

Wesley's Method for Spiritual Formation

In our pluralistic society, as well as in many circles of the church, religion is viewed as a purely private matter. Believe and practice what you will, just keep it to yourself! This is contrary to what Scripture teaches: “Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:16-17).

Such privatizing of Christianity runs counter to Wesleyan faith and practice. “Christianity is essentially a social religion,” John Wesley

In time, it was decided that each class would meet together weekly rather than be visited individually by the leader. This class meeting became the point of entry into the Society. “Any person determined to save his own soul,” Wesley explained, “may be united with them. But their desire must be evidenced by three marks: avoiding all known sin, doing good after his power, and attending all the ordinances of God.”⁴ In these classes many “happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. . . . They began to ‘bear one another’s burdens,’ and ‘naturally to ‘care for each other.’ As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other.

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preached, “and to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.”¹ Shortly after the beginning of his revival ministry in 1738, Wesley formed religious “societies” for the spiritual formation of those who had been awakened and converted during his ministry.

Societies

New converts, finding themselves in a hostile spiritual environment, sought out Wesley’s advice. He suggested they meet together to find strength in mutual conversation and prayer. It was not long, however, before they requested that Wesley himself talk and pray with them. Shortly thereafter, he began Thursday evening meetings with them in a group he called a “society.” Their stated purpose was “to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love that they might help each other work out their salvation.”² Within a brief time, however, the phenomenal growth of the societies made necessary what came to be called “class meetings.”

Class Meetings

The class meeting emerged during a discussion in 1742 on how to clear the debt on the New Room at Bristol. It was decided to divide the society of more than 1,000 members into classes of 12. Each week, a leader would visit the class members to collect a penny from each. Those too poor to pay anything were provided for by the other members. The leaders were chosen to collect contributions but also to “watch over the souls of their brethren.”³

And ‘speaking the truth in love, they grew up into him in all things.’⁵ As important as these classes were, spiritually-earnest seekers felt the need for a more intimate fellowship where they could unburden themselves to each other in their quest for the new birth and growth in holiness. Out of this kind of need came “bands” designed to bring about the above ends.

Bands

In these small groups of six or eight, in which the men met separately from the women, the leader “was to speak his (or her) own state first, and then ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be,” such as:

- Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
- Have you the witness of God’s Spirit with your spirit?
- Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
- Do you desire to be told of all your faults?
- Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?⁶

In the bands, the three General Rules involved a more demanding discipline. Members were to “carefully” avoid evil, “zealously” do good works, and “constantly” observe the ordinances of God.⁷

The Select Society

Those who progressed in the Christian life beyond the average

band members were gathered by Wesley into a “select society.” His design was “not only to direct them how to press after perfection” and “to incite them to love one another more, and to watch more carefully over each other,” but also for Wesley to have a group in which he might talk freely about himself “on all occasions, without reserve.” Because they had “the best rule of all in their hearts” (the rule of love), Wesley gave them only three directions: “First, let nothing spoken in this society be spoken again. (Hereby we had the more full confidence in each other.) Secondly, every member agrees to submit to his Minister in all indifferent things. Thirdly, every member will bring once a week all he can spare toward a common stock.”⁸

In all these groups, disciplined living was the fruit of desire for salvation, and desire was the fruit of faith: namely, to grow in love for God and neighbor. The rules of discipline were means of grace through which God continually enabled and invited a mutual divine-human relationship of love.⁹

Concluding Thoughts

Although “societies,” “class meetings,” “bands,” and “select societies” arose in a specific setting in early Methodism, and therefore cannot be precisely duplicated in the church today, they speak eloquently and powerfully to the truth that Christianity is essentially social or communal. “We really do need each other,” as Reuben Welch, an evangelist in the Church of the Nazarene, has often stated, agreeing with Wesley, who wrote: “When I say (Christianity) is

essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all, without society—without living and conversing with other men.”¹⁰ When will we really learn, and institute in our fellowships, what Wesley’s insight means for the church today? No question is more important, especially for churches that claim to espouse “holiness of heart and life”!

WILLIAM M. GREATHOUSE had a long career of service in the Church of the Nazarene, including general superintendent, professor of theology, and a writer of several books on Wesleyan theology. This article was originally published in the Summer 2002 issue of *Illustrated Bible Life*.

1. John Wesley, “Sermon on the Mount,” Discourse 24, *The Works of John Wesley* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1978), 5:296.

2. Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ, and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1992), 97.

3. David Lowes Watson, “Methodist Spirituality,” *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader*, Kenneth J. Collins, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 182-84.

4. Knight, 98.

5. *Ibid.*, 99.

6. Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 180-81.

7. Knight, 101.

8. *Ibid.*, 102.

9. *Ibid.*, 101.

10. Wesley, 5:296.