sup> The first advice Wesley gave to the preachers for instruction was to read, explain, and enforce the *General Rules* in the societies.<sup>23</sup> Wesley practiced this himself, effectively serving the role of Methodist disciplinarian-in-chief.<sup>24</sup> Regular attention to the *General Rules* reminded members of the original intent of the group, which was the facilitation of obedience consistent with the goal of holiness.

In broad categories, as mentioned previously, the *Rules* were three: do no harm, do good, and attend upon the ordinances of God. Specifically, the first rule prohibited taking God’s name in vain, “profaning the day of the Lord” with work or commerce, bringing lawsuits against other Christians, retaliating, speaking ill of civic or clerical leaders, charging unlawful interest, indulging the self needlessly, and “laying up treasures on earth,” among others. The positive command to do good was to be expressed through what Wesley considered the works of mercy:

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<sup>21</sup> John Wesley, September 3, 1741, *Journal* 2:496-497.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1753), *Works* 10:847.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* (1770), 10:888.

<sup>24</sup> There are numerous accounts of Wesley attending to disciplinary matters in his visits. On a visit to Norwich he admonished the society: “Those who are resolved to keep these Rules may continue with us, and those only,” in John Wesley, October 10, 1763, *Works* 21:433.

feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting and helping the sick. Also included was “instructing, reproof, or exhorting” loved ones, keeping an eye out for another’s welfare, and “submitting to bear the reproach of Christ.” Finally, the ordinances of God to be kept by the Methodists included what Wesley considered the works of piety: faithfully attending public worship, hearing the preached word, praying both privately and as a family, receiving the Lord’s Supper, studying the Scriptures, and fasting. Keeping the rules was considered evidence of one’s desire for salvation, since these *Rules*, Wesley insisted, were already written by the Holy Spirit upon every “truly awakened heart.”<sup>25</sup>

In the small groups, Methodists received individual-specific feedback on their behavior in light of the *Rules*. In the case of the classes, examination was conducted by the class leader; in the bands and select societies, it was by another member of the group. The leaders in the Methodist small groups, particularly the class leaders, were extensions of Wesley’s own authority. Wesley insisted that class leaders maintain effective discipline in their classes, and they were expected to “advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require.”<sup>26</sup> The class leaders were appointed by Wesley and reported directly to him or to one of his assistants.<sup>27</sup> Though there was no assigned leader in the bands, members agreed to come under the scrutiny of fellow members whose purpose was to “cut to the quick” and to search hearts “to the bottom” in group discussions.<sup>28</sup> The bands provided opportunity for the kind of member-to-member feedback lacking in the classes, facilitating an increased level of interdependence within the group. This stronger interdependence encouraged the openness that came with

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<sup>25</sup> Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, §4-7, *Works* 9:70-73.

<sup>26</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §II.5(1), *Works* 9:261.

<sup>27</sup> see Wesley’s comments on class leader Robert Peacock in John Wesley, March 8, 1747, *Works* 20:162-163.

<sup>28</sup> Wesley, *Rules of the Band Societies*, *Works* 9:78.

speaking “without reserve” and created a deeper experience of accountability and support.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, group theorists have noted that authoritarian groups tend to function less effectively than those without a top-down approach do in terms of motivating members to reach group goals.<sup>30</sup> Wesley seems to have had a preference for the bands for this reason; their egalitarian nature provided greater potential for the type of cohesion capable of stirring members even more powerfully toward love and good deeds.

Wesley’s system was set up such that no Methodist would fall through the cracks. Promotive interaction was fostered through relationships in small groups in which the pursuit of holiness was encouraged, and the grace of God was experienced in an atmosphere of accountability. Methodists needed more than encouragement to continue on the journey towards perfection; they needed oversight. The classes and bands provided such oversight with the opportunity for feedback and reproof consistent with what Wesley considered the biblical standard of appropriate speech.<sup>31</sup> As David Michael Henderson has said, “Many church leaders were telling people what they ought to do, but the Methodists were telling each other what they were doing.”<sup>32</sup>

### **6.3 Ticket for Admittance**

One of Wesley’s priorities was setting parameters for the societies in terms of who should and should not be included in their meetings. After loving reproof, expulsion was the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Alvin Zander notes from group research: “it appears that social support for avoiding unfavorable consequences was more likely to develop when persons were outside the surveillance of an authoritative person,” and “social pressures are more effective, if they are non-coercive in nature,” in Zander, *Motives and Goals in Groups*, 174-175.

<sup>31</sup> Wesley, “The Cure of Evil Speaking,” §1.6, *Works* 2:257.

<sup>32</sup> Henderson, 193 (emphasis original).

principal manner of discipline practiced by the early Methodists. It has been said that a review of Wesley's journal indicates that Wesley spent as much time throwing members out of the Methodist societies as he did persuading them to come in.<sup>33</sup> Wesley instructed his preachers on how to "prevent improper persons from insinuating into the society."<sup>34</sup> Of great concern was whether or not existing members were becoming "disorderly walkers." Wesley considered those who "did not live the gospel" a grave threat to the community<sup>35</sup> and believed "one sin, or one sinner... diffuse[d] guilt and infection through the whole congregation."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the more serious consequence was to allow these members to remain in the fellowship. Wesley identified the risks as twofold. On the one hand, those who weren't striving after holiness were potential sources of temptation for other members of the society; other Methodists might follow their example into sin. The other risk was related to the reputation of the Methodists in the larger community and the fear that these "hypocrites" might bring slander upon the movement. Those who failed to live as they ought were not immediately expelled; they were reprov'd and "borne with for a season." However, if they failed to forsake their sin, they were removed from the society.<sup>37</sup> It was in response to this need to detect, correct, and potentially expel such persons that Wesley instituted the class meeting as a mandatory requirement for society membership.<sup>38</sup>

Perfection was not a requirement for membership in a class meeting or a band, but a willingness to adhere to norms in the form of specific rules was. In order to test the willingness of prospective society members, individuals were required to observe a three-month trial under

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Edward White, "John Wesley's Use of Church Discipline," *Methodist History* 29, no 2 (January 1991): 113-114.

<sup>34</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1753), *Works* 10:848.

<sup>35</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §II.1, *Works* 9:260.

<sup>36</sup> Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, 1 Corinthians 5:6 (London: Epworth Press, 1976), 599.

<sup>37</sup> Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, §7, *Works* 9:73.

<sup>38</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §II.1-4, *Works* 9:260-261.

the supervision of a class leader, including meeting at least thrice with a class meeting in session.<sup>39</sup> Prospective members were to be given a copy of the *General Rules* at their first meeting, a practice which was to be “never neglected.”<sup>40</sup> The *Rules* were examined carefully and soberly throughout the trial period, and only the one who gave full assent to keep them would be accepted into the society.<sup>41</sup> Instructions given to prospective members according to one class leader in 1790, were serious indeed:

“If you continue to meet with us, you will observe these Rules, both [for the] End you ought to have in view & the Conduct you are expected to manifest. Take [these Rules] Home with You – consider them alone, as in the sight of God. Consider with much Prayer what you are about to do, & if you do not sincerely intend, with divine help, to forsake your Sins, to take up your cross & follow Jesus Christ, do not increase your Guilt by professing to belong to his followers.”<sup>42</sup>

Once admitted, every member received a quarterly examination by Wesley to determine “whether they grew in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>43</sup> Later, this responsibility was shared with his preachers.<sup>44</sup> Those who proved true under Wesley’s scrutiny were given his personal stamp of approval through the issuance of a ticket with the individual’s name signed upon it by Wesley’s own hand.<sup>45</sup> Those who Wesley did not find so approved had their ticket revoked. The ticket became a tangible means to define whether or not one was maintaining proper standing within the community. It was a source of encouragement for those who were walking well and an incentive to stay on the narrow path for those tempted to stray. Wesley insisted the tickets be presented prior to admittance to various society

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<sup>39</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1753), *Works* 10:848.

<sup>40</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1789), *Works* 10:913.

<sup>41</sup> Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, §4, *Works* 9:70.

<sup>42</sup> Manuscript letters in the private collection of Dr. Frank Baker, in David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 220.

<sup>43</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §IV.1, *Works* 9:265.

<sup>44</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1770), *Works* 10:881.

<sup>45</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §IV.2, *Works* 9:265.

meetings, with occasional exceptions.<sup>46</sup> Those who did not meet the expectations of societal membership lost their privileges through the simple non-renewal of their ticket. Wesley identified the failure to renew such a ticket as a “quiet and inoffensive method of removing any disorderly member,”<sup>47</sup> though he subsequently instructed his preachers to read aloud the names of those who had been excluded from the society at the quarterly meeting.<sup>48</sup>

Membership privileges in the society could be revoked through Sabbath-breaking, evil-speaking, unprofitable conversation, acquiring debts with an inability to pay, drunkenness, becoming “unequally yoked” through marrying an unbeliever, or the wearing of expensive or superfluous apparel,<sup>49</sup> all of which, aside from the prohibition of being “unequally yoked,” were in explicit violation of the *General Rules*.<sup>50</sup> The primary reason admission tickets were revoked, however, was due to lack of attendance.<sup>51</sup> Maintaining regular attendance in the class meeting was perhaps the greatest challenge for Wesley and his successors in their oversight of the Methodist movement.<sup>52</sup> Since the classes were mandatory, they became the most frequent instrument of exercised discipline. Generally, three absences were considered sufficient neglect of duty to warrant expulsion from the Methodist societies.<sup>53</sup> There are several recorded examples of strong rebukes from Wesley to society members who had become lax in their class

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<sup>46</sup> Alternate meetings of the societies could be open according to Wesley in *Large Minutes* (1753), *Works* 10:847; and special “serious” persons could be occasionally admitted to closed meetings per *Minutes of The Bristol Conference of August 1-3, 1745*, *Works* 10:158.

<sup>47</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §IV.3, *Works* 9:265.

<sup>48</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1753), *Works* 10:849.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 850-851.

<sup>50</sup> Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, §4, *Works* 9:70-72.

<sup>51</sup> David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 107.

<sup>52</sup> William Walter Dean’s conclusion after extensive analysis of the surviving records from the classes: “The primary continuing problem for Wesley was getting Methodists to attend class regularly,” in Dean, 181.

<sup>53</sup> Wesley, Letter to the Societies at Bristol, October 1764, §6, *Letters* 4:273.

meeting attendance.<sup>54</sup>

The dilemma that Wesley had in persuading members to faithful attendance was not a problem unique to the church of the eighteenth century. Perhaps it is comforting to know that even in the days of Wesley, Methodists struggled with faithful attendance. The difference between Methodism in that day and the Methodism of the present day can be witnessed in Wesley's strict opposition to unfaithful attendance and the disciplinary measures he put in place to prevent it. In considering the effectiveness of these measures, it is interesting to note that the quarterly society meeting where tickets were renewed was also the most well attended meeting of the quarter, demonstrating that, at least in some degree, Wesley's disciplinary measures were effective.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, there are examples of Wesley's discipline bringing about positive change in the lives of society members beyond the mere reformation of attendance habits.<sup>56</sup>

It is worth noting that the revocation of membership privileges from the Methodist societies of the eighteenth century would have different consequences than those of removing persons from membership rolls of churches of the present day. When members of Wesley's societies lost their privileges, they weren't being removed from the rolls of a church; Methodism was a renewal movement within the Church of England. Both William Walter Dean and David Lowes Watson have discussed the "church versus sect" typology of sociologist Martin Troeltsch and concluded that the sect-like qualities of eighteenth-century Methodism provided unique advantages to the movement.<sup>57</sup> One of the advantages was that persons could be removed from membership in the societies but still not be refused participation in the sacraments. Wesley's

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<sup>54</sup> John Wesley, September 3, 1759, *Journal* 4:350; Letter to Joseph Benson, February 22, 1776, *Letters* 6:208; Letter to Thomas Rutherford, March 3, 1776, *Letters* 6:210.

<sup>55</sup> Dean, 296.

<sup>56</sup> Wesley notes the reform of drunkards and gossips in a class meeting over a three month period in: October 9, 1748, *Journal* 3:380.

<sup>57</sup> Dean, 26ff., David L. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 134-135.

dismissals were not excommunications. Removed members could still participate in the full life of the local Anglican parish. On the other hand, since membership in the Methodist societies was more difficult to obtain, it had the allure of exclusivity. The loss of membership in the Methodist societies was a deprivation of real privileges. The boundary lines of the community were sharply defined, and Wesley wanted it that way. While secrets were not kept among group members, those things spoken of in the societies, classes, bands, and love-feasts were to be kept within the bounds of the community, at times inviting criticism from outsiders for their seeming cult-like secretiveness. Guarding it all was the tangible token of approval in the form of an admittance ticket.

#### ***6.4 Common Boundaries***

In group theory, boundaries of the group are defined by group norms. Some sociologists define a group in its most basic sense as a set of individuals governed by a specific set of norms, whether the norms are named or unnamed. For the Methodist small groups, particularly the societies and the class meetings, those norms became the *General Rules*. The bands and select societies had respective rules as well. Discipline was the means of assuring that group norms were followed, thus preserving the integrity of the group. As every healthy organism has boundaries that define what is inside and outside the system, norms serve as the boundaries for the community, defining what, or who, is within the bounds of the group. A group that refuses to attend to its norms loses its sense of identity. Concerning interdependence, the group that refuses to abide by its norms has lost sight of its goal. An individual member that refuses to abide by group norms has become a deviant member, potentially destructive to the health of the group. That member should either be rehabilitated to keep group norms or, if such deviancy

becomes chronic, be removed from the group. Perhaps this is why Wesley consistently identified maintaining proper discipline above numbering names on membership rolls.<sup>58</sup>

The advantage of the rules in the Methodist system was that they provided a specific means by which Methodists could be held accountable. They became means by which progress in holiness could be gauged, at least in terms of expressed actions, words, and temperament. Keeping the rules set Methodists apart from the rest of British society. The rules were never an end to themselves, but they served as guardians in a sense. Indeed, David Lowes Watson identifies observation of the rules more appropriately with “holding fast” than with growth or progress.<sup>59</sup> The group provided reinforcement for the individual to hold fast to the boundaries defining the community, keeping the group distinctive in light of the pressures of conformity applied by the outside world. For those within the group, the rules functioned as a sort of covenant, or binding agreement, holding individual members together.<sup>60</sup> The result was a stronger contrast between the members of the community and the rest of the world and therefore a stronger sense of solidarity among group members.<sup>61</sup>

It would seem that the authoritarian nature, particularly of the classes, would have inhibited healthy interdependence in that individual members would have taken less responsibility in their group’s progress toward the goal of holiness. Sociologists have found, however, that authoritarian groups can work well in certain situations, particularly where stress levels are elevated.<sup>62</sup> When lower levels of stress are present in the system, authoritarian

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<sup>58</sup> Wesley: “Better forty members should be lost than our discipline lost,” in a Letter to John Valton, January 18, 1782, *Letters* 7:101.

<sup>59</sup> David L. Watson, *Accountable Discipleship*, 54.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>62</sup> Korten, 357-358.

leadership has more difficulty sustaining itself.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps the season of most rapid growth of British and American Methodism was influenced in part by the tensions of rapid cultural changes – Britain at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, and a nascent, newly independent America – that made persons more open to the authoritarian oversight of Wesley and his successors. An environment of perilous transition contributed to an acute sense of the need for holiness and the severity of the consequences of a failure to obtain it.

Because of this sense of urgency, there was no toleration for becoming lackadaisical in applying accountability to the Methodist groups. Class leaders were instructed not to withhold reproof for fear of offending.<sup>64</sup> The preachers were admonished to “mind every point, great and small, in the Methodist discipline!”<sup>65</sup> The risks of falling backward due to the residual influence of sin were too great. Weekly examination by class leaders provided the individual feedback and oversight that was necessary for healthy functioning. Since the feedback took place in an environment with supportive relationships and weekly follow-up, group effectiveness was compounded. Wesley became convinced that not only was “joining together” those who had been “once-awakened” under his preaching into disciplined fellowship groups the best way to train them up in holiness, it was the only way.<sup>66</sup>

## ***6.5 Loss of Discipline***

The loss of attention to discipline in the Methodist groups has been identified as one of the key factors, if not the critical factor, contributing to their decline in the nineteenth century.

William Walter Dean has pointed out that the first instruction book to be printed for class

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 358-359.

<sup>64</sup> *The Wesley Banner and Revival Record* 1 (1849): 72-73.

<sup>65</sup> Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1780), *Works* 10:915.

<sup>66</sup> John Wesley, August 25, 1763, *Journal* 5:26.

leaders after Wesley's death relegated the examination of individual members in light of the *General Rules* to a second place below the observation of the spiritual condition of each member.<sup>67</sup> Whether or not such a listing demonstrated a shift in priority, attentiveness to specific feedback for the behavior of members in light of the *General Rules* became less commonplace in class meetings in Great Britain as the nineteenth century progressed. Dean notes further that the disciplinary focus of the class meeting shifted from the avoidance of "disorderly walking" to family devotions and class attendance.<sup>68</sup> In time, attendance at class meetings became the sole point of accountability, usurping the place of the *General Rules*. While attendance had always been a priority for Wesley, it was never the first standard of faithfulness for the class member; that depended upon holy living and proper observation of the *General Rules*.<sup>69</sup>

As the nineteenth century progressed, discipline became institutionalized and less personal as Methodism made the shift from revival movement to established church. The inherent power of individual feedback in the context of small group relationships was diminished in the more bureaucratic environment.<sup>70</sup> As group attendance became the telos, fellowship replaced the goal of holiness, and purpose was lost. The relaxing of membership expectations did not increase the rate of recruitment of new members as some expected.<sup>71</sup> Meetings became shallow; the intensity and sense of urgency which had belonged to Methodism in the days of Wesley was largely lost. Randy Maddox notes a similar regression in

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<sup>67</sup> James Wood, *Directions and Cautions Addressed to the Class Leaders, in the Methodist Connexion; and Designed to Show the Nature of their Office, and the Necessity of their being Faithful in the Discharge of Their Duty* (London: Conference Office, 1803), quoted in Dean, 235.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, quoted in Dean, 238.

<sup>69</sup> Dean: by the latter part of the eighteenth century, "attendance itself... was the discipline, not the interaction that occurred at the meeting," in Dean, 338.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 343, 354.

the class meetings in America from a place of “shared challenge... aimed at shaping character” to “a gathering for individual members to rehearse the correct choices that they had made.”<sup>72</sup> This contributed to an increased environment of envy, or competition, among group members.<sup>73</sup> The creep of competitive interdependence and oppositional interaction, which has already been noted as having devastating effects on group vitality, replaced the promotive interaction of cooperative interdependence. This was a direct result of the failure to maintain the difficult work of accountability and honest feedback associated with the discipline Wesley considered so essential to reach the goal of holiness.

The level of discipline established at the outset of the movement was difficult to maintain for an organization the size of the Methodist Church, especially after the loss of its disciplinarian-in-chief. The class meeting remained in place in the intervening decades, but the attention to the guiding principles that defined the bounds of these groups was not so long-lasting. Still, vitality has persisted in Wesleyan Christianity in Britain, North America, and other parts of the globe. Having considered the goal of holiness, the cooperative spirit of grace, and the disciplined accountability of the Methodist groups, let us now examine how the distinctive characteristics of the Wesleyan groups could be recaptured in small group ministry in the church today.

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<sup>72</sup> Maddox, “Social Grace: The Eclipse of the Church as a Means of Grace in American Methodism,” 144.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

## 7. Wesley's Groups for Today

*"I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this will undoubtedly be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out." John Wesley<sup>1</sup>*

Now that the characteristics contributing to the dynamic nature of the early Methodist groups have been considered in light of more recent studies in group dynamics, it is worth asking whether these particular characteristics can be recovered in the process of making disciples through small group ministry today. Can the early Methodist small groups, in their most effective form, be recovered in the twenty-first century church? This final chapter is devoted to seeking an answer to this question.

Though researching the influence of the cultural and socio-economic environment of eighteenth-century England would be an important factor in evaluating the success of Wesley's method, such an effort is beyond the scope of this project. However, while the context of the early Methodist movement is substantially different from the current social climate, it should be noted that the Anglican Church of Wesley's day was in a place of diminishing influence not incomparable to that of the church in the Western world today.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, rather than considering cultural factors, this chapter will examine some of the better known attempts to recreate early Methodist groups in twenty-first century North America. These modern-day manifestations will be evaluated in light of the three characteristics which have been identified

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley, "Thoughts upon Methodism," §1, *Works* 9:527.

<sup>2</sup> The turn of the eighteenth century in the West was described as the time of "the Great Secularization" by Herbert Butterfield in "England in the Eighteenth Century," in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Vol. 1, ed. Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 5-6. See references to this "low ebb" of Protestant influence also in David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 13; Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 13-15, 31; Charles John Abbey and John H. Overton, *The English Church in the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1878), 1-40.

in this thesis as fundamental to the success of the original model: the common goal of holiness, a spirit of cooperating grace, and individual accountability. This study can contribute to current efforts to recreate Wesley's groups by identifying ways in which modern attempts often fail to faithfully recover the doctrine, spirit, and discipline of the early Methodist groups, by uncovering a key component that can be universally applied to recover group vitality, and by suggesting a balance of Wesley's three emphases that could invigorate disciple-making in small group ministry in the church today.

## ***7.1 Existing Small Groups in the Stream of Wesley***

### **7.1.1 Wesley Fellowship Groups (Christ Church, Ft. Lauderdale)**

At Christ United Methodist Church of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, Wesley Fellowship Groups are identified as the means by which "people grow in faith."<sup>3</sup> The groups, consisting of at least three participants, can be initiated by any member of the congregation and are officially described by Christ Church as having no "leader," though an assigned facilitator guides group discussion, a role which rotates among members. The beginning and ending of each meeting is an informal snack time designated for "catching up." The last half of the session is for "Bible or topical study including group discussion." The heart of the group discussion, however, lies in the first half of the meeting when group members respond to the question, "How are you doing this week?"<sup>4</sup> This is a derivation of Wesley's question for the members of the class meeting: "How does your soul prosper?"

Though the goal of the Wesley Fellowship Groups as stated by Christ Church leaders is

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<sup>3</sup> Christ Church, "Wesley Fellowship Group: Easy Startup" (Accessed November 29, 2015), <http://www.echristchurch.org/clientimages/42525/wesley%20groups%20easy%20startup%209.2014.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

to be sanctification,<sup>5</sup> their inherent purpose seems to be explicit in their name – they are “fellowship groups.” As such, there is a strong sense of cooperative interdependence as members interact with one another and discuss their daily lives. The expectation is that growth happens as members have fellowship with one another in an environment where God’s cooperative grace is acknowledged and experienced through the fellowship of the group.<sup>6</sup> Such would be consistent with a Wesleyan understanding of grace as experienced in the early Methodist classes and bands. However, beyond creating an atmosphere of cooperative interdependence, the groups fall short in terms of sharing a clear goal of holiness and holding one another accountable. Their link with Wesley appears to be primarily through their guiding question for discussion, a loose interpretation of the question asked by Wesley’s class leaders, and any specific emphasis on growth in holiness appears to be limited to an implicit expectation that members make progress consistent with the topic or biblical text being studied. No such expectation is specifically spelled out, however. Furthermore, though accountability is claimed to be one of the core values of the group,<sup>7</sup> there are no guiding rules or explicit expectations of group members by which they would hold one another accountable.

### **7.1.2 Kitchen Groups (Munger Place, Dallas)**

Munger Place, an extension campus of Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, calls their version of the Wesleyan class meeting the “Kitchen Group” in honor of the informal but dynamic group led by Susanna Wesley in the Epworth rectory kitchen when John

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<sup>5</sup> Joe Iovino, “How’s your spiritual life? The Class Meeting for today,” United Methodist Communications (Accessed December 4, 2015), <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/hows-your-spiritual-life-the-class-meeting-for-today>.

<sup>6</sup> Rev. Michael Zdorow, Christ Church Pastor of Connecting and Leadership Ministries: “They really do care for one another,” in Joe Iovino, “How’s your spiritual life? The Class Meeting for today.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Wesley was a boy. Like the Wesley Fellowship Groups, Kitchen Groups are organized around a single question: a slightly more soul-specific, “How is your life in God?”<sup>8</sup> Also similar to the Wesley Fellowship Groups, a significant portion of time in Kitchen Groups is devoted to Bible study. In contrast to the Wesley Fellowship Groups, however, this study time is first, and one could imagine a protracted study time prohibiting some Kitchen Groups from devoting proper attention to every group member in answering the important question regarding their spiritual well-being.

Following the model advocated by Kevin Watson, the Kitchen Group is supposed to be more experientially driven than the “information-driven” group which consists of a Bible study alone.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the focus in the Kitchen Group is on what is happening in the spiritual lives of the participants rather than on the material of a particular curriculum. This reimagined class meeting does not exist for purposes of accumulation of theological acumen but for the cultivation of proper discipleship in daily living. According to the Munger Place model, consistent with Kevin Watson’s prototype, a practice of regular examination in light of the question, “How is your life in God?” will have the cumulative effect, week after week, of propelling members further along the way of holiness. However, if David Lowes Watson and William Walter Dean are correct in their assessment of what led to the decline of the Methodist groups in the nineteenth century, one might reasonably wonder if a preoccupation with experience, apart from the outward acts and inward tempers consistent with holiness as reflected in the *General Rules*, is sufficient to build an effective small group discipleship model. So, once again, despite good

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<sup>8</sup> Munger Place Church, “Small Groups” (Accessed December 4, 2015), <http://www.mungerplace.org/grouplife/>.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 7-15, 116-117.

intentions, what may be missing in this interpretation of the class meeting is a clear understanding of the goal of holiness and an explicit method of accountability.

### **7.1.3 Covenant Discipleship Groups (Discipleship Ministries of the UMC)**

In Covenant Discipleship Groups, fellowship is built around a group covenant, which is a binding agreement among group members much like the *General Rules* of the early Methodist societies. The covenant becomes the focus of group meetings, and members are examined at each meeting in light of their observance (or lack thereof) of it.<sup>10</sup> Steve Manskar, director of Wesleyan Leadership at the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church, is in many respects the successor to David Lowes Watson in the advocacy of accountable discipleship as an instrument of renewal in the Wesleyan movement through the use of small groups. Manskar is explicit in stating that Covenant Discipleship Groups are not class meetings.<sup>11</sup> Rather, they are means of “re-traditioning” the class meeting for the present day, building upon principles that made class meetings effective and integrating those principles into ministry models that become instruments for promoting vital piety.

Covenant Discipleship Groups write their own covenants, usually consisting of eight to ten practices believed by group members to be consistent with holiness as defined by the great commandments of loving God and loving neighbor. These practices are broken into four categories which comprise the “General Rule of Discipleship” (a re-statement of Wesley’s

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<sup>10</sup> Gayle Turner Watson, *Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 38-47.

<sup>11</sup> Joe Iovino, “Covenant Discipleship: Changing Lives, Transforming Communities,” United Methodist Communications (Accessed December 4, 2015), <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/covenant-discipleship-changing-lives-transforming-communities>.

*General Rules*): acts of compassion, acts of justice, acts of worship, and acts of devotion.<sup>12</sup> Acts of worship and devotion are categorized under Wesley's heading "works of piety," and acts of justice and compassion are identified as "works of mercy." The strength of Covenant Discipleship Groups is their attention to individual accountability. Each week, every member is held accountable to specific acts consistent with the binding covenant to which they have all agreed, either at the group's formation or at their initiation. In this sense, the covenant does indeed function like the *General Rules* of the early class meetings. What might be missing in the Covenant Discipleship Groups, however, is an awareness of holiness as a journey toward a goal of perfection, a path which consists of specific stages as members live cooperatively into God's gracious work in their lives.

#### **7.1.4 Pulse Bands (Kingswood University, New Brunswick)**

Kingswood, a Wesleyan university in Sussex, New Brunswick, organizes their entire student body into groups of two to four called "Pulse Bands"<sup>13</sup> or "personal band accountability groups."<sup>14</sup> Inspired by the band meetings of Wesley, Pulse Bands are subdivisions of "Pulse Groups" of six to ten students led by a "Pulse Leader."<sup>15</sup> Pulse Groups are discussion-based groups that meet once a month, in contrast to the Pulse Bands that meet weekly and exist primarily for purposes of accountability. The Pulse Leader, usually a "fourth-year" student,

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<sup>12</sup>The General Rule of Discipleship: "To witness to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit," in David L. Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples: The Role of Covenant Discipleship and Class Leaders in the Congregation* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 8-11.

<sup>13</sup> Kingswood University, "Campus Life" (Accessed January 8, 2016), <http://www.kingswood.edu/campus-life/>.

<sup>14</sup> Kingswood University, *Kingswood University Student Handbook* (Accessed January 8, 2016), <http://www.kingswood.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Student-Handbook-2015-2016.pdf>, 2-4.

<sup>15</sup> Brent Dongell (Director of Student Ministries, Kingswood University), interview by the author, January 8, 2016.

provides oversight for the two or three Bands which typically make up an individual Pulse Group. The Bands are peer-on-peer meetings with no set leader, similar to the band meetings of early Methodism.

According to student ministry director Brent Dongell, Pulse Bands provide accountability in the lives of students in four specific areas: studying Scripture, fighting sin, sharing their faith, and praying together. Within their bands, students at Kingswood are expected to maintain and give a report of daily Bible readings, to confess known sins committed in the past week, to give attention through prayer and focused thought as to whether or not “there is anyone they need to be reaching out to” outside of the group meeting, and to pray together at the beginning and end of each meeting, a pattern consistent with the rule and practice of Wesley’s bands.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, Kingswood’s Pulse Bands give attention to works of piety in the reading of and reflection upon Scripture and to works of mercy in considering who could be the recipient of an act of compassion within the students’ sphere of influence. Though attention to works of piety and mercy was not a stated expectation for members of the early bands, it would have been an expectation for members of the society, which band members were an active part. According to Dongell, the Pulse Bands of Kingswood do not attempt to perfectly model the band meetings of Wesley.<sup>17</sup> Missing in the stated goal of the Pulse Bands is a clear articulation of what the holiness accomplished through the elimination of sin entails aside from a commitment to some of the means of grace.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.; see Wesley, *Rules of the Band Societies*, Works 9:77.

<sup>17</sup> Dongell, interview.

## **7.2 What's Missing?**

Since Howard Snyder invited Christians from both within and beyond the stream of Wesley to reconsider early Methodist methods of disciple-making for purposes of renewal in the church today, others have followed in his footsteps, including those listed above who have advocated or instituted a particular form of small group ministry reflecting to some degree the terminology or methodology of Wesley.

The approach of Kevin Watson, reflected in the Kitchen Groups of Munger Place and the Wesley Fellowship Groups of Christ Church, emphasizes the importance of a cooperative experience of grace; group members are invited to share about their daily experiences in an atmosphere of openness in the presence of fellow believers in Christ. The focus is on the well-being of the individual soul, and fellow group members are present to facilitate transparency in group discussions and to offer encouragement. This is manifest in the groups' recreation of Wesley's question to guide examination: "How does your soul prosper?" In their pursuit of the well-being of the soul through individuals speaking to fellow group members with similar priorities, the reimagined class meetings of Munger Place and Christ Church reflect the *spirit* of Wesley's groups. Grace is counted upon to be at work in and through the group gathering, and the facilitated conversation provides opportunity to experience the cooperative activity of God as members share deep Christian fellowship.

In the stream of David Lowes Watson, on the other hand, Steve Manskar emphasizes the necessity of structured accountability in Covenant Discipleship Groups. Group members are guided by the group covenant which, much like the *General Rules*, forms the central thrust of the group meeting. Members find the grace of God at work in their midst as they are attentive to the mutual covenant that binds them together. Similarly, the Pulse Bands of Kingswood

University emphasize spiritual formation through peer-led accountability to specific components of the life of discipleship. In this respect, Covenant Discipleship Groups and Pulse Bands reflect the *discipline* of Wesley's groups through their pervasive attention to accountability. Members agree to come under the authority of the covenant and consent to live lives consistent with a pattern of holiness. In the Covenant Discipleship Groups, this pattern is found in the General Rule of Discipleship through specific acts of justice, compassion, devotion, and worship. In the Pulse Bands, it is manifest in the university's expectations for students in regard to works of piety and mercy.

For the Covenant Discipleship Groups and Pulse Bands, the commitment to holiness is implicit through the agreement of group members to abide by a common covenant, or to acts of devotion, compassion, and the confession of sin. For the Wesley Fellowship Groups and Kitchen Groups, the pursuit of holiness is facilitated through a time of biblical or topical study. What is missing from both sets of groups is a robust declaration of why the life of holiness is worth pursuing. This was clear for Wesley – he had come to an awareness that holiness was the fundamental purpose of the Methodist movement, reflecting his understanding of holiness as the telos of the Christian life and of all religion. According to Kurt Lewin, the common goal is the premier characteristic of a group, for it is from a goal that interdependence, the defining relational dynamic of group members, springs. For Methodists, the goal was holiness, specifically expressed through the doctrine of Christian perfection. Perfect love was what the Methodists sought; holy love defined by both the appropriate inward tempers of a sanctified heart and the outward works of a pious life. A rediscovery of the value and necessity of holiness, accompanied by the recovery of a robust consensus of what holiness of heart and life looks like would appear to be the most critical component of reclaiming the vitality of the early Methodist

groups. Based on existing attempts at their restoration, this component may be the most frequently overlooked characteristic of Wesley's groups.

### ***7.3 Recovering the Goal***

Wesley's appeal to prospective Methodists – to those on the outside of his movement – was an urgent one. They were implored to “flee the wrath to come.” A similar appeal in the present day would likely be as jarring to our ears as it was to those who heard it from Wesley in the eighteenth century. Those who took up the journey of holiness did so, at least at first, out of a desire to escape impending disaster. It was the common desire to flee the wrath of God that initially bound Methodists-in-training together. While corporate, societal ungodliness was certainly an issue that Wesley addressed in his preaching and correspondence, it was individual sin that those who first heard Wesley's appeal would have been stirred to correct by entering the societies. They were not motivated to “change the world” as much as they desired to avoid judgment. Those who chose to take up this quest eventually became aware that God was present in their midst, assisting them in this urgent exodus through grace. An experience of justification assured them that their sins had been taken away and that a new life had begun based on the merits of Christ. The possibilities of perfect love took root in their hearts and eventually became a stronger motivator for them than fear alone.

The initial awareness and fear of impending wrath because of individual sin, however, was a critical component in establishing a yearning for holiness early in this process. The pilgrims of Wesley's movement understood that they were journeying from a place of darkness to a place of light and that there were serious consequences to remaining in the place of darkness. By taking up the quest of holiness through participation in the societies with its classes and

bands, they were aspiring to leave a state of judgment in order to enter a state of acceptance in the sight of God, at least initially. Even after they had received justifying grace, the dangers of falling away were still apparent, with consequences no less severe, so the motivating hope for perfect love would have been similarly palpable. Methodists were not only implored to escape divine wrath; they were “earnestly striving after” Christian perfection.<sup>18</sup> They not only believed perfect love was possible in this life; they believed it was possible for them.

Whether or not the recovery of such an urgency among holiness pilgrims in the twenty-first century to escape “the wrath to come,” or to reach that place Wesley described as “entire sanctification” is consistent with good theology is beyond the scope of this thesis. What is clear, however, is that the sense of dread associated with falling away as well as the hope of the possibility of full salvation contributed mightily to the vitality of the early Methodist groups. It was this urgency to avoid wrath and to attain full salvation that motivated members to participate in small groups so that they might make progress on this necessary journey. It would seem that groups which have recovered this sense of urgency – and are therefore most focused on the goal – would be most likely to recover the vitality of the groups of early Methodism.

For any pursuit, it is a worthy task to establish at the outset the goal and reason for the undertaking. Why is the journey necessary? What will its accomplishment entail? What are the consequences of a failure to take the quest seriously? What are the potential benefits of its realization? The cooperative spirit of the Wesley Fellowship and Kitchen Groups and the discipline of the Covenant Discipleship Groups and Pulse Bands would lack the power to

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<sup>18</sup> This is the language of the fourth ordination question in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), ¶1336.4. The original question at the admittance of the Methodist preachers in America was, “Are you *groaning after* [perfection]?” (emphasis mine) in Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church in America: with Explanatory Notes*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss, 1798), §VIII, 60.

motivate members in a specific, commonly held direction without consensus in terms of answering these questions. These structures could be similar in form in various respects to Wesley's groups, but, without clarity in respect to their motivating aim, they lack the single-mindedness which stirred Wesley and the early Methodist preachers to birth a movement. In the Wesleyan understanding of holiness, sanctified living follows a renewed heart. In fact, in the eighteenth century, the gradual decline of the Methodist groups coincided with a loss of "heart" in which the new telos became the perpetuation of the forms themselves aside from their original purpose. If recovering a proper understanding of the significance of holiness could renew the heart of what the Methodist groups were all about, then, consistent with the Wesleyan understanding of holiness, a similar revitalization of the "life," or structural components of the groups would naturally occur.

#### ***7.4 Holiness, Grace, and Accountability***

Perhaps a return to the universal value of holiness, including common agreement about the content of holiness, would reestablish the interdependence so necessary in the communal structures of Wesley's modern-day spiritual descendants. A commitment to a common goal – a goal which is clear and attainable – would rally members to its accomplishment in the cooperative setting of the small group, particularly as self-denial is one of the defining characteristics of the goal. The facilitation of obedience rather than self-promotion or institutional growth would become the universal priority binding group members together, and because rules that cannot be universally agreed upon and submitted to lose their binding authority, those rules would reflect a universal, objective standard for holiness – a standard Wesley found in the pages of Scripture. The more precious the prize in the eyes of its seekers,

the more tenacious sojourners would be in pursuing its accomplishment. The more respect that exists for the established standard, the stronger the covenant relationship binding group members together will be.

One can envision the development of present-day small groups in which members are able to share their experiences and discuss the well-being of their souls (as in the Kitchen and Wesley Fellowship Groups) while also being held accountable to an agreed-upon standard for behavior (as in the Covenant Discipleship Groups and the Pulse Bands). Once an agreed-upon objective standard of holiness is established for these yet-to-be developed groups, different levels (similar to Wesley's tiered scheme of classes, bands, and select societies) could provide deepening levels of accountability for members as they make further progress in their journey of holiness. At every level, members would be committed to the foundational principles forming the basis of holiness: in Wesleyan terms, "fleeing the wrath to come" and "earnestly striving after" perfection in love.

In the emerging digital age, community life is experienced differently than in previous generations. Fewer people are participating in the traditional institutions of Western life,<sup>19</sup> and relationships are more frequently based on informal networks including networks that span large spatial distances. Even in this time of cultural change, however, the call to follow in the way of Jesus still requires formation through intentional face-to-face interaction in community. The Methodists in Wesley's day adapted to their era of rapid change through attentiveness to the simple, time-tested method of meeting together in small groups. Technology will continue to provide new frontiers of human interaction in coming decades, but, regardless of the cultural

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<sup>19</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

and technological context, three principles will be foundational to the facilitation of healthy small groups that form persons after the image of Jesus. Those principles include: a clear direction of movement toward a goal, the cooperative assistance of God and fellow pilgrims for the journey, and an atmosphere of loving accountability so that none would stray from the path.

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## **Biography**

Matthew Alan “Matt” Mobley is an ordained elder in the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church. A native of Abbeville, Alabama, Matt has served churches in the Dothan, Prattville, and Wetumpka areas of Alabama since 2000. Matt is a graduate of Auburn University and Asbury Theological Seminary, and is a licensed Professional Engineer in the states of Alabama and Georgia. Matt is married to the former Mary Bell “Molly” Scott. They have one son, Matthew David.