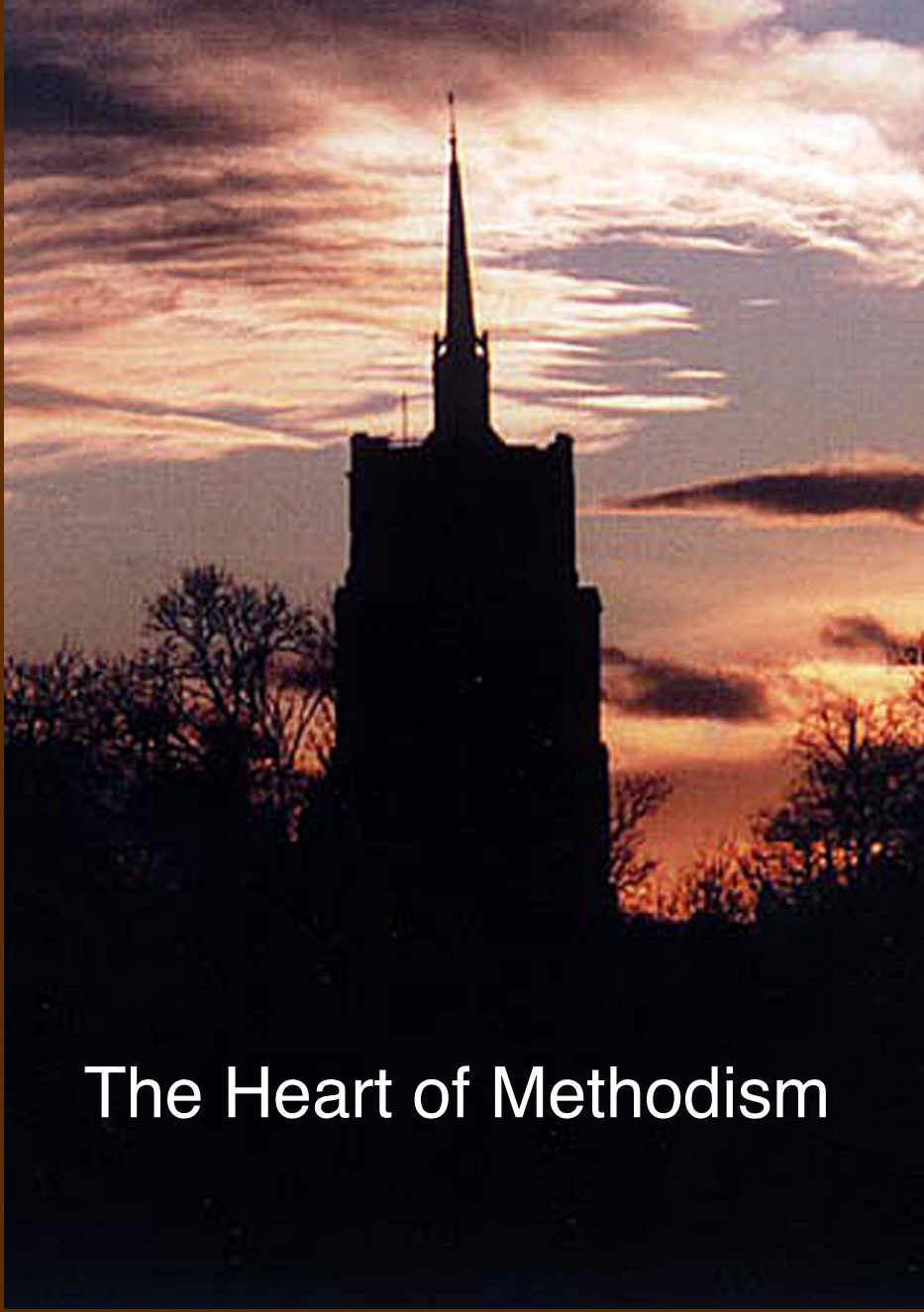
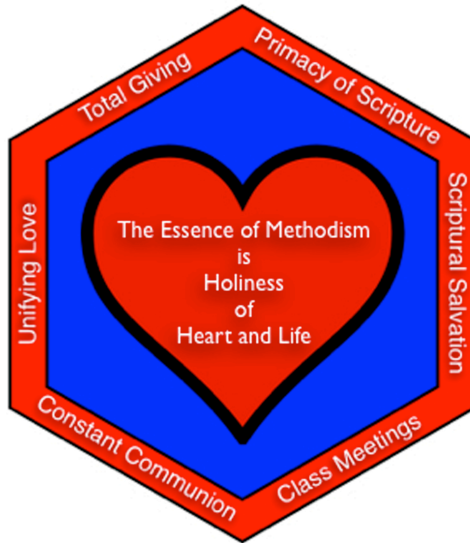


Jim Reuteler, Ph.D. The Heart of Methodism



The Heart of Methodism

Holiness of Heart and Life



For as long as love takes up
the whole heart,
what room is there for sin therein?
John Wesley

THE HEART OF METHODISM

Holiness of Heart & Life

by

Jim Reuteler, Ph.D.
Covenant Bible Studies
Aurora, Colorado
2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	5
INTRODUCTION	7
THE HEART OF METHODISM	9
1. PRIMACY OF SCRIPTURE	9
A Man of One Book	9
The Wesleyan Quadrilateral	11
Plain Truth for Plain People	12
Teaching the Bible	13
Preaching from the Bible	15
Modern Bible Study	17
Studying the Bible	19
2. SCRIPTURAL SALVATION	21
The Staring Point	21
Salvation	22
Grace	28
Seeking Grace	29
Justifying Grace	30
Sanctifying Grace	34
Conclusions	37
On the Porch	37
Through the Door	40
Entering All the Rooms	43
3. CLASS MEETINGS	47
A Brief Historical Sketch	48
The Religious Societies	48
The Holy Club	49
The United Societies	51
The Voluntary Band Meetings	52
The Required Class Meetings	54
A Modern Approach	57
Covenant Discipleship Groups	58
The New General Rule	60
The Meetings	66
Class Leaders	68

4.	CONSTANT COMMUNION	71
	The Lord’s Supper is a Means of Grace	71
	The Recipients	72
	The Frequency	77
	The Objections	79
	Beliefs about the Lord’s Supper	83
	Who can administer the Lord’s Supper?	87
	Word and Sacrament Today	89
5.	UNIFYING LOVE	95
	The Catholic Spirit	95
	Opinions	98
	Worship	98
	Theology	99
	Original Sin	100
	Love	102
	The Smaller Points	103
	Give Me Thy Hand	104
	What the Catholic Spirit is Not	105
	What the Catholic Spirit is	106
	Unity	106
	Practical Unity	110
6.	TOTAL GIVING	117
	Three Plain Rules	118
	Gain All You Can	118
	Save All You Can	120
	Give All You Can	121
	The Problem of Wealth	123
	Wesley’s Example	126
	Can We incorporate these Principles?	127
	A Modern Miracle	128
	Can the Miracle be Reproduced?	131
	THE CONCLUSION	135
	IMPORTANT DATES	139
	OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR	147

PREFACE

What follows is an attempt to get at the heart of Methodism as understood by John Wesley. In order to do this I will use original sources, primarily Wesley's Journal, including his sermons and his articles. I will not limit myself to original sources, but they will makeup my primary sources.

My purpose is to identify the primary principles found in the heart of Methodism. I have chosen what I consider to be the six most important principles in Methodism, which are:

1. Primacy of Scripture
2. Scriptural Salvation
3. Class Meetings
4. Constant Communion
5. Unifying Love
6. Total Giving

I will begin by defining each one of these principles. Occasionally I will repeat a quote from Wesley. I will do this intentionally because the quote applies to more than one of the six principles. After I define the principles, I will evaluate and try to illustrate how each one of these principles could be relevant in the church today.

Some may wonder why I did not include Methodism's Episcopal form of church government to be unique. My answer is simple. Wesley never wanted bishops, and most of the churches that have grown out of the Wesleyan movement did not adopt the Episcopal form of church government. They do not have bishops.

Methodism used to be a *high commitment* Christian renewal movement, but in becoming a church, it has become a *low commitment* Christian institution. Restoring these six principles should change that. Will it cause Methodism to grow numerically? Probably not, but statistics were never an important concern of Methodism when it was a renewal movement.

INTRODUCTION

Methodism

John Wesley's greatest desire was to renew the Anglican Church. The method he stumbled across was called Methodism. Other terms were used to describe his method, such as Bible Moths, Enthusiasts, and Sacramentalists, but *Methodists* was the term that stuck. Wesley never liked the term, but he came to terms with it and defined it in *The Character of a Methodist*. Toward the end of his life, Wesley wrote eleven thoughts on Methodism.¹ Methodism was at its height, but Wesley feared that his success was only an illusion. The first paragraph of his *Thoughts on Methodism* expresses his fears.

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 undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.

Have Wesley's fears come true? Albert Outler, a well recognized Wesleyan scholar, wrote in his *Preface on John Wesley*: "His [Wesley's] theological essays have, for the most part, gone unread by the generality of 'the people called Methodists,' who are more inclined to honor Wesley as their founder than as their mentor."²

I'm afraid that what Wesley feared has happened, and Outler has simply pointed to some of the evidence of the demise. As a church Methodism stands in need of the very renewal it sought to apply to the Anglican Church. "The essence of [Methodism]." wrote Wesley, "is holiness of heart and life; the circumstantial all point to this. And as long as they are joined together in the people called Methodists, no weapon formed against them shall prosper. But if ever the essential parts should evaporate, what remains will be dung and dross."³ The *heart* that's needed just isn't there, and as long as it's not there, Methodism will cease to be a dynamic force in the world, particularly as a church.

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 13* (Third Edition) (258). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), page iii.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 13* (Third Edition) (260). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Perhaps that's not so bad. John and Charles Wesley never intended for Methodism to become a church. John Wesley once said, "I fear, when the Methodists leave the church, God will leave them. But if they are thrust out of it, they will be guiltless."¹ Perhaps, if Methodism were not a church, it could have more of an effect on all of the other churches. After all Methodism was never intended to be a church. When Wesley was accused of proselytizing, he replied:

Our societies were formed from those who were wandering upon the dark mountains, that belonged to no Christian Church; but were awakened by the preaching of the Methodists, who had pursued them through the wilderness of this world to the Highways and the Hedges—to the Markets and the Fairs—to the Hills and the Dales—who set up the Standard of the Cross in the Streets and Lanes of the Cities, in the Villages, in the Barns, and Farmers' Kitchens, etc.—and all this done in such a way, and to such an extent, as never had been done before since the Apostolic Age.²

Wesley wasn't interested in starting a church. He was attempting to help the church to be the church. That would be a good role for Methodism to play today.

I believe that Wesley, like the Apostle Paul, was always theologizing and evangelizing. These were the two functions of his chief endeavor: "the effectual communication of the Gospel."³ Methodism has something vital, which it can offer to the whole church; but as a church, it will not be able to offer what it has rejected. The whole church needs what Wesley contributed in both his practical theologizing and his effective evangelizing. My purpose in this book is to identify what made Wesley so effective in communicating the Gospel, hoping that Methodist churches, as well as all the other churches, will put those Christian principles into practice.

I have no interest in writing a biography of the Wesley brothers. Many biographies have been written. My intent is to discover how Wesley was trying to renew the church in his time and ask whether these principles are still applicable today. I'm after the very heart of Methodism, which I think has the power to transform the world.

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (319). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² William Barclay. (2001). *The Gospel of Luke*. The New Daily Study Bible (67–68). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

³ Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. iii.

1. PRIMACY OF SCRIPTURE

*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching,
for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,
so that everyone who belongs to God
may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

2 Timothy 3:16-17

*I began to be homo unius libri,
to study (comparatively) no book but the Bible.*

John Wesley

A Man of One Book

The Bible was Wesley's first principle in his theologizing and evangelizing. This was true from the beginning to the end of his ministry. He was a man of one book, although, he read voraciously many other books. Here is how he described himself:

From the very beginning, from the time that four young men united together, each of them was *homo unius libri*—a man of one book. God taught them all to make his “Word a lantern unto their feet, and a light in all their paths.” They had one, and only one rule of judgment with regard to all their tempers, words, and actions, namely, the oracles of God. They were one and all determined to be *Bible-Christians*. They were continually reproached for this very thing; some terming them in derision *Bible-bigots*; others, *Bible-moths*—feeding, they said, upon the Bible as moths do upon cloth. And indeed unto this day it is their constant endeavour to think and speak as the oracles of God.¹

In 1730 I began to be *homo unius libri*, to study (comparatively) no book but the Bible. I then saw in a stronger light than ever before that only “one thing is needful” [cf. Lk. 10:42] even “faith that worketh by that love [Gal. 5:6] of God and man, all inward and outward holiness. And I groaned to love God with “all my heart,” and to serve him with “all my strength.”²

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition., p. 203). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1909–1916). *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8*. (N. Curnock, Ed.) (Vol. 5, p. 117). London: Robert Culley.

“Here then I am,” continued Wesley, “far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.”¹ Wesley didn’t mind being called a Bible Moth or a Bible Bigot. The Bible was truly Wesley’s second language.

His rhetoric throughout is a tissue woven from the Biblical texts and paraphrases and his own crisp Augustan prose (“plain truth for plain people”). His appeal to Scripture goes far deeper than the use of texts in support of his own views. His larger concern was to let each part of Scripture be pondered in the light of the whole, obscure texts in the light of the more lucid ones—and all of them, always, in the spirit of prayer....²

The Bible, for Wesley, consisted of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The Apocrypha could be used for edification, but not for sermon texts. Scripture was not merely God’s address to the believer. It was inspired by the Holy Spirit who in turn inspired the believer’s understanding. The Bible was to be read literally, except when such a reading led to absurdity. Scriptural commands were not to be construed legalistically; they were to be seen also as promises.³

Although Wesley was willing to be called a Bible Bigot, he was no bigot in the contemporary use of the term. He was no literalist. He knew that the Bible needed interpreting, and he looked to the Eastern theologians as well as the Western theologians for help. Although Wesley accepted the Orthodox Creeds, he emphasized the essentials of Methodism, as original sin, justification by grace through faith, and holiness of heart and life.

Wesley was no literalist when it came to interpreting Scripture. The Great Commandment to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind and strength lay at the heart of Scripture, and next to it was the love of one’s neighbor, even one’s enemy, and even the enemies of God. We are to love others as Christ has loved us.⁴

¹ Luke Tyerman. (1870). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 1* (531–532). London: Hodder and Stoughton

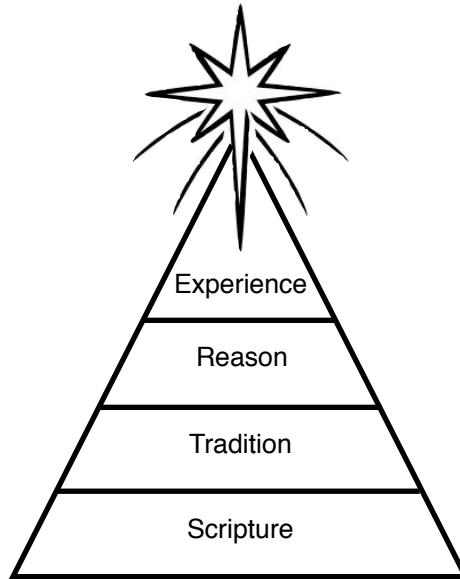
² Albert Outler, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*.

³ Scott J. Jones, “John Wesley on the use of Scripture,” *Circuit Rider*, January/February, 1999, p. 16.

⁴ The Great Commandment in Mark 12:29-31 and John 13:34-35.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

So far there is nothing new. The New Testament church believed all this, and so do most Christian churches of most Denominations. The difficulty lies in putting these principles into practice. Before we can deal with putting faith into practice, we must say something about what has come to be called the Wesley Quadrilateral. I've designed a graphic of the Quadrilateral, which follows:



Albert Outler, one of our best known Wesleyan and Methodist scholars, reminds us that Wesley never used the term Quadrilateral, but he did talk about the four components of the Quadrilateral. They may be summarized as follows:

- **Scripture:** Our authority, fundamental and decisive.
- **Tradition:** The collective wisdom of the church in interpreting Scripture.
- **Reason:** The critical discipline used in judging all interpretation.
- **Experience:** To the person what tradition is to the whole.

“Tradition, reason, experience,” Outler concludes, “are ways of understanding and interpreting Scripture. But Scripture is central...” The Quadrilateral does not appear in any of Wesley’s works. Outler coined the term and at times has regretted introducing it, since it has been so widely misconstrued.

This complex method, with its fourfold reference, is a good deal more sophisticated than it appears, and could be more fruitful for contemporary theologizing than has yet been realized. It preserves

the primacy of Scripture, it profits from the wisdom of tradition, it accepts the disciplines of critical reason, and its stress on the Christian experience of grace gives it existential force.¹

The foundation is Sacred Scripture and the goal is the Evangelistic spirit. Both benefit from the Wisdom of Tradition and the discipline of Critical Reason.

Plain Truth for Plain People

Even though Wesley never used the term “Quadrilateral,” he did apply the four parts of the Quadrilateral, always emphasizing the primacy of Scripture. He avoided the complexity of the Quadrilateral by speaking the plain truth for plain people.

I design plain truth for plain people: Therefore, of set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scripture. I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and, in particular, those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in Bodies of Divinity; those modes of speaking which men of reading are intimately acquainted with, but which to common people are an unknown tongue. Yet I am not assured, that I do not sometimes slide into them unawares: It is so extremely natural to imagine, that a word which is familiar to ourselves is so to all the world.

Nay, my design is, in some sense, to forget all that ever I have read in my life. I mean to speak, in the general, as if I had never read one author, ancient or modern (always excepting the inspired).²

Notice the single exception: always excepting the *inspired*. The only reference he will quote is *the original Scriptures*. This is good advice to those of us who preach every Sunday and teach during the week. Wesley continues, giving his reasons why:

I am persuaded, that, on the one hand, this may be a means of enabling me more clearly to express the sentiments of my heart, while I simply follow the chain of my own thoughts, without entangling myself with those of other men; and that, on the other, I

¹ Albet Outler, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*..

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition., p. 2). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

shall come with fewer weights upon my mind, with less of prejudice and prepossession, either to search for myself, or to deliver to others, the naked truths of the gospel.¹

Teaching the Bible

Wesley studied theology at Oxford, but that's not the only reason why he was Biblically literate. Although he didn't start the Holy Club at Oxford, he joined it and eventually became its leader.² Part of what that small group did was to study the Scriptures. That's why they were called Bible Moths. They were also called Sacramentalists because they observed the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Because they were methodical in all that they did, they were called Methodists, the description of them that stuck. They called themselves people of one book, even though they were voracious readers of other books. The language of the Bible became their second language. Wesley wanted the Methodists to be Biblically literate.

"For many years," wrote Wesley, "I have had a desire of setting down and laying together, what has occurred to my mind, either in reading, thinking, of conversation, which might assist serious persons, who have not the advantage of learning, in understanding the New Testament."³ He didn't start this task until he was approximately fifty years old. He was just too busy preaching, organizing, and traveling, but he knew this was an important task. When he finally began the project, he wrote, "I determined to delay it as long as possible, that (if it should please God) I might finish my work and my life together."

Wesley's project was to work through the entire text of the Bible and to explain its meaning in plain words for plain people. "It will be easily discerned, even from what I have said already, and much from the notes themselves, that they were not principally designed for men of learning; who are provided with many other helps...." "But I write chiefly for plain unlettered men, who understand only their mother tongue, and yet reverence and love the word of God, and have a desire to save their souls."⁴

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition., p. 2). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² Charles Wesley started the Holy Club.

³ John Wesley. (1818). *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (Fourth American Edition) (3). New York: J. Soule and T. Mason.

⁴ John Wesley. (1818). *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (Fourth American Edition) (3). New York: J. Soule and T. Mason.

To accomplish this task, Wesley set down a readable text and simple notes to explain the text. In describing his intention, he wrote, “In order to assist these in such a measure as I am able, I design first to set down the text itself, for the most part, in the common English translation, which is, in general, (so far as I can judge) abundantly the best that I have seen.” Wesley was not afraid to make a few changes in order to make the text more comprehensible to common readers. In defense of making those changes, he said, “Some will probably think, the text is altered too much; and others, that it is altered too little.”¹ Wesley concludes by saying that he never altered anything for altering sake.

In addition to laying down a readable text, Wesley also endeavored to make his notes readable. “I have endeavoured,” he said, “to make the notes as short as possible that the comment may not obscure or swallow up the text: and as plain as possible, in pursuance of my main design, to assist the unlearned reader.”² He purposely declined to go too deep, fearing that he would lose the reader in material that didn’t matter that much. Wesley’s notes cover the entire Bible, both the Old and New Testaments.

The Scripture therefore of the Old and New Testament, is a most solid and precious system of Divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste, prefer to all writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy.³

Methodism has always and still does give priority to Scripture over Tradition, Reason, and Experience. The official statement on Scripture is found in Article V of *The Articles of Religion*. A couple of sentences out of the fifth Article should help to clarify the position.

The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

¹ John Wesley, J. (1818). *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (Fourth American Edition) (3–4). New York: J. Soule and T. Mason.

² John Wesley. (1818). *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (Fourth American Edition) (4). New York: J. Soule and T. Mason.

³ John Wesley. (1818). *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (Fourth American Edition) (5). New York: J. Soule and T. Mason.

The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and Man.

Although the law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites doth not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, **no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.**¹

Preaching from the Bible

In addition to teaching the Bible, Wesley preached from the Bible and encouraged his lay preachers to do the same. It may surprise us to discover that Wesley opposed what were called Gospel preachers. Gospel preachers were those who preached only the Gospel and ignored the Law. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” Wesley agreed and said, “Faith, then, was originally designed of God to re-establish the law of love.”²

If both the Law and Gospel must be preached, it is important to first define what these two terms mean. Wesley defined each one as follows:

By *preaching the law*, I mean, explaining and enforcing the commands of Christ, briefly comprised in the Sermon on the Mount.³

I mean by *preaching the gospel*, preaching the love of God to sinners, preaching the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ, with all the blessings which, in consequence thereof, are freely given to true believers.⁴

What bothered Wesley was the practice of some to preach only the Law and of others who preached only the Gospel. Wesley had more difficulty with those who only wanted to preach the Gospel. Wesley believed in

¹ *Articles of Religion*, “Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation,” V.
The boldfacing is my own.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition., p. 464). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 11* (Third Edition., p. 486). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 11* (Third Edition., p. 486). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

preaching both the Law and the Gospel. Both Law and Gospel should be mixed in every sermon.

If both Law and Gospel are to be mixed, how is that to be done? Wesley's answer was to proceed with the Law and then bring the Gospel in as needed.

I think, the right method of preaching is this: At our first beginning to preach at any place, after a general declaration of the love of God to sinners, and his willingness that they should be saved, to preach the law, in the strongest, the closest, the most searching manner possible; only intermixing the gospel here and there, and showing it, as it were, afar off.¹

After more and more persons are convinced of sin, we may mix more and more of the gospel, in order to "beget faith," to raise into spiritual life those whom the law hath slain; but this is not to be done too hastily neither.²

Is there never a time to only preach the Gospel? Wesley's answer is clear. One can preach the Gospel alone only "in private converse with a thoroughly convinced sinner."³

Wesley shares an example of the ineffectiveness of Gospel preaching and the effectiveness of preaching both Law and Gospel. He visited the societies in the north of England, where the preachers styled themselves as "gospel preachers." When Wesley reviewed the societies, he found most of them lessened by one-third and one entirely broken up. In Newcastle itself, the societies had lost more than one hundred members, and those that remained, were cold, weary, heartless and dead. Such were the effects of "gospel preaching." In contrast, when Wesley examined the Societies in Yorkshire, who were under the care of John Nelson, who preached both the Law and Gospel, he found that the societies had increased in number from eighteen or nineteen hundred to upwards of three thousand. Wesley explains the difference that preaching both Law and Gospel makes:

From the beginning they had been taught both the law and the gospel. "God loves you; therefore, love and obey him. Christ died for you; therefore, die to sin. Christ is risen; therefore, rise in the

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 11* (Third Edition., pp. 486–487). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 11* (Third Edition., p. 487). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 11* (Third Edition., p. 487). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

image of God. Christ liveth evermore; therefore, live to God, till you live with him in glory.”

So we preached; and so you believed. This is the scriptural way, the Methodist way, the true way. God grant we may never turn therefrom, to the right hand or to the left!¹

Modern Bible Study

Modern Methodism does accept the primacy of Scripture in principle, but is the whole Bible taught? I attended a Methodist College, Seminary and Graduate School. Prior to receiving my Ph.D. I taught in a Methodist Seminary. It wasn't until I was appointed as a pastor in a Methodist Church, that I realized that I was Biblically illiterate. How could that be? I had studied about the Bible, but I had not even read the entire text, much less studied it. in any kind of depth. I knew a lot about the Bible, but the text was not my second language.

I decided to do something about my Biblical illiteracy. Recognizing that I needed help, I began to investigate the various Bible Studies that were available, such as Bethel, Trinity, and Logos [Kerygma]. Disciple had not yet been published. None of them satisfied me.² I finally decided to study the Bible from cover to cover, and to do this, I set aside an hour every morning in my office. It wasn't very long before I concluded that this wasn't working. Besides, it was boring.

That's when I confessed my Biblical illiteracy on a Sunday morning to the congregation I was serving. What would they think of me? I have a Ph.D. and I'm Biblically illiterate. Would they no longer want me as their pastor? Not knowing what to expect, I asked for help. I invited all the other Biblical illiterates to join me at 6:00 p.m. on Sunday evening. They were to bring only their Bibles. I didn't know what to expect, but about a dozen people showed up. We decided to start with Genesis and move through the Bible, ending with Revelation. We studied about eight to ten chapters each week. We divided the Biblical material up and began each session by summarizing what we had read. That took about thirty minutes. We spent the next thirty minutes asking and answering questions about what we had read and summarized. I didn't have all the answers, and frequently, other members of the group answered some of the questions ahead of me. When we had no more questions, we began to discuss the relevancy of what we read. After a few weeks, a method of Studying the Bible emerged.

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 11* (Third Edition., p. 492). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² Having led some of the Disciple Courses, I would say the same about it.

Summarize: Summarize the Text. (30 Minutes)

Question: Ask questions about the Text. (30 Minutes)

Apply: Apply the Text to modern life. (30 Minutes)

Witness: Witness through living the insights in the world.

We didn't always spend thirty minutes on each of the three parts, but at times we were close. Since I did know a lot about the Bible, I did attempt to answer most of the questions. People began to ask me where I was getting my answers. They couldn't see those answers in the text. I told them that I got most of my information in college, seminary, and graduate school. They asked me to write my comments out and pass them out ahead of time. I was a little hesitant to do this, but after thinking about it, I decided to make my own notes on the Bible, and pass them out one week ahead of time. Many of the participants indicated that they found the notes useful in preparing their own summaries each week. This began to enrich our questions and answer time, permitting us to put more time into discussing the application of our Bible Study to modern life. It also put me on Wesley's path of writing my own commentary on the entire Bible in plain words, including such books as Leviticus and Numbers.

As we proceeded through the Bible, we found it important to make everyone feel safe and unafraid to ask questions. We did this by agreeing to a simple covenant, proposed by Augustine. It was just as difficult for us to keep as it was for Augustine, but here it is:

Let us, you and I lay aside all arrogance.
Let neither of us pretend to have found the truth.
Let us seek it as something unknown to both of us.
Then we may seek it with love and sincerity
 when neither of us has the rashness nor
 presumption to believe that he (and she) already
 possesses it.
And if I am asking too much of you
 allow me to listen to you at least,
 to talk with you as I do with beings whom,
 for my part,
I do not pretend to understand.

That's pretty close to Wesley, when he said, "We think and let think." Wesley, however, was only referring to those opinions which do not strike at the marrow of Christian truth.¹ This makes it difficult, but this emerged as our goal.

¹ Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 28.

It took six years to work through the Bible. Any Bible Study that goes through the Bible in less than six years isn't struggling with the text. We went book by book and found the Bible extremely well organized. We only departed from this principle in two books. They were the Book of Psalms and the Prophets. We found it more rewarding to study the Psalms in their various classifications than to study them as they are numbered. When we came to the Prophets, we found it more rewarding to study them chronologically than to study them as they appear in the Bible.

Studying the Whole Bible

If the Bible is going to have priority over tradition, reason, and experience, then we need to know what it says. That will take hard work, but the work will be worth it. I have gone completely through the Bible four times, changing my notes each time. At the same time I've tried to follow Wesley's principle of writing plain words for plain people. I admit that some of the words that are plain to me, may not be plain to others. The task of Bible Study is never easy and it's never finished. The renewal of the church depends upon the study of the whole Bible, context and all.

My problem with most of the Bible Studies I had taken in the past is that they selected scriptures to support a particular theology. I would say that this was true both for those with liberal leanings as well as evangelical leanings. I wanted my theology and vision to emerge out of having studied the whole Bible, not selected portions of it. Our theology and our morality needs to come out of the Scriptures. This is our first priority, and this is the Wesleyan method of doing things. The primacy of Scripture is the first characteristic of the heart of Methodism and of Christianity itself.

I also discovered that this was not something I could do alone. I needed the help of other Christians trying to make sense out of the Bible for daily living. I found all that I was looking for, and more, when I invited others to join me that first Sunday evening. I have come to believe that leading a weekly Bible Study should be every pastor's first priority. The pulpit is not the place for Bible Study. Preaching is a monolog; whereas, Bible Study is a dialog. The place for Bible Study is around a table.

We entered into a Covenant to study the Bible together. Our purpose was to read the passages before we met, to **summarize** what we had read, to ask **questions** and make an attempt to answer those questions as best we could, to **apply** what we had learned to our daily living, and finally, to **witness** in word and deed the results of our study together. We began with Augustine's Covenant and ended with Wesley's Covenant Prayer. From this experience, I designed the following logo:



This was our Covenant for studying together. We knew that we weren't all going to agree, and so we also needed a prayer with which to send us out into the world, and we could find no better prayer than John's Wesley's Covenant Prayer, which is as follows:

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt,
rank me with whom thou wilt;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for thee
or laid aside for thee
or brought low for thee;
let me be full, let me be empty;
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

2. SCRIPTURAL SALVATION

For by grace are you saved through faith.

Ephesians 2:8

We could hardly speak of anything else, either in public or private.
It shone upon our minds with so strong a light,
that it was our constant theme.

John Wesley

The Starting Point

It is not surprising that when Wesley wanted to preach, he turned to the Bible as his primary source. “I am not afraid,” he said, “to lay open the inmost thoughts of my heart.” He expressed those inmost thoughts as follows:

I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: Just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing,—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*.^{*} Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.¹

This was Wesley’s starting point. When Wesley deals with salvation, he includes much more than preparation for going to heaven. In the first paragraph of Wesley’s sermon, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, he says, “Nothing can be more intricate, complex, and hard to be understood, than religion, as it has been often described...” “Yet,” he continues, “how easy to be understood, how plain and simple a thing, is the genuine religion of Jesus Christ; provided only that we take it in its native form, just as it is described in the oracles of God!”²

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition., p. 3). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley, (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 43). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

An understanding of salvation is dependent upon our understanding of Scripture, all of Scripture. That's what makes our understanding of salvation so difficult. The goal of the Christian life is salvation, and faith is the means of attaining it. Wesley only uses one verse for the text of his classical sermon, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*. That text is Ephesians 2:8, which says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith." So, now we have three technical words with which we must deal. They are Salvation, Faith, and Grace. It is important for us to understand these Biblical words. Understanding them will enable us to view salvation as plain and simple, something everyone can understand.

Salvation

Wesley begins his sermon by defining what salvation is not. "The salvation which is here spoken of," he says, "is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness." "It is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death; or, as we usually speak, in the other world." The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question: "Ye are saved." These words could be rendered with equal propriety, "Ye have been saved." The salvation which Wesley is defining extends to the "entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory."¹

To understand what salvation is, we need to look first at why salvation is even needed. Wesley goes back to the story of Adam and Eve to explain why salvation is needed. The key thought there is that God created humanity in his own image:

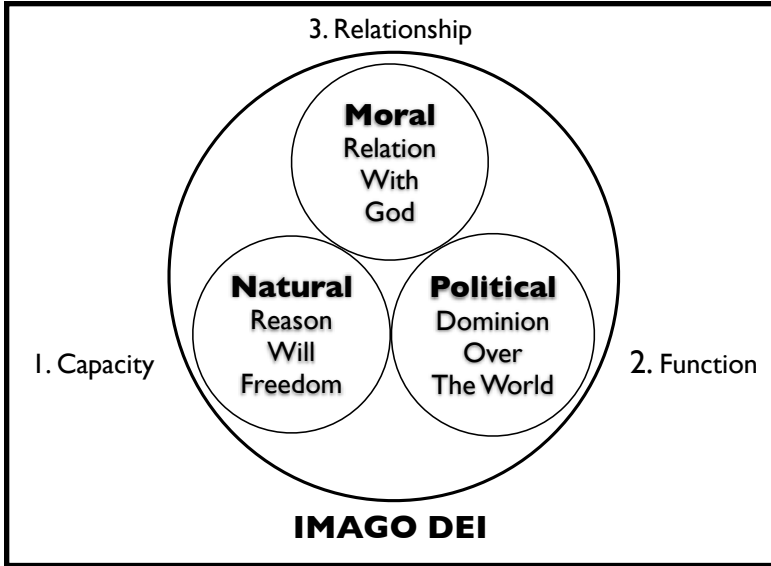
And God, the three-one God, said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him;" (Gen. 1:26-27)—Not barely in his *natural image*, a picture of his own immortality; a spiritual being, endued with understanding, freedom of will, and various affections;—not merely in his *political image*, the governor of this lower world, having "dominion over the fishes of the sea, and over all the earth;"—but chiefly in his *moral image*; which according to the Apostle, is "righteousness and true holiness." (Eph. 4:24)² In this image of God was man made. "God is love." Accordingly,

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 44). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:23-24)

man at his creation was full of love; which was the sole principle of all his tempers, thoughts, words, and actions. God is full of justice, mercy, and truth; so was man as he came from the hands of his Creator.¹

Below is a diagram of Wesley’s concept of the Image of God, or what is frequently called the Imago Dei.



Salvation, in the simplest of terms, is *the restoration of the image of God* in humankind. Salvation, then is necessary in this world as much as it is in the next. God created beings “able to stand, and yet liable to fall.” The rebellion against God may have started in the Garden of Eden, but it didn’t stop there. The following is not only a description of Adam and Eve, it is also a description of humanity in general. God warned Adam and Eve and he also warns us of the danger of disobedience. Wesley describes the rebellion as follows:

By this willful act of disobedience to his Creator, this flat rebellion against his Sovereign, he openly declared that he would no longer have God to rule over him; that he would be governed by his own will, and not the will of Him that created him; and that he would not seek his happiness in God, but in the world, in the works of his hands. Now, God had told him before, “In the day that thou eatest”

¹ John Wesley, (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 66). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

of that fruit, “thou shalt surely die.” And the word of the Lord cannot be broken. Accordingly, in that day he did die: He died to God,—the most dreadful of all deaths.¹

On that day the love of God was extinguished from the soul. Without the love and knowledge of God, the Image of God could not subsist. Not only did humankind become unholy, but unhappy as well. Whether the fall is biological or sociological, the consequence is the same. The Image of God, particularly, the Moral Image of God has been corrupted, and that corruption affects the Natural and Political Images as well. Wesley put it as follows, and this is one of his main theological teachings. This truth makes salvation and the restoration of the Image of God necessary in both this world and the next.

The natural consequence of this is, that every one descended from him [Adam] comes into the world spiritually dead, dead to God, wholly dead in sin; entirely void of the life of God; void of the image of God, of all that righteousness and holiness wherein Adam was created. Instead of this, every man born into the world now bears the image of the devil in pride and self-will.

This, then, is the foundation of the new birth,—the entire corruption of our nature. Hence it is, that, being born in sin, we must be “born again.” Hence every one that is born of a woman must be born of the Spirit of God.²

But how may a person be born again? The New Testament suggests a number of ways, but let us examine one of the most well known. It is the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus seems to be puzzled when Jesus tells him that he must be born again. Jesus was not the first person to use the expression, “born again.” It was well known before Jesus’ time, and was in common use among the Jews. When an adult Gentile was convinced that there was one God, and desired to convert to Judaism, the custom was to baptize him first before he was admitted to circumcision. After he was baptized, he was said to be born again. He was then adopted into the family of God through circumcision and counted as one of God’s children. The expression about a new birth would have been known by Nicodemus. Being a teacher of the Law, Nicodemus would have been familiar with the expression, but he probably thought that he didn’t need to be born again. After all, he was already a member of God’s elect.

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 67). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 68). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Gentiles needed to be born again, not Jews. Jesus used this term in a stronger sense than Nicodemus expected.

Nicodemus asks, “how can these things be? A man cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb, and be born.” Nicodemus is confused because, being a Jew, he doesn’t think that he needs baptism and rebirth. Gentiles may need to be born again, but not Jews. Wesley compares natural birth to spiritual birth.

Before a child is born into the world he has eyes, but sees not; he has ears, but does not hear. He has a very imperfect use of any other sense. He has no knowledge of any of the things of the world, or any natural understanding. To that manner of existence which he then has, we do not even give the name of life. It is then only when a man is born, that we say he begins to live. For as soon as he is born, he begins to see the light, and the various objects with which he is encompassed. His ears are then opened, and he hears the sounds which successively strike upon them. At the same time, all the other organs of sense begin to be exercised upon their proper objects.¹

The same can be said of spiritual birth. “When a man is in a mere natural state,” says Wesley, “before he is born of God, he has, in a spiritual sense, eyes and sees not; a thick impenetrable veil lies upon them; he has ears, but hears not; he is utterly deaf to what he is most of all concerned to hear. His other spiritual senses are all locked up.” Such is the state of the natural person. Wesley continues:

He has no true knowledge of the things of God, either of spiritual or eternal things; therefore, though he is a living man, he is a dead Christian. But as soon as he is born of God, there is a total change in all these particulars. The “eyes of his understanding are opened;” and, He who of old “commanded light to shine out of darkness shining on his heart, he sees the light of the glory of God,” his glorious love, “in the face of Jesus Christ,” His ears being opened, he is now capable of hearing the inward voice of God, saying, “Be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee;” “go and sin no more.”²

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 69). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 70). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

In the new birth one's spiritual senses are opened up. From this it is easy to see the necessity of the new birth. Without it we cannot know God, nor can our corrupted moral image be restored. In addition to not knowing God, we also cannot sense the difference between good and evil or right and wrong. In defining the nature of the new birth, Wesley says:

It is that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life; when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is "created anew in Christ Jesus;" when it is "renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness;" when the love of the world is changed into the love of God; pride into humility; passion into meekness; hatred, envy, malice, into a sincere, tender, disinterested love for all mankind. In a word, it is that change whereby the earthly, sensual, devilish mind is turned into the "mind which was in Christ Jesus." This is the nature of the new birth: "So is every one that is born of the Spirit."¹

By now it should be obvious why a person needs a new birth. Salvation is the restoration of the image of God in us. It is in the new birth where this begins. We need this new birth now. We need to be saved from ourselves now, not just to enter heaven in the future. We need a rich and happy life in this world. Without holiness, the restoration of the image of God, no one shall see the Lord. "For the same reason," Wesley concludes, "except he be born again, none can be happy in this world. For it is not possible, in the nature of things, that a man should be happy who is not holy." Don't be fooled by the thousands who "believe, that they have found a broad way which leadeth not to destruction."² Such persons utterly block up the way to salvation, and send people to hell, out of mere charity!³

Before finishing this section on salvation, something needs to be said about baptism. Baptism is a Sacrament, a means of Grace, but baptism is not the new birth. Wesley describes baptism as follows:

Baptism is a sacrament, wherein Christ hath ordained the washing with water, to be a sign and seal of regeneration by his Spirit."

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 71). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 72). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 75). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Here it is manifest, baptism, the sign, is spoken of as distinct from regeneration, the thing signified.

What is the inward part, or thing signified? A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness. Nothing, therefore, is plainer, than that, according to the Church of England, baptism is not the new birth.¹

What about the baptism of infants? “It is certain,” answers Wesley, “our Church supposes that all who are baptized in their infancy are at the same time born again.” It is difficult to understand how this can take place in infants, but then, it is difficult to understand how the new birth takes place in persons of riper years. “But whatever be the case with infants,” insists Wesley, “it is sure all of riper years who are baptized are not at the same time born again.” Even if one was born again as an infant, adults have the uncanny ability to neglect or deny their baptism. Wesley writes in detail about how we can deny our baptism. Below is just a brief example:

Therefore you deny it by every willful sin; by every act of uncleanness, drunkenness, or revenge; by every obscene or profane word; by every oath that comes out of your mouth. Every time you profane the day of the Lord, you thereby deny your baptism; yea, every time you do any thing to another which you would not he should do to you.²

The new birth may precede or follow baptism. The new birth is the gateway to sanctification, but it is not the same thing. Wesley again compares natural birth to spiritual birth.

A child is born of a woman in a moment, or at least in a very short time: Afterward he gradually and slowly grows, till he attains to the stature of a man. In like manner, a child is born of God in a short time, if not in a moment. But it is by low degrees that he afterward grows up to the measure of the full stature of Christ. The same relation, therefore, which there is between our natural birth and our growth, there is also between our new birth and our sanctification.³

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 73). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room. (I prefer transformation to regeneration.)

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 76). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 75). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

The new birth is an entrance into the process we call sanctification. “When we are born again,” says Wesley, “then our sanctification, our inward and outward holiness begins; and thenceforward we are gradually to ‘grow up in Him who is our Head.’” Inward and outward holiness is our goal.

Now that we have defined salvation as the restoration of the image of God, and the new birth as the gateway into sanctification, we shall now examine what Wesley had to say about preventing, justifying, and sanctifying grace. These three forms of grace move us towards our goal. They require faith, for we are saved by grace through faith.

Grace

Grace is the gateway to salvation and the new birth. Grace is a gift which we are invited to accept. In this section I will deal with what is involved in accepting this gift, we call grace. Wesley sums it up as follows: “Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three,—that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself.”¹ Wesley is illustrating the role grace plays in bringing about salvation, which is the restoration of the divine image in fallen humanity.

Wesley names three movements of grace: preventing grace², justifying grace. and sanctifying grace, He sums up how this gift is given and received:

Salvation is carried on by *convincing grace*, usually in Scripture termed *repentance*; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, “through grace,” we “are saved by faith;” consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God. All experience, as well as Scripture, show this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual.³

Let’s deal first with Wesley’s definition of grace. In the Western Church, theologians have usually defined grace as “divine pardon,” or

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition., p. 472). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² Albert Outler changed *preventing* grace to *prevenient* grace, a word Wesley never used. I like *seeking* grace.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 509). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

“forgiveness.” In the Eastern Church, theologians have usually defined grace as “the power of God working within to renew our nature,” that is, to restore the divine image in humanity. Wesley used both definitions and defined grace “as God’s love for humanity made evident in Christ. When grace is received, it communicates forgiveness and makes renewal possible.” Grace does more than to release us from the burden of sin, it also restores us to health.¹

Seeking Grace. Instead of *preventing* or *prevenient* grace, I have chosen to use *seeking* grace. The meaning of the other two words have to do with the grace that “comes before.”² God’s seeking love comes before we even know it’s there. “We love,” says John 4:19, “because he first loved us.” This seeking grace is present everywhere and in everyone. If this is so, why isn’t everyone aware of it? Wesley’s answer is that not everyone’s spiritual senses are awakened, but they can be. Everyone has some measure of that light, though it be only a glimmering ray. Everyone feels more or less uneasy when he or she acts contrary to the light of his or her own conscience. We do not sin because we lack grace, but because we don’t recognize or want the grace that is seeking us. This gift of grace is not forced upon us, nor is it irresistible. Wesley’s favorite quote on this subject came from Augustine, who said, “He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves.”³

Our difficulty is that we don’t recognize God’s seeking grace when it’s staring us in the face. Wesley believed that conscience was not simply one of our natural endowments. Conscience is a supernatural gift of God. It is one of our spiritual senses. Conscience “is not nature, but the Son of God, that is ‘the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world.’ So that we may say to every human creature, ‘He,’ not nature, ‘hath showed thee, O man, what is good.’”⁴ Wesley described the process as follows:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) *preventing grace*; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some

¹ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 26 and 29.

² pre-venio: “comes before”.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (513). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (188). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by *convincing grace*, usually in Scripture termed *repentance*; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone.¹

Grace is universally offered. God is always seeking us. The common objection to Wesley's universalism is, if God is present and active everywhere, then why are our missionary efforts necessary? Wesley's answer is that without Christ, our knowledge of God would be imperfect. Wesley's approach is Trinitarian. The Holy Spirit goes where Christ is yet to be known. God will judge every person not in terms of their acceptance or rejection of Christ, whom they have not yet encountered, but in terms of how they respond to the Holy Spirit, or the light they did receive.² The Holy Spirit represents God's seeking love that Wesley calls preventing grace and Outler named prevenient grace.³ I prefer to call it seeking grace, for the intention is to invite everyone to the door of justifying grace.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son helps to illustrate God's seeking grace. While the younger brother was in the far country thinking he was having a grand time, God's seeking grace, that is, the Holy Spirit woke him up, and the Scripture says, "He came to himself." In the words of Wesley, he woke up. He saw the Light. All this was in response to God's seeking grace. The elder brother, who never left home, did not wake up, regardless of the pleas of his loving Father. Seeking love was operating on both, but only one responded. Wesley compared grace to a house. God's seeking grace operates outside the house, including the porch, inviting people to open the door to justifying grace.

Justifying Grace. The next step is justifying grace, which we accept by faith alone. Justification is another word for pardon or forgiveness. Prior to Wesley's experience at Aldersgate, Wesley wrote, "I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it; (though many

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (509). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 33-35.

³ In "preventing grace," God attempts to prevent the natural consequence of being outside of the divine will. He seeks those living outside of his will and invites them to repent and accept the grace that is being offered.

imagine they have it, who have it not). . . .”¹ Wesley made a serious self-dedication in 1725, but he was still trying to earn his salvation. On March 6, 1738 Peter Böhler convinced Wesley that justification came by faith alone. Although at this point justification was a convincing intellectual possibility for him, it was not yet a conscious experience in his life. “Immediately it struck into my mind,” wrote Wesley, “‘Leave off preaching. How can you preach to others, who have not faith yourself?’ I asked Böhler whether he thought I should leave it off or not. He answered, ‘By no means.’ I asked, ‘But what can I preach?’ He said, ‘Preach faith *till* you have it; and then, *because* you have it, you *will* preach faith.” This may sound like Wesley was supposed to convince himself, but it was the response to the results of his preaching that led him to experience what he was now preaching. Here’s how Wesley put it:

Accordingly, *Monday* the 6th, [1738] I began preaching this new doctrine, though my soul started back from the work. The first person to whom I offered salvation by faith alone was a prisoner under sentence of death. His name was Clifford. Peter Böhler had many times desired me to speak to him before. But I could not prevail on myself so to do; being still (as I had been many years) a zealous assessor of the impossibility of a death-bed repentance.²

Before Wesley’s eyes he began to see the fruit of his own preaching. What had happened was that he preached faith *until others had it*, and now his own faith was confirmed by theirs. His own confirmation was to come on May 24, 1738 at Aldersgate while he was listening to someone read Luther’s definition of faith in his introduction to the Book of Romans.

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.³

Wesley reflected on the mistake he had made. “I was strongly convinced,” he wrote, “that the cause of that uneasiness was unbelief; and that the gaining a true, living faith was the ‘one thing needful’ for me. But still I fixed not this faith on its right object: I meant only faith in God, not

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *Vol. 1: The Works of John Wesley, Volumes 1–4* (Third Edition) (77). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1909–1916). *Vol. 1: The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8* (N. Curnock, Ed.) (442). London: Robert Culley; Charles H. Kelly.

³ John Wesley. (1909–1916). *Vol. 1: The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8* (N. Curnock, Ed.) (475–476). London: Robert Culley; Charles H. Kelly.

faith in or through Christ¹ This new insight changed his whole definition of faith. Prior to Aldersgate, Wesley viewed *adherence* as the first step in faith, but he learned that it is the second step. Assurance is the first step or act of faith.

But let it be observed, that, in the very nature of the thing, the assurance goes before the confidence. For a man cannot have a childlike confidence in God till he knows he is a child of God. Therefore confidence, trust, reliance, adherence, or whatever else it be called, is not the first, as some have supposed, but the second branch or act of faith.²

Wesley had learned something very valuable. He learned that the sole cause of God's acceptance of us is the righteousness and death of Christ, who fulfilled God's law and died in our place. This substitutionary theory of the atonement communicated to Wesley the depth of divine love and released him from all his previous efforts to justify himself.³ The faith that justifies is as follows:

Faith, in general, is defined by the Apostle, *πραγματων ελεγχος ου βλεπομενων*. *An evidence, a divine evidence and conviction (the word means both) of things not seen; not visible, not perceivable either by sight, or by any other of the external senses. It implies both a supernatural evidence of God, and of the things of God; a kind of spiritual light exhibited to the soul, and a supernatural sight or perception thereof.*⁴

Taking the word in a more particular sense, faith is a divine *evidence* and *conviction*, not only that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself," but also that Christ loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*. It is by this faith that we *receive Christ*; that we receive him in all his offices, as our Prophet, Priest, and King.⁵

¹ John Wesley. (1909–1916). *Vol. 1: The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8* (N. Curnock, Ed.) (471). London: Robert Culley; Charles H. Kelly.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (47). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, Abingdon Press), p. 43.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (46). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁵ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (47). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Is this the faith of assurance, or the faith of adherence? The Scripture makes no such distinction. Paul says, “There is one faith, and one hope of our calling;” one Christian saving faith; “as there is one Lord,” in whom we believe, and “one God and Father of us all.”¹

Does this faith not have to produce the fruit of works? “Not in the *same degree*,” says Wesley, “for those fruits are only necessary *conditionally*; if there be time and opportunity for them. Otherwise a man may be justified without them, as was the *thief* upon the cross.² The point is that justification is by faith alone with no conditions. When there is time, there will be the fruit of good works. In the moment we are justified, sanctification begins. As divine love fills up the heart, what room is left for sin? None.

One question remains. Does God justify us by faith alone instantaneously or does he do it gradually. Wesley’s answer is “yes” to both.

Look for it then every day, every hour, every moment! Why not this hour, this moment? Certainly you may look for it *now*, if you believe it is by faith. And by this token you may surely know whether you seek it by faith or by works. If by works you want something to be done *first, before* you are sanctified. You think, I must first *be* or *do* thus or thus. Then you are seeking it by works unto this day. If you seek it by faith, you may expect it *as you are*; and if as you are, then expect it *now*. It is of importance to observe, that there is an inseparable connexion between these three points, — expect it *by faith*, expect it *as you are*, and expect it *now*!

Christ is ready; and He is all you want. He is waiting for you: He is at the door! Let your inmost soul cry out,

Come in, come in, thou heavenly Guest!
Nor hence again remove;
But sup with me, and let the feast
Be everlasting love.³

¹ Ephesians 4:4-6

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (48). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (53–54). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Sanctifying Grace. “And at the same time that we are justified,” says Wesley, “yea, in that very moment, sanctification begins.¹ Justification is what Christ does for us. Sanctification is what the Holy Spirit does in us. Justification changes our status. Sanctification changes our nature. Justification inaugurates the process of sanctification, the aim of which is the restoration of the image of God. Let us look at two passages in which Wesley describes what happens as one moves from justification by faith alone to sanctification by the Holy Spirit.

But the moment the Spirit of the Almighty strikes the heart of him that was till then without God in the world, it breaks the hardness of his heart, and creates all things new. The Sun of Righteousness appears, and shines upon his soul, showing him the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He is in a new world. All things around him are become new, such as it never before entered into his heart to conceive. He sees, so far as his newly-opened eyes can bear the sight,

The opening heavens around him shine,
With beams of sacred bliss.²

In that instant we are born again, born from above, born of the Spirit: There is a *real* as well as a *relative* change. We are inwardly renewed by the power of God. We feel “the love of God shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us;” producing love to all mankind, and more especially to the children of God; expelling the love of the world, the love of pleasure, of ease, of honour, of money, together with pride, anger, self-will, and every other evil temper; in a word, changing the earthly, sensual, devilish mind, into “the mind which was in Christ Jesus.”³

Wesley is not describing what must take place before we can be justified. Wesley is clear that the only condition for justification is faith, but once we exercise faith, we can expect to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. Other Biblical words that describe this process are regeneration and the new birth. All of these terms involve rebuilding the moral image in which we were created. In response to the question, “What is the nature of the new birth?” Wesley replies:

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (45). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (351–352). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (45). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

It is that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life; when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is “created anew in Christ Jesus;” when it is “renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness....”¹

The restoration of the image of God in us does not make us divine. It makes us more human. We are made in the image of God. We are not the image of God. According to Theodore Runyon, the working metaphor for the image of God is that of a mirror. We are to reflect the image of God.² We do not become gods.

There is both a positive side and a negative side to sanctification. It is like breathing. When the breath of God enters our lives it drives out everything inconsistent with it. Sanctification is in the first instance purgation, a cleansing which expunges whatever separates us from God. The positive part is found in the words, “That we may perfectly love Thee.”³ As Wesley put it, “For as long as love takes up the whole heart, what room is there for sin therein?”⁴ It is important to remember that for Wesley the increase of love is the positive goal of salvation.

The negative goal was the elimination of voluntary transgressions. In regard to involuntary transgressions, Wesley said, “I believe, a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. Such transgressions you may call sins, if you please: I do not....”⁵ Nevertheless, even those who are perfect, whose hearts are overflowing with the love of God and neighbor, still need to confess. Wesley never uses the term sinless perfection.

The dual aims of sanctification are to be made perfect in love and to live entirely without voluntary sin. The danger that the faithful have to be careful about is the temptation to draw the inference, “I *feel* no sin;

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (71). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 80-81.

³ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 85.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (52). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁵ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 11* (Third Edition) (396). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

therefore, I *have* none: It does not *stir*; therefore, it does not *exist*: It has no *motion*; therefore, it has no *being*!”¹ We are not to emphasize the negative aspect of sanctification. If we neglect the positive aspect of sanctification, we destroy the hope of salvation and the restoration of the image of God. The anticipation of Christian perfection in this life is a key element in Methodist piety. The goal gives shape to the process. No one stands still. We are either growing in grace or we are falling away from grace.

The litmus test of perfect love is not, “Do you love God and your neighbor as yourself? That’s to be expected. Wesley poses the question as follows:

Dost thou love, as thyself, all mankind without exception? “If you love those only that love you, what thank have ye?” Do you “love your enemies?” Is your soul full of good-will, of tender affection, toward them? Do you love even the enemies of God, the unthankful and unholy?²

Two important questions remain. First, “Is sanctification gradual or instantaneous?” Wesley answers the question:

It is both the one and the other. From the moment we are justified, there may be a gradual sanctification, a growing in grace, a daily advance in the knowledge and love of God. And if sin cease before death, there must, in the nature of the thing, be an instantaneous change; there must be a last moment wherein it does exist, and a first moment wherein it does not.³

It is not necessary that we be conscious of the change. The transformation can be effectual without a date or time or place.

The second question is somewhat related to the first question. “Can we experience entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, in this life?” We ask our clergy to declare that they are seeking Christian perfection in this life. Although Wesley never claimed to have achieved entire sanctification, Christian perfection, or perfect love, when he was on his death bed, his followers gathered around him to find out whether he had attained the goal

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (45). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (498). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (329). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

toward which he had urged others. His only answer was to point beyond himself to say, “The best of all is, God is with us.”¹

Conclusions

With the exception of considering infants born again at baptism, I agree completely with Wesley’s concept of Scriptural Salvation. To be consistent, he should have treated infant baptism in the same way as he treated adult baptism. The act of baptism in itself does not guarantee the new birth or regeneration. The Sacrament of Baptism is a means of grace in that it communicates the justifying grace of God.

The only thing I would add to Wesley’s teaching on Salvation is the need to simplify it so that the average person can understand it. Wesley was aware of the problem in the opening paragraph of his sermon, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, where he admitted that nothing could be more “intricate, complex, and hard to be understood,” and yet, “how easy to be understood, how plain and simple a thing, is the genuine religion of Jesus Christ” in its native form.

I’ll have to admit that he tries, but his sermons are anything but simple. In trying to explain the principles of Methodism, he said, “I have again and again, with all the plainness I could, declared what our constant doctrines are.... Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three,—that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself.”² I only wish he would have stayed with the imagery of the house. Since he did not, I will proceed to use his image of the porch, the door, and the inside of the house to clarify his teachings on the movement of three kinds of grace in Salvation.

On the Porch. Wesley uses the porch to describe “preventing” grace. Albert Outler didn’t make it easier by inventing the term “prevenient” grace. By this term, Outler thought Wesley was emphasizing the need for grace to come before justification. In discussing this issue Scott Kisker says:

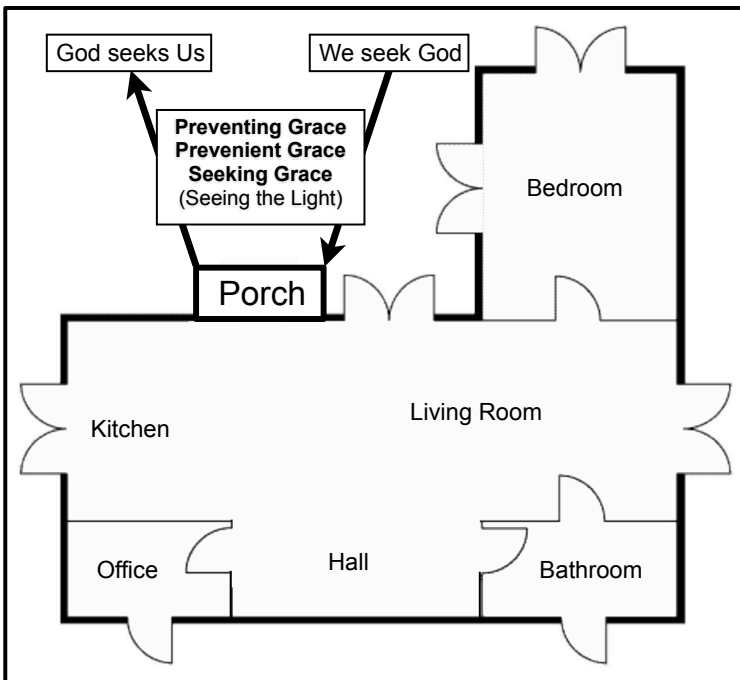
It is certainly true of grace—the unmerited love of God does come before [pre veni] we do anything. Grace is there ahead of us,

¹ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 101.

² John Wesley.. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (472). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

waiting for us, running out to meet us. But this is true of grace as it prevents, convinces, justifies, or sanctifies.¹

Scott Kisker proceeds to ask what Wesley meant by the term. Wesley seems to know what he means by “preventing grace.” He concludes that God’s grace prevents the natural consequence of living outside of God’s will.² I believe Kisker is correct. To put it in very simple terms, “We love because he first loved us.”³ All that Wesley meant by preventing (or prevenient grace) is that God’s grace is to be found everywhere, even in the far country or in the death camps of this world. God isn’t just sitting on the porch, waiting for his prodigal sons to come home. He runs out to meet them. I would use the term “seeking grace,” and I would illustrate it as follows:



¹ Scott Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist?* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), p. 62.

² Scott Kisker, *Mainline or Methodist?* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008), p. 63.

³ 1 John 4:19 (NRSV)

Wesley places those persons, who are unaware of God and their need to repent, on the porch and everywhere beyond it. They aren't just standing on the porch. Many of them, like the prodigal son, are in the far country believing that they are having a great time. Some, like the elder brother may well be standing on the porch, but he'll only go in if he can get his own way. Both individuals need to repent, but that will only happen if they can see the light. That will only happen to the prodigal son when he comes to himself and begins to recognize that happiness can only be found in holiness (perfect love), and it will only happen to the elder brother when he begins to recognize that forgiveness and perfect love are more important than obedience and duty.

Wesley believes that both of them have a divinely given conscience that will enable them to see the light and their need for salvation. Conscience is one of the spiritual senses which will enable them to see, if only they will wake up and use the spiritual senses God has given them. When that happens, they will repent, and by faith, go through the door.

There is another way of looking at the image of the house. I almost hesitate to bring it up. I don't want to confuse Wesley's image, and yet I see significance in an image suggested by George Macdonald. He suggests that we think of ourselves as the house, and Christ as standing on the porch knocking. One is reminded of the painting of Jesus standing on the porch knocking. There is no door handle, and so we must open the door to let him in, but we won't do that until we hear him knocking. That will only happen when we use our spiritual senses. To quote Jesus after he teaches his parables, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"¹ This even works with people who have never heard of Jesus. In those cases it is the Holy Spirit knocking, which is just as effective as Jesus knocking. Wesley takes a Trinitarian approach in the activity of God in *seeking grace* (preventing or prevenient grace). In both cases, repentance is the key to opening the door, but *seeking grace* is universal. It's everywhere. George Macdonald describes what happens when we see ourselves as the house and Jesus is standing on the porch.

Imagine yourself as a living house.

God comes in to rebuild that house.

At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing.

He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof

and so on:

you knew that those jobs needed doing

and so you are not surprised.

¹ Mark 4:9

But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way
that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense.

What on earth is He up to?

The explanation is that He is building quite a different house
from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here,
putting on an extra floor there, running up towers,
making courtyards.

You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage:
but He is building a palace.

He intends to come live in it Himself.¹

Through the Door. We advance from the porch of *seeking grace* through the door of *justifying grace*. Repentance moves us towards the door, or in the case of George Macdonald, we begin to open the door. At this point there has not been any transformation in our lives. All that we have done is to step out in faith, the only condition for salvation. What we really need at this point is assurance that our sins have been forgiven. We can't convince ourselves that our sins have been taken away, but when we begin to believe it, at that moment we experience assurance. Justification is what Christ did for us on the cross. In him we discover forgiveness. Even the record of our past is destroyed.

¹ Quoted in C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1980), p. 176.

Wesley uses the door to describe “justifying grace.” One opens the door by faith alone, but this isn’t all that happens. Justifying grace initiates assurance and regeneration (transformation), a new birth. When we put all this together, we are talking about conversion. “The immediate effects of justification,” says Wesley, “are the peace of God, a ‘peace that passeth all understanding,’ and a ‘rejoicing in hope of the glory of God’ ‘with joy unspeakable and full of glory.’”¹ Yet, Wesley knew that these things could come instantaneously or gradually. Following his own experience of assurance at the Society meeting at Aldersgate, he wrote,

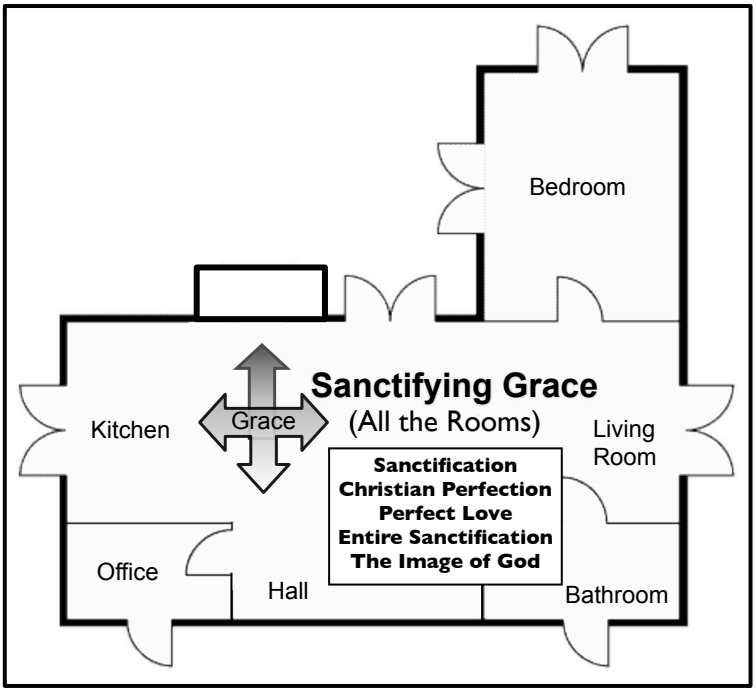
But it was not long before the enemy suggested, This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy? “Then was I taught, that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation: But that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes with holdeth them, according to the counsels of his own will.”²

Even with the assurance that Wesley received, he still had some doubts. It must be pointed out that justifying grace only initiates assurance and regeneration (transformation). The moment we are justified, that’s the moment our sanctification begins. Hence the first work of God, in moving us towards conversion is to raise up a spiritual light within us. We do not become mature Christians overnight. It will take the rest of our lives to mature and to grow in grace. If Wesley’s concept of justifying grace is complex, his concept of sanctifying grace is difficult and controversial, but I think it is correct. If justifying grace is what Christ does for us, sanctification is what the Holy Spirit does in us. The purpose of salvation is to move us through the doorway into the house, or to use George Macdonald’s image, the Holy Spirit wants to dwell within us, creating out of us a Temple. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul wrote, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” Once we recognize that we have been forgiven, through the cross of Christ, the real work begins. The goal is the restoration of the image of God in all of humankind. From this moment on we are to reflect that image as we move towards entire sanctification, Christian perfection, or perfect love.

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (45). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *Vol. 1: The Works of John Wesley, Volumes 1–4* (Third Edition) (103). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Entering all the Rooms. If we are justified by faith alone, we are sanctified by the Holy Spirit to use our spiritual gifts to bear fruit and do good works. Faith and love are intimately related. When Wesley wished to summarize his doctrine on sanctification or perfect love, he would quote Galatians 5:6, “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. ‘Faith working by love’ is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.”¹ The goal is clearly not for individual reconciliation with God, but the restoration of the image of God.

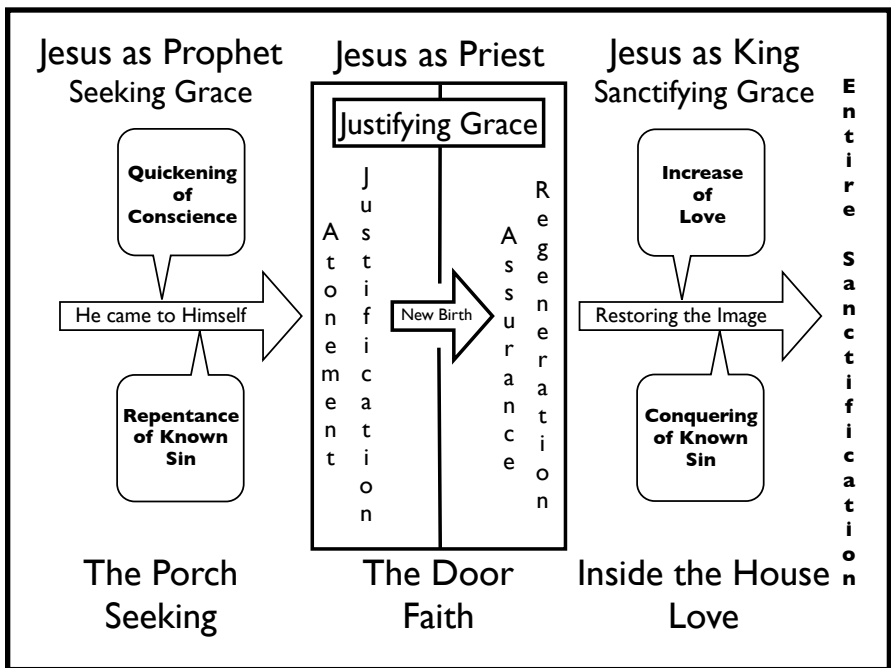


Sanctifying grace, even entire sanctification was and is an important corrective to the Protestant theology which, tends to equate salvation with justification or conversion. Wesley’s doctrine of sanctification points to the re-creation of both individuals and the society. through the restoration of the image of God in humanity. Wesley has taken a great deal of criticism for insisting that entire sanctification or perfect love is possible to achieve in this world. Wesley focused on the energy of love which would displace known sin. The point being made is this: Are we going to increase in love or sin?

¹ John Wesley., (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 14* (Third Edition) (321). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

When one uses Madonald's image that we are God's Temple on earth, there is still the emphasis of Christian perfection. Since we are human Temples in which the divine dwells, we must be ready to let the Holy Spirit occupy every room. As the Holy Spirit dwells in all the rooms, all known sin disappears. Sin simply can't exist where God is present.

Another way of outlining Wesley's scriptural salvation is to view it through Jesus as prophet, priest, and king. According to Mark 1:14-15, Jesus begins his ministry as a prophet. "He came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" Jesus assumed that his hearers had a spiritual conscience and were capable of using it. The quickening of their spiritual conscience would lead his hearers to repentance of known sin. The twelve disciples answered his prophetic invitation. In Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, the prodigal came to himself, repented and headed for the porch, but before he could get there, his Father ran out to meet him. The prodigal hoped he would be accepted as a slave, but his father accepted him as a son.



Next Jesus acts as a Priest. After Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah; and according to Mark 8:27-33, he accepts the title and taught them, "that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise

again.” According to Mark 14:22-25, prior to Jesus’ death, he ate his Last Supper with them:

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

As their priest, he gave himself as an atonement for their sins and for the sins of the whole world. This is the work of justifying grace. It takes awhile to be convinced, but when, according to Acts 1-2, they are filled with the Holy Spirit, they undergo a powerful transformation. The witness of the Holy Spirit assures and regenerates them, sending them on a new world mission.

The new mission is not simply to get people into heaven, but to call people into a new Kingdom that spans heaven and earth. In the midst of Jesus’ ministry, a scribe asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:28-34) The word Messiah means “anointed King.” This new Kingdom had perfect love, not as its only commandment, but as its primary and greatest commandment. According to Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus put it in as follows:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not

even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Wesley's emphasis on perfect love, sometimes called entire sanctification, emphasized the increase of love to the extent that known sin would fall away. He never taught sinless perfection, but he did move us towards the complete restoration of the image of God in this life. Wesley's scriptural salvation is just as relevant today as it was in his day. That's because it's biblical. In commenting on the blessing of entire sanctification, Wesley said:

For suppose we were mistaken, suppose no such blessing ever was or can be attained, yet we lose nothing: Nay, that very expectation quickens us in using all the talents which God has given us; yea, in improving them all; so that when our Lord cometh, he will receive his own with increase.¹

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (51). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

3. CLASS MEETINGS

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

Acts 2:42

*The class-meeting,
the most peculiar and characteristic feature of Methodism.¹*

John Wesley

Some undergraduate students, along with Charles and John Wesley, were first called “Methodists” when they met together regularly at Oxford University. Those who observed these young men in their *methodical* approach to Christian discipleship called them a number of devastating nicknames, none of which were complimentary. Seven of these names were: The Holy Club, the Reforming Club, Bible Moths, Methodists, Supererogation Men, Enthusiasts and Sacramentalists. Methodist was the label that stuck; and even though Wesley disliked it, he wore it as a badge of honor and proceeded to define “the character of a Methodist” as one who really believes and lives “the common principles of Christianity.”

Wesley had a method for committed discipleship; and it had little to do with church membership or average attendance, the standards we use today. It had to do with accountability, which took place within the Methodist Class Meetings. There were times when the *expulsions* and *withdrawals* outnumbered the *faithful* allowed to remain in the Class Meetings. Wesley was warned frequently that his stringent demands on the people called Methodists would reduce the societies to extinction. These warnings failed to deter him, for he was not enamored with statistics. For him a spiritual revival was not a matter of numbers, but of devotion and commitment. Membership statistics were not even compiled until Methodism had been a force in England for more than thirty years; and even then, they were held down by Wesley’s firm insistence on accountability. That accountability took place within the Class Meetings.

Wesley called the Class Meetings the “sinew” of Methodism. Other terms that could be used might be “muscle” or “genius.” I prefer to call the Class Meetings the *heart* of Methodism, and for the most part, we have taken the *heart* out of Methodism. We need to find a way of restoring the

¹ John Wesley. (1909–1916). *Vol. 3: The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8* (N. Curnock, Ed.) (272). London: Robert Culley; Charles H. Kelly.

heart to Methodism, or cease to call ourselves Methodists. That may seem harsh, but we have rendered the name meaningless.

A Brief Historical Sketch

History can be a wonderful teacher, so, let's begin by sketching the development of the Class Meetings. The story begins with the Religious Societies in England, some of which were present in the Anglican and Moravian Churches.

The Religious Societies. A German Lutheran pastor, Dr. Anthony Horneck, was familiar with some small house groups that had met under the leadership of Jakob Philipp Spener, first in Frankfurt and then elsewhere in Germany. Their aim was to develop a more disciplined spiritual life. Horneck, who had settled in England, encouraged the development of similar religious societies there. They were initiated by lay people, who avoided meeting during the prescribed Sunday services. This caused some suspicion among the clergy, but the societies were committed to deepening the spiritual life of the churches.

The movement grew in London and spread to many other cities as well. Samuel Wesley was invited to preach to one of these societies in 1698, and in 1701, he organized a society in Epworth, with nine charter members. New members could be added, but they had to be approved by the group, and twelve was set as the maximum size of a society. When the society reached twelve, two members were set aside to start a new society. This provided for expansion while maintaining the small size, which encouraged honest participation and direct conversation. While the primary purpose of the religious society at Epworth was to deepen the spirituality of its members, their statement of purpose was "to set up schools for the poor, wherein children (or if need be, adult persons) may be instructed in the fundamentals of Christianity...and to take care of the sick and other poor, and to afford them spiritual as well as corporal helps."

Since the religious societies were limited to men, Susanna Wesley adapted the model and began to hold what she called "enlarged family prayers" in the Epworth rectory in 1712. This was the religious environment in which John Wesley grew up.

There is no record of how long any of these societies lasted, but we know something of the impact they had on early Methodism. The religious societies promoted the practical aspects of Christian discipleship and became increasingly involved in caring for the poor, relieving debt, visiting the sick, providing for orphans, and setting up schools. They were also open to Wesley's preaching when the local Anglican congregations closed their doors and pulpits to him.

The Holy Club. The next step in our historical sketch of the heart of Methodism has to do with the Holy Club. In 1725, John Wesley dedicated himself to no longer be “half a Christian [but] to be all-devoted to God.” Charles Wesley made a similar commitment. When Charles entered Oxford, he discovered some friends with similar interests, and they started meeting together on a regular basis. The date for the beginning of the Holy Club can be set at 1729. Upon his return to Oxford, John was glad to find a group of serious thinkers. As a faculty member he became the group’s leader. The name we usually associate with this group is the “Holy Club,” but as mentioned earlier, there were other names leveled at it, including “Methodist.”¹

The Holy Club is usually viewed as an example of an Anglican religious society because it had rules which its members drew up, it followed the practice of the societies in using the stated prayers of the Anglican tradition, and required regular attendance at the sacrament as a condition for membership. One of the more influential members of the Holy Club, John Clayton, opposed being identified as an Anglican religious society. He feared that such an identification would water down their rigorous discipline based upon the early church in its first five centuries. The members of the Holy Club understood themselves as a disciplined renewal movement within the Anglican Church. Wesley later stated their goal as the “recovery of the faith and practice of primitive Christianity.”

Members of the Holy Club were interested in reading and discussing the classics, but their motives were religious rather than intellectual. They prayed three times aloud during the day, stopped for silent prayer every hour; practiced all the ordinances of the church; and spent their time visiting the sick and imprisoned and conducting schools for the poor. “Methodists” was the mildest name applied to the Holy Club. It was said of them:

By rule they eat, by rule they drink,
Do all things else by rule, but think—
Accuse their priests of loose behavior,
To get more in the laymen’s favor;
Method alone must guide ’em all,
Whence Methodists themselves they call.²

¹ Luke Tyerman. (1870). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 1* (51). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

² Luke Tyerman. (1870). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 1* (248). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

We know the names of some of the members of the Holy Club. Besides John and Charles, there were George Whitefield, James Hery, John Gambold, Westley Hall, and John Clayton. Hervey wrote a best seller in the eighteenth century. John Gambold and Westley Hall were won over to Moravian quietist piety. Gambold became a Moravian bishop and broke off their common work with the Wesley's. Charles Wesley was also tempted by quietism, but it only lasted for three weeks. Others became faithful pastors in the Anglican Church. At its height, the Holy Club had as many as thirty men in it, but when the Wesleys were absent, it shrank to five. Not everyone in the Holy Club turned out to be religious. One of the members married one of Wesley's sisters and was pronounced by the historian of the club "an unmitigated scamp."

In 1735, Wesley was invited by Dr. John Burton, Trustee of the Georgia Colony and patron of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.), to transfer the Holy Club to Georgia to reach out to the Indians and Colonists. In September of that year the invitation was accepted and approved by the Georgia Society. It proved impossible to take the entire Holy Club to Georgia. Only three members were aboard the *Simmonds* when it sailed from Gravesend on October 21, 1735. They were John and Charles and Benjamin Ingham. A new recruit, Charles Delamotte, made a fourth. George Whitefield was still a student at Oxford and was not yet ordained. He promised to join them later. Wesley refers to the Holy Club in Savannah and says that "twenty or thirty persons met at my house" on Sunday afternoons and evenings, and Wednesday evenings, and spent "about an hour in prayer, singing, and mutual exhortation." But he had less success with the Holy Club in Georgia than he had at Oxford. The Georgia groups varied considerably in size and were difficult to discipline. The Holy Club in Georgia ended in failure, but that is another story.¹

The Holy Club at Oxford adopted strict disciplines for themselves in an effort to gain "inward and outward righteousness." Wesley believed that lukewarm Christianity was worse than open or willful sin. He and the other members of the Holy Club labored to bring every area of their lives under submission to Jesus Christ. They toiled at strict self-examination, rigorous spiritual disciplines, and sacrificial good works, yet the assurance of salvation eluded them. At the end of the experience in Georgia, Wesley found himself mired in what he called "a spiritual wilderness." It was the religious society meeting on Aldersgate Street in London that enabled him to find the assurance that he sought. It came not by his own efforts but by grace through faith. Charles had a similar experience of assurance a few

¹ John Wesley, (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 13* (Third Edition) (307). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

days earlier, and so we can date the beginning of the next period in their lives at May 21st and May 24th in 1738.

The United Societies. Upon returning to London, Wesley became involved in the Fetter Lane Society, formed on May 1, 1738 by the Anglicans, but finally dominated by the Moravians. He states that forty or fifty of them agreed to meet together every Wednesday evening for a free conversation, begun and ended with prayer. This was not to be a substitute for worship and the sacrament. Wesley eventually became the unofficial leader of the Fetter Lane Society, but his leadership was challenged by a Moravian from Bohemia, who won a majority of its members over to the belief that the best way to have a spiritual blessing was through “stillness.” That meant the refraining from all good works, all study, and all participation in the services of the churches, until the blessing came. Before the year was finished, it became clear that Wesley could not accommodate himself to such an idea. He tried to patch things up, but finally withdrew with those who agreed with him. The Fetter Lane society was given up entirely to the Moravians. The two streams divided: the Moravians continued their work of testifying to the reality of the inner spiritual life, and the Methodists took upon themselves the task of proclaiming holiness to the multitudes.

One might say that Wesley took the best of the Anglican and Moravian religious societies and created the United or Methodist societies. The first Methodist society was formed in London in November of 1739. Wesley describes the event:

In the latter end of the year 1739, eight or ten persons came to me in London, who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired (as did two or three more the next day) that I would spend some time with them in prayer and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come, which they saw continually hanging over their heads. That we might have more time for this great work, I appointed a day when they might all come together, which from thenceforward they did every week, namely, on Thursday in the evening. To these, and as many more as desired to join with them (for their number increased daily) I gave those advices from time to time which I

judged most needful for them; and we always concluded our meeting with prayer suited to their several necessities.¹

That was the rise of the first United or Methodist Society. Others followed in such places as Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle, and many other parts of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Wesley carefully defined the purpose of the society as “*a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.*”²

The Voluntary Band Meetings. As the Methodist societies grew, their small-group emphasis would have been lost if it had not been for the development of classes, and bands, which became common subdivisions of the societies. Let us take a closer look at the voluntary bands before proceeding to the required classes. We are doing this because the bands actually preceded the classes. Bands developed out of Moravian influences. They were small group units within Moravian congregations. Wesley adopted the format of the bands during his ministry in Savannah, and when he returned to England, he, along with the Moravians, incorporated them into the Fetter Lane Society. When the Fetter Lane Society was first organized, it was Anglican, but it subdivided into bands following the Moravian custom.

The bands were divided into single gender groups and according to marital status. Composed of from five to ten persons, bands met once and sometimes twice a week for singing, prayer, and spiritual conversation, in which each person was to “speak freely, plainly, and concisely as he can, the real State of his Heart, with the several Temptations and Deliverances, since the last Time of meeting.” There were eleven sentences in their covenant:

1. That we will meet together once a week to “confess our faults one to another, and pray one for another, that we may be healed.”

¹ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, (1872). *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, &c. In *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (269). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² ¹ John Wesley and Charles Wesley. (1872). *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, &c. In *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (269). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

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

Their focus was spiritual growth and maturity. The size and nature of the band enabled its members to discuss common problems more freely, which would not have been possible in mixed company. Membership in the bands was strictly voluntary, band tickets were marked with a letter b, and leaders were chosen from within the group. Only about one in five Methodists took the step of joining a band. Since band meetings were not considered essential, they fell into disuse at an early date.

¹ John Wesley. (1909–1916). *Vol. 1: The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8* (N. Curnock, Ed.) (458–459). London: Robert Culley; Charles H. Kelly.

The Required Class Meetings. The required Class Meeting, which became the most characteristic mark of Methodism, arose quite by accident. A loan had to be taken out in Bristol to build the New Room, one of the first Methodist society chapels. Wesley met with some leaders and asked, “How shall we pay the debt upon the preaching-house?” Captain Foy gave the following answer, “Let everyone in the society give a penny a week and it will easily be done.” “But many of them,” said one, “have not a penny to give.” “True” replied the Captain, “then put ten or twelve of them to me. Let each of these give what they can weekly, and I will supply what is wanting.” Others made the same offer, and so Wesley divided the societies among them, assigning a class of about twelve to each of these, whom he called Class Leaders.¹

It was quickly discovered that as the Class Leaders visited their members to collect the contributions, that they performed a unique pastoral role. They were watching over one another in love. This was not only time consuming, but it presented some other problems. The weekly rounds were inconvenient because many Methodists lived as servants in houses where the master or mistress would not permit visitors. Even where such visits were allowed, they were unable to talk in private. This led to the next development in the evolution of classes. Instead of the leader visiting the members, a weekly meeting was set up, which brought the class together with the leader for prayer, Bible study, mutual confession and support. In addition to being a means of paying off a debt, the classes provided training in mutual accountability. Hence the twofold dynamic of the Class Meeting emerged: (1) watching over one another in love, and (2) holding one another mutually accountable.

It was not difficult to get into a class. It was indeed required of every person who wanted to belong to a Methodist society. There was only one condition for persons who desired admission and that was “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.”² As the classes developed it became clear that they needed some guidance, and so Wesley drew up the General Rules in 1743. The aim of the General Rules was to provide the Methodists with biblically prescribed guidelines for holy living. While the General Rules went through thirty-nine revisions in Wesley’s lifetime, their outline remained essentially the same. It was expected of all who continued within the Methodist societies that they give evidence of their desire of salvation:

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 13* (Third Edition) (259). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (250). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind; especially that which is most generally practised.

Second, by doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as is possible to all men....

Thirdly, by attending upon all the ordinances of God. Such are the public worship of God; the ministry of the word, either read or expounded, the Supper of the Lord; private prayer, searching the Scriptures; and fasting, or abstinence.¹

Even a religious conversion was not required to enter a Class Meeting. In fact, more religious conversions occurred within the Class Meetings than in the public preaching services. Class Meeting activities were conducive to conversion. They included singing, prayer, and the sharing of spiritual struggles and victories. Class members were expected to follow the rule of confidentiality: “Let nothing spoken in this society be spoken again. Hereby we had the more full confidence in each other”²

Wesley saw the support and encouragement provided by the societies, classes and bands as nothing other than the pattern provided by the apostles and the early church. He saw the Class Meetings not as an innovation of the Church, but the recovery of the basic principles for the practice of Christian discipleship. From 1745-1748, Wesley experimented with placing the emphasis on preaching alone. During that time he did not form societies or require people to join the Class Meetings. The result was disastrous. “Almost all the seed has fallen by the wayside; there is scarce any fruit remaining,” noted Wesley in the Minutes of the Conference of 1748. At that same Conference the decision was made to turn again to the formation of societies with their Class Meetings. Those who weren’t connected to a class or band were hanging on “a rope of sand,” and Wesley refused to preach where there were no societies with Class Meetings and bands.

¹ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, (1872). *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, &c. In *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (270–271). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley, (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (261). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connexion; and the consequence is that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.¹

Research done by Thomas Albin on the spiritual lives of five hundred fifty-five early British Methodists, whose spiritual biographies were published in the pages of the *Arminian Magazine* and the *Methodist Magazine*, shows that according to their own testimony, only one-fourth experienced new birth in the context of preaching. Three-fourths of them needed the nurture of the society, classes, and bands, and spent an average of 2.3 years in this nurturing process before experiencing what they themselves identified as new birth. The Class Leaders and fellow class members were the primary influences. Because of this valuable truth, Methodist preaching at typical open-air meetings ended not with an *altar call* and a count of the number of conversions, but with an announcement of where the local Methodist society met and an invitation to join one of the Class Meetings.

While profession of Christian conversion was not a requirement to be in a Methodist Class Meeting, classes only admitted serious seekers. Class Meeting tickets were issued quarterly first at Bristol and Kingswood to guard against “disorderly walkers,” some forty of which were expelled in February of 1741. The issuing of tickets spread to London and other places for the same reason, to maintain the level of seriousness and accountability that characterized the Class Meetings. Similar tickets were issued to members of the bands. Three consecutive absences from the Class Meeting meant the loss of one’s ticket, and without a ticket, one could not gain admission into the meetings. Class Leaders were required to keep an accurate record of attendance.

Just how many classes were there? In 1766, the first year for which we have any statistics, they numbered approximately 19,000 in England and Wales. At Wesley’s death in 1791, there were more than 53,000. The population of England and Wales at that time was between 8.5 and 9 million. The Methodist Episcopal Church ceased to make the Class Meeting a requirement in 1864, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South discontinued the requirement of weekly attendance at Class

¹ John Wesley. (1909–1916). *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8*. (N. Curnock, Ed.) (Vol. 5, p. 26). London: Robert Culley.

Meetings in 1866. The Methodist Discipline continued to include instructions for Class Meetings until the 1930's. Regardless of what we have done with the Class Meetings today, it remains the most theological and practical contribution made by Wesley, and by Methodism to the Christian tradition. Wesley called them the prudential means of grace. If Wesley understood the Class Meetings as the sinew (muscle) of Methodism, what gives us the right to set them aside? Our problem today is that we think we have outgrown the snares of sinful human nature, but nothing could be further from the truth.¹

One might well ask, "If the Class Meeting was so important to the rise of Methodism, why was it ever given up?" Several reasons are given for the decline of the Class Meetings. The first is that the Methodist societies became a church. For awhile the Class Meetings continued to energize the church; but soon pastors began to settle down in particular parishes, diminishing the need for Class Leaders. The second reason is that the Class Meetings simply gave way to Sunday School classes. Listening to teachers interpret biblical passages became more popular than participation in Class Meetings, where members were expected to share their spiritual journeys and be accountable to one another. The third reason had to do with the waning of the fires of revival. Class Meetings became perfunctory, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Class Meetings had all but disappeared, except where spirituality was alive and well, such as in the Black and Korean churches. They have also continued to exist in some third world churches, or among other denominations where the combination of spirituality and accountability is valued.

A Modern Approach

Why not let things alone? Maybe we do not need Class Meetings in modern Methodism. If we were taking Christian discipleship as seriously today as the early Christians and early Methodists did, then our conclusion might be to move in new and different directions. When we look at early Methodism, we find that they were more interested in obedience to Christ than they were in doctrinal beliefs, or even religious experience. Class Leaders were charged with the task of making sure that this priority was upheld. This meant accountability, one of many things missing in modern Methodism.

The above is well illustrated in how The United Methodist Church deals with membership. In our effort to attract more members, we emphasize the benefits of membership and downplay the cost of

¹ David Lowes Watson, *Class Leaders* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998), p. 50.

discipleship. This is a direct inversion of the invitation to discipleship given by Jesus, who allowed people unwilling to pay the price to simply walk away. We are consumed with membership enrollment, or at least increasing our average attendance. This comes dangerously close to idolatry. The consequence of this approach is that we compromise the cost of discipleship in order to attract more people into membership or to warm our pews. A true response to Christ does result in benefits, but not without the cost of discipleship.

How did we come to this? It happened quite naturally as we did away with the *heart* of Methodism—the Class Meeting. We moved away from what James D. Anderson and Ezra Earl Jones calls transformational leadership. The business model of transactional leadership was adopted. David Watson defines the difference in these two kinds of leadership:

Transactional leadership is responsible for meeting the needs of church members, and for the institutional maintenance of the church. Transformational leadership is responsible for keeping church members focused on the vision of the gospel and the obligations of their discipleship.¹

Both kinds of leadership are necessary, but both kinds of leadership need to be given distinct and equal emphasis in the life and mission of the church. In early Methodism that balance was maintained with two kinds of leaders—the Class Leaders and the stewards. Class Leaders focused on forming disciples and stewards focused on the care of temporal things. We have our equivalence of stewards in our committee structure, which does a fairly good job of administrating the church, but we have nothing like the Class Leaders who kept Methodism focused on forming disciples, even though we claim that our primary mission is “to make disciples for the transformation of the world.” We need to restore something like the Class Meeting in order to develop transformational leaders. We already have plenty of transactional leaders. We know how to transact business, but we do not know how to make disciples.

Covenant Discipleship Groups. There is no point in reinventing the wheel. Fortunately, David Lowes Watson developed what he named “Covenant Discipleship Groups” at Holly Springs United Methodist Church in Holly Springs, North Carolina in 1975. At the time the members of Holly Springs United Methodist Church did not know they were doing anything particularly significant. They just wanted to seek the grace of God by practicing the disciplines of the faith, and to hold one another

¹ David :Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples* (Nashville, Discipleship Resources, 1999), pp. 120-121.

accountable for their discipleship. In doing this they reestablished both accountability and transformational leadership. They learned how to make disciples, the primary mission of The United Methodist Church. They were theologically driven; whereas, most congregations are sociologically driven. Transactional leaders try to please the members rather than move them to pay the cost of Christian discipleship. For example, the only condition of discipleship that one can find in the New Testament is Jesus' call to obedience, to carry a cross. There is never any discussion of potential benefits, even though they existed.

Watson defines both the Class Meeting of the past and Covenant Discipleship Groups in modern Methodism. Let us look first at his definition of the Class Meeting, which is:

The Class Meeting was a weekly gathering, a subdivision of the early societies, at which members were required to give an account to one another of their discipleship and thereby to sustain each other in their witness. These meetings were regarded by Wesley as the “sinews” of the Methodist movement, the means by which members “watched over one another in love.”¹

Two things happened in those early Class Meetings that can and should be happening today—accountability and the watching over of one another in love.

Through the Class Meetings, Wesley called the church back to the principles of scriptural Christianity, personal holiness, and social responsibility; and he did this through the ordinances of the Church. This was the method in Methodism, and we still need it in some form today. Covenant Discipleship Groups represent a modern approach to the Class Meetings of early Methodism. Watson's definition follows:

A Covenant Discipleship Group consists of two to seven people who agree to meet together for one hour per week in order to hold themselves mutually accountable for their discipleship. They do this by affirming a written covenant on which they themselves have agreed.²

While the group may have as few as two members, the dynamic of the meeting is impeded. The dynamic is much better with five to seven members. Eight members is generally considered too many because the

¹ David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998), p. 18.

² David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998), p. 97.

larger number limits conversation. The larger number might be used when group members travel or find it difficult to meet every week.

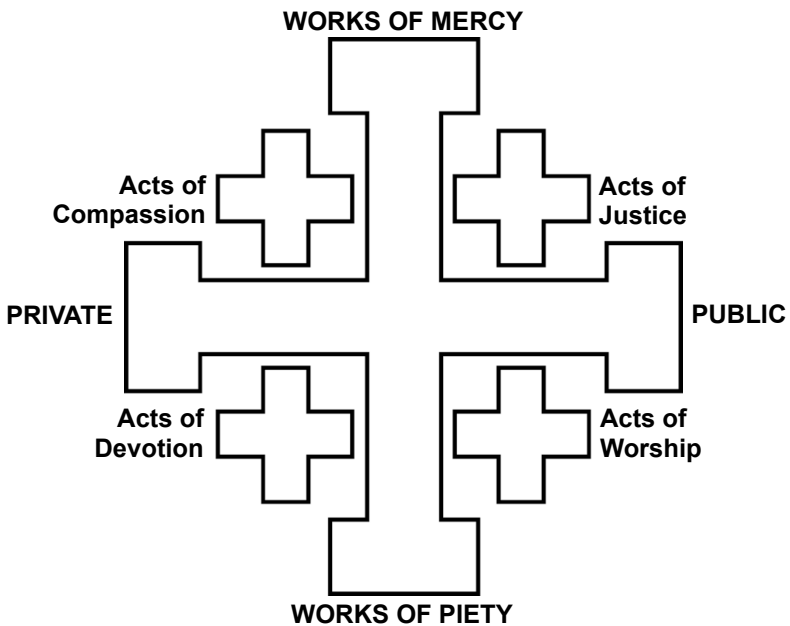
Watson estimates that 15% of the active membership or 5-7% of the total membership in a United Methodist Church are ready to take part in Covenant Discipleship Groups. As such groups are formed, there are a few principles that need to be understood.

1. The pastor should be involved. The most natural support group for the pastor is not other pastors, but the pastor's own people.
2. The staff should be involved, but they should not be expected to provide permanent leadership, even though they may well provide such leadership in the beginning.
3. Discipleship groups should last one hour, and they should start and finish on time.
4. A new member may visit three times. Then he or she must decide whether or not to join the group.
5. There are regular opportunities for changing the covenant, but welcoming a new member is not one of them.
6. Covenant Sunday is a good time for groups to review their meeting schedules, revise their covenants, and if necessary, change groups.¹
7. The accountability of the groups is for the purpose of the forming of faithful disciples and holding them on course as they live out their discipleship in the world. Covenant Discipleship Groups are not to be used as work groups for the church.

The New General Rule. While the modern name for the Class Meeting is the Covenant Discipleship Group, the modern name for the General Rules is the New General Rule or the General Rule of Discipleship. The General Rules written up by Wesley contained not only the obligations of discipleship, but how those obligations were to be carried out by the classes. Wesley's intent was to help the members of the Class Meetings maintain a balance in their discipleship; therefore, the General Rules were three in number: to do no harm, to do good, and to participate in all of the ordinances of the church. Each of these three rules

¹ Covenant Sunday would be the first Sunday of the new year. Wesley wrote a special service for Covenant Sunday.

contained a number of specific clauses, some of which are not relevant today. The ordinances of the church are very much the same as today. They include: prayer, the searching of the scriptures, the Lord’s Supper, fasting, and Christian conferencing. Only the last two need some explanation to make them relevant to modern times. Fasting was suggested in order to help people detach themselves from earthly things and to focus on spiritual realities. That was as much of a problem then as it is today. Christian conferencing refers to the importance of Christian community. In fellowship with others, we benefit from mutual accountability and growth.



Watson wants us to appreciate the historical General Rules, but he creates a New General Rule for today, which is:

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.¹

Witnessing

The primary mission of every Christian is to bear witness to Jesus Christ, not in the church, but in the world. Wesley said that God raised up

¹ David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998) p.78.

the Methodists “...not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”¹ When the Anglican Church accused him of proselytizing, he replied:

Our societies were formed from those who were wandering upon the dark mountains, that belonged to no Christian Church; but were awakened by the preaching of the Methodists, who had pursued them through the wilderness of this world to the High-ways and the Hedges—to the Markets and the Fairs—to the Hills and the Dales—who set up the Standard of the Cross in the Streets and Lanes of the Cities, in the Villages, in the Barns, and Farmers’ Kitchens, etc.— and all this done in such a way, and to such an extent, as never had been done before since the Apostolic Age.²

The early Methodists discovered scripture and prayer in the early Class Meetings. They also found their voice and felt impelled to witness. The rapid growth of Methodism was attributable to that witnessing. Wesley insisted that “...our calling is to save that which is lost. Now, we cannot expect the wanderers from God to seek us. It is our part to go and seek them.”³ The purpose of the church must be given as much priority today as it was in early Methodism. We need to gather in Covenant Discipleship Groups to plan our strategy for witnessing in the world and hold one another accountable for it. Our greatest witness will focus on works of mercy and works of piety.

Works of Mercy

In works of mercy, disciples are to do everything possible to serve God and their neighbor, while at the same time avoiding those things that offend God and harm their neighbor. In the New General Rule there are two works of mercy—acts of compassion and acts of justice. Compassion is a private act and justice is a public act. Watson defines acts of compassion as follows:

Acts of compassion are those simple, basic things we do out of kindness to our neighbor; and our neighbor is anyone who is in need, anywhere in the world. To the extent that we feed the hungry,

¹ Luke Tyerman. (1876). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 2* (3rd edition) (474). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

² William Barclay. (2001). *The Gospel of Luke*. The New Daily Study Bible (67–68). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (300). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the imprisoned, we minister to Christ in our midst.¹

The primary scriptural passages to support our need to witness through acts of compassion can be found in the last judgement in Matthew 25:31-46; the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37; and in James 2:14-17.

Justice is a social act. Wesley did not take the Methodist societies out of the world, but showed them how to follow God in the world. He knew that they would be marked people for declaring publicly that the personal and social teachings of Jesus were to be taken seriously. To pattern their lives after Jesus would lead to considerable tension with the world in which they lived. Watson defines acts of justice as follows:

Acts of justice remind us that God thundered the law from Sinai and pronounced righteousness through the prophets. We must not only minister to people in need, but ask why they are in need in the first place. And if they are being treated unjustly, then we must confront the persons or systems that cause the injustice.²

The primary scriptural passages to support our need to witness through acts of justice are the Old Testament prophets, specifically Amos 5:24, and Jesus' opening sermon in Nazareth, which is located in Luke 4:16-21.

Why do we need to be held accountable for acts of compassion and justice? Wesley knew all too well that the promptings of the Holy Spirit could be ignored or misinterpreted due to laziness. Works of mercy are obligatory for Christians, even if they are not in the mood for them. The hungry need feeding, even if we are not in the mood. The naked need to be clothed, whether or not it is convenient for us. The sick need help, whether or not we are feeling up to it. Those in prison need to be visited, whether or not we feel we have anything to offer them. Acts of compassion require acts of justice to follow. Most Covenant Discipleship Groups will have the most difficulty with acts of justice.

Works of Piety

In works of piety, disciples are to do everything needful to be open to God's grace. In the New General Rule there are two works of piety—acts

¹ David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), p. 9.

² David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), p. 9.

of devotion and acts of worship. Acts of devotion are private and acts of worship are public. Watson defines acts of devotion as follows.

Acts of devotion are those private spiritual disciplines of prayer, reading the scriptures, and inward examination, that bring us face to face with God most directly, when no one else is present. At such times, our dialogue with God is intensely personal, searching, and enriching.¹

The four most personal acts of devotion would be searching the scripture, prayer, fasting, and giving. Scriptural passages that support these devotions include 2 Timothy 1:3-17; Matthew 6:4-15; Matthew 6:16-18; and Matthew 6:19-21. For a better understanding of fasting, look up Isaiah 58:6-10. Obviously, acts of devotion lead us into acts of worship, the public expression of the works of piety.

In acts of worship we observe the ordinances of the Church, or what might be called the means of grace in a public manner. Wesley insisted that Methodists ought to participate in the Lord's Supper as frequently as they can. In the early days, the Methodist services avoided offering the Lord's Supper because Wesley was encouraging everyone to worship on Sunday in the nearest Anglican Church. Methodism was to be a *method* of carrying out one's discipleship. It was not to become a Church. Watson defines the acts of worship as follows:

Acts of worship are the means of grace that we exercise corporately: the ministries of word and sacrament. Not only do they affirm the indispensable place of the church in Christian discipleship. They also enable us to build each other up in the Body of Christ.²

Our regularity of worship in word and sacrament is far more important than the benefits we might derive from them. Our presence is itself a witness. To become more regular in worship we need to be accountable to one another. We need each other to discern the will of God. No one can do this on his or her own. The important scriptural passages that support our witness through acts of worship might include Matthew 18:20; Acts 2:41-47; and Hebrews 10:22-25.

¹ David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), p. 9.

² David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), p. 9.

The Guidance of the Holy Spirit

All of the above is to be done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Christian disciples, insists Watson, do not have *bright ideas*; they have *promptings* from the Holy Spirit. Christian disciples do not *have twinges of conscience*; they have *warnings* from the Holy Spirit.¹ Identifying these *promptings* and *warnings* is one of the critical tasks of every Covenant Discipleship Group. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is best comprehended where two or three are gathered together seeking it. It is too easy for the individual to ignore the *promptings* and *warnings* of the Holy Spirit.

To understand how the Holy Spirit operates in our lives, it might be helpful to look more carefully at Wesley's religious experience at Aldersgate. Wesley describes when it happened (*a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ*), but he also recounts the impression made on his spiritual senses (*I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death*). The primary actor at Aldersgate was the Holy Spirit making an impression on Wesley's mind and heart.

The Holy Spirit works through our spiritual senses. "To every other eye," said Rudolf Bultmann, "other than the eye of faith the action of God is hidden." So, what are these spiritual senses through which the Holy Spirit guides us? Archbishop William Temple alluded to the spiritual senses when he defined worship. "To worship," he wrote, "is to quicken the *conscience* by the holiness of God, to feed the *mind* with the truth of God, to purge the *imagination* by the beauty of God, to open the *heart* to the love of God, to devote the *will* to the purpose of God."² Drawing upon Temple's definition of worship, I would suggest the following spiritual senses: (1) reflective reason, (2) common sense, (3) a moral conscience, (4) free choice, and (5) feelings of the heart. All of these spiritual senses put together make the individual able to respond to God's gift of grace (unmerited love) by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). We could certainly spend time with each of the spiritual senses, but discussion of one should suffice. Wesley rejected the idea of a natural conscience. Conscience, he insisted, is a gift from God. What we all have is a moral sense, but we must be careful that we do not destroy that moral sense. Wesley's own experience of

¹ David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998) p.92.

² William Barclay. (2001). *The Gospel of Matthew* (Third Ed.). The New Daily Study Bible (137). Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press.

assurance occurred not in solitude, but in the company of fellow believers. Sharpening our spiritual senses depends upon being accountable to fellow believers. Without that accountability, we are likely to make shipwreck not only of our conscience, but also of our souls. Some important scriptural passages that support the impression that the Holy Spirit makes on us to guide us can be found in Romans 8:12-16 and 1 Timothy 1:18-19.

The Meetings. Let us now look at how Covenant Discipleship Groups actually work. I visited sixteen groups in Indiana, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. All of them met weekly and rotated leadership. Some of them had a person designated as the convener, who then met monthly with the pastor. Half of the groups were restricted to one gender, three groups were all men and five groups were all women. These groups insisted that it gave them more freedom to talk about concerns that would never be mentioned in a mixed group. The women were as insistent about that as the men. Obviously the women permitted me to sit in on a one-time basis.

All of the groups began their sessions with prayer. After the opening prayer, there was considerable diversity. Some of the groups used the *Upper Room* or the *Upper Room Disciplines* for a brief devotion. Some of the groups studied a book and shared some thoughts from it as a devotion. Some of the groups used a simple Bible Study as their devotion. Following the prayer and devotional time, which for the most part, lasted no more than fifteen minutes, all of the groups took on the four acts of the New General Rule—compassion, justice, devotion, and worship. Some groups only dealt with one of them in a session, while other groups dealt with all four. The most difficult one for all the groups was justice. All of the groups closed by sharing prayer concerns, and for the most part, allowed time for each member to offer a brief prayer. An occasional meeting was closed with prayer by the leader, particularly when time was running out. They all adhered to the one strict rule, that a Covenant Discipleship Group was to meet *only* for one hour.

None of the covenants were the same. They varied from being very simple to being very complex. Few of the groups had time for everyone to respond to every clause of their covenant every time they met. This only happened when the covenant was simple and written in general terms. One clause that David Watson included in his sample covenant had to do with tithing, or taking steps towards tithing. None of the groups I visited included any clause on tithing. There were a few clauses that had to do with giving of self and resources, but they ignored percentages and amounts. There were some instances when individuals included clauses that they wanted to be held accountable for, even though the rest of the group could not agree to include the clause in the group covenant. Some of

these had to do with giving financial resources, but none had to do with tithing.

I thought the word “accountability” would scare people, but none of the groups shied away from the term. They saw it as a friendly term. When asked about “confidentiality,” every group said that it was not a problem. A potential problem mentioned by several groups had to do with viewing the Covenant Discipleship Groups as a working committee of the church. Covenant Discipleship Groups are not supposed to meet where discipleship happens. Such groups make sure that discipleship happens in the world. Participants hold one another accountable and watch over one another in love. Accountability and love seemed to go hand in hand. It seemed to work.

The practice of fasting came up from time to time. John Wesley fasted every Friday. Some of the Covenant Discipleship Groups fasted during the day on Friday and contributed money to be given to some worthy hunger project. That is as close as any of the groups came to being a working committee. I should mention that the members of one group worked together in a soup kitchen once a month.

All but two of the groups met in a small room at the church. One group met in the homes of its members and another group met in an office of the Mayo Clinic. Most of the groups met either early in the morning or during what one might call evening meal time. The times ranged from 5:30 to 7:00 a.m. in the morning and 5:30 to 8:00 p.m. in the evening. There were a couple of groups that met around Noon. It was obvious that group members understood what they were doing and that their discipleship was to take place in the world, where God is acting. They saw their group as helping them cope with being a Christian in the world. When I suggested meeting every other week, every group insisted that it was important to meet every week.

I have been meeting with one group that meets every week for more than ten years. Some of them would say that attendance in the Covenant Discipleship group is more important than attendance in public worship. This group rotates leadership. The leader begins with a brief prayer and devotion, which is followed by a time for checking in with how they are doing with the Covenant. Prior to coming to the meeting, everyone reads a passage of Scripture or a chapter from a book. A brief discussion revolves around what they have read. Over the years this group has come to desire closing every Covenant Discipleship Group meeting with Holy Communion. Since I am ordained, that’s not a problem, but it has become important to the group. I personally feel that every member of a Covenant

Discipleship Group should be permitted to lead in Holy Communion, even without clergy being present.

Class Leaders. Only one of the churches I visited had what Watson calls *Class Leaders*, but they were called *Discipleship Stewards*. The church was located in a university city and did not want to use the word *class*. All of the Discipleship Stewards were in Covenant Discipleship Groups, but they also were given pastoral responsibility for fifteen to twenty members of the congregation, who were not in Covenant Discipleship Groups. The Discipleship Stewards were also present at new member orientations and a new member was always assigned to a Discipleship Steward. Although new members were invited to join Covenant Discipleship Groups, they rarely did so at the time that they joined the church. The Discipleship Stewards met with the pastor on a monthly basis to discuss pastoral concerns and programming needs. These concerns and needs were brought to the forefront in the Covenant Discipleship Group meetings and from conversations they had with persons assigned to their group, who were not participating members of their Covenant Discipleship Group.

Class Leaders, according to Watson, exist to move the membership from thinking of itself as the recipients of pastoral care to becoming a support base for serving Jesus Christ in the world. This is its calling. When the staff tries to fill all the needs of the congregation, it will find its resources inadequate and inappropriate. Watson goes on to define Class Leaders:

Class leaders are laypersons entrusted with the formation of a congregation in the basics of Christian discipleship. They do this by helping a class of fifteen to twenty members shape their lives according to the General Rule of Discipleship and in keeping with each one's gifts and graces.

In 1988, after an absence of fifty years, the office of Class Leader was reintroduced into *The Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church.¹

The office of Class Leader was lost because the work that had been delegated to Class Leaders was gradually assumed by pastors. With this clergy domination, the grassroots authority of the Class Leaders was slowly replaced by a clergy-dominated structure of pastorates and annual conferences so familiar to us today. "It will probably take at least a generation," says Watson, "to recover the accountable discipleship that

¹ David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), p. 128

Methodism took more than a century to lose.” Watson warns that the office of Class Leader should not be introduced until Covenant Discipleship Groups have been in place for at least two years.

To better understand the office of Class Leader, it might be best to list the qualifications and responsibilities of such *transformational* leadership.

Qualifications: A Class Leader...

1. desires to follow Christ in daily living.
2. loves the gospel.
3. is a member of a Covenant Discipleship Group.
4. has the ability to empower others to be active Christian disciples.
5. leads by example in Christian discipleship.
6. is willing to be held accountable and to hold others accountable to the General Rule of Discipleship.
7. is willing to contact fifteen to twenty class members by phone or in person on a monthly basis.
8. has the ability to be a transformational leader, a visionary leader.¹

Responsibilities: A Class Leader is responsible

1. to keep focused on the primary task.
2. to be accountable for your own walk with Christ by meeting weekly in a Covenant Discipleship Group.
3. to encourage your class members to practice justice, compassion, worship, and devotion, as they witness to Christ in the world.
4. to “nudge” your class members in their discipleship by upholding them through regular telephone calls, letters, or personal visits.
5. to guide your class members in finding resources for their acts of worship, devotion, justice, compassion, and their witness to Jesus Christ.

¹ Grace Bradford, *Guide for Class Leaders* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), p. 22.

6. to meet once a month with the pastor, the lay leader, and other Class Leaders in a regularly scheduled leaders' meeting.
7. to keep alert for the promptings of the Holy Spirit in your life.
8. to participate in the Administrative Board or Council.
9. to be accountable to the congregation through your annual election to the office of Class Leader at the church conference.¹

It should be obvious by now that the Class Leaders form a direct link between the Covenant Discipleship Groups and the congregation as a whole. While the Class Leaders need to be involved in Covenant Discipleship Groups, some of the members of their class do not have to be in a Covenant Discipleship Group. What is important is that the various classes represent the full range of membership

The monthly meeting of Class Leaders, which should include the lay leader(s), has two purposes: (1) to provide ongoing support and supervision for the Class Leaders; and (2) to take the pulse of the congregation through the reports of the Class Leaders. The practical result of these meetings will be program enhancement. The Class Leaders will need to be aware of the range of programs and activities available to members, and the church leadership will be in a much better position to plan programs that address genuine needs and interests, rather than to try to discover what will attract people's participation in unwanted or unnecessary activities.

The final question to be asked is not whether the above will work, but whether it is right. There are countless Methodists, past and present, who have answered that question with a resounding "yes." Are we ready to join them, or would we rather continue without using the *method and heart* of Methodism?

¹ Grace Bradford, *Guide for Class Leaders* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999), p. 49.

4. CONSTANT COMMUNION

*Then their eyes were opened,
and they recognized him;
and he vanished from their sight.*

Luke 24:31

*One family we dwell in Him,
One church, above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream, of death:¹*

Charles Wesley

The Lord's Supper is a Means of Grace

To both John and Charles Wesley, the Lord's Supper was a means of Grace. They went so far as to claim that it was the *Chief* means of Grace. What made the Lord's Supper so precious as a means of Grace? It was the last command of Christ before he faced his death on the cross, and it conveyed the "Real Presence" of Christ. To the Wesley's nothing could be more real than Christ's Presence, but that presence was not to be located in the elements of bread and wine. John explains what happens in the elements of bread and wine:

Is not the eating of that bread, and the drinking of that cup, the outward, visible means, whereby God conveys into our souls all that spiritual grace, that righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which were purchased by the body of Christ once broken and the blood of Christ once shed for us? Let all, therefore, who truly desire the grace of God, eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.²

The elements of bread and wine simply convey what they symbolize. What John describes in prose, Charles describes in song.

Who shall say how bread and wine
God into man conveys,
How the Bread His flesh imparts
How the wine transmits the blood,

¹ Luke Tyerman. (1871). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 3* (p. 526). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (195). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Fills his faithful people's hearts
With all the life of God?¹

Charles refers to the elements as the "Bread of Heaven" and the wine as the "Heavenly Wine." Our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, but even more, they are the food and drink of our souls.

Jesu, on Thee we feed
Along our desert way;
Thou art the Living Bread
Which doth our spirits stay;
And all who in this banquet join
Lean on the Staff of Life Divine.²

The Lord's Supper is a real means of grace, commanded by the Lord Himself, bestowing grace upon those who by faith receive it.

The Recipients

Following the early church, Wesley regarded baptism, not confirmation, as the necessary qualification for admission to the Lord's Supper.

[Baptism] is the initiatory sacrament, which enters us into covenant with God. It was instituted by Christ, who alone has power to institute a proper sacrament, a sign, seal, pledge, and means of grace, perpetually obligatory on all Christians. We know not, indeed, the exact time of its institution; but we know it was long before our Lord's ascension. And it was instituted in [place] of circumcision. For, as that was a sign and seal of God's covenant, so is this.³

Wesley regarded baptism as the rite of initiation into the Church. He also understood baptism to be a sufficient qualification for partaking of the Lord's Supper. There is no evidence that he insisted upon confirmation as a requirement.

If confirmation was not required to partake of the Lord's Supper, what conditions were required to participate? Wesley's insistence on "Constant Communion," and on observing the General Rules, resulted in crowded

¹ John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), p. 170.

² John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), p. 172.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 10* (Third Edition) (188). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

communion services in early Methodism. Wesley had to make up his mind whether conditions should be imposed on those who thronged to participate in the Lord's Supper.

In principle Wesley called everyone to the Lord's Supper, just as he invited everyone to the Lord, and with the same conditions. Charles Wesley put the invitation into song:

Come to the Supper, come,
Sinners, there still is room;
Every soul may be His guest,
Jesus gives the general word;
Share the monumental Feast,
Eat the Supper of your Lord.¹

In a letter written to John Simpson, Wesley asked the question, "Ought every believer to pray or communicate?" He replied "Yes," and then went on to say. "And if you believe Christ died for guilty, helpless sinners, then eat that bread and drink of that cup."²

One of the most important features of the Methodist Revival was that the Lord's Supper came to be regarded as a converting ordinance. Both John and Charles Wesley understood the Lord's Supper to be a means of grace in the whole of the Christian journey, from the beginning to the end. Age limits were difficult to set. I have heard that Wesley's mother, Susannah Wesley, was converted at the Lord's Supper, but I have been unable to find any documentation of her childhood experience. She did, however, record the following adult experience.

But two or three weeks ago, while my son Hall was pronouncing those words, in delivering the cup to me, "The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee," the words struck through my heart, and I knew God for Christ's sake had forgiven me all my sins."³

¹ John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), p. 106.

² *Letters*, VI, November 28th, 1774, p. 124.

³ John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), p. 106. The next year [1739], Another version of Susanna Wesley on the Lord's Supper indicates that she had this experience sometime in 1739. "The words *the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for Thee* struck my heart," she said, "and I knew that God for Christ's sake had forgiven me all my sins."

One might say, “But his mother grew up as a Christian. This was just a special moment in which she received an assurance of the grace of God.” One can find other examples of conversion at the Lord’s Supper. The following example illustrated for Wesley the significance of the Lord’s Supper as a converting ordinance:

Till *Saturday* the 10th, I think I did not meet with one woman of the society who had not been upon the point of casting away her confidence in God. I then indeed found one who, when many (according to their custom) laboured to persuade her she had no faith, replied, with a spirit they were not able to resist, “I know that the life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me; and He has never left me one moment, since the hour He was made known to me in the breaking of bread.”¹

Experiences like this led Wesley to administer the Lord’s Supper to men and women prior to conversion. He was again following a practice of the early Church.

In the ancient Church, every one who was baptized communicated daily. So in the Acts we read, they “all continued daily in the breaking of bread, and in prayer.”

But in latter times many have affirmed that the Lord’s Supper is not a converting, but a confirming ordinance.

And among us it has been diligently taught that none but those who are converted, who have received the Holy Ghost, who are believers in the full sense, ought to communicate.

But experience shows the gross falsehood of that assertion that the Lord’s Supper is not a converting ordinance. Ye are the witnesses. For many now present know, the very beginning of your conversion to God (perhaps, in some, the first deep conviction) was wrought at the Lord’s Supper. Now, one single instance of this kind overthrows the whole assertion.

The falsehood of the other assertion appears both from Scripture precept and example. Our Lord commanded those very men who were then unconverted, who had not yet received the Holy Ghost, who (in the full sense of the word) were not believers, to do this “in remembrance of” Him. Here the precept is clear. And to these

¹ John Wesley. (1909–1916). *Vol. 2: The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8* (N. Curnock, Ed.) (267). London: Robert Culley; Charles H. Kelly.

He delivered the elements with His own hands. Here is example equally indisputable.¹

Another factor, besides defining the Lord's Supper as a converting ordinance, which explains the appeal of the Methodist revival, was Wesley's universalism. Grace was available to all. Charles Wesley again put it in a hymn:

O for a trumpet voice
On all the world to call,
To bid their hearts rejoice
In Him who died for all!
For all my Lord was crucified;
For all, for all my Saviour died.²

This universalism could not help but call all persons to the Lord's Supper. The Wesley brothers frequently preached from the parable of the Great Supper.³

While Wesley invited seekers after God to participate in the Lord's Supper, he did not demand a full assurance of faith. It was sufficient if they were sincere seekers and willing to accept what God was waiting to bestow upon them. Thus, believing the Lord's Supper to be a converting ordinance and proclaiming God's free grace available to all, the Wesley's called repentant sinners to the Lord's Table.

In the early days of the Methodist revival, the Lord's Table was unfenced, but it was not long before something had to be done to preserve the sanctity of the ordinance. This was done in two ways. In the first place a moral and spiritual obligation was enforced. Those who attended the Lord's Supper were expected to show evidence of a faith in Christ, or at least a sincere seeking after that faith, which manifested itself in repentance and good works. Wesley invited not only those who had found, but also those who were seeking, salvation through Christ. Salvation comes as a free gift from a gracious God, but to make that gift real, one must actively respond and reach out with the arms of true repentance to receive the gift. Wesley agreed that "a man who is not assured that his sins are forgiven may yet have a kind or degree of faith, which distinguishes him,

¹ John Wesley. (1909–1916). *Vol. 2: The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8* (N. Curnock, Ed.) (360–361). London: Robert Culley; Charles H. Kelly.

² John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), p. 109.

³ Luke 14:15-24

not only from a devil, but also from a Heathen; and on which I may admit him to the Lord's supper."¹

What Wesley could not tolerate is what Paul describes in the Corinthian church as an abuse of the Lord's Supper. Wesley's conception of "eating and drinking unworthily" is not "being unworthy to eat and drink," but "taking the Holy Sacrament in such a rude and disorderly way that one was hungry and another drunken."²

To deal with this problem, a practical obligation was devised. Only those were admitted who were able to produce either a Class Ticket or a Communion Note. The necessity for this step became obvious when the crowds, made up of all sorts and conditions of people, thronged to the services. There would be believers, sinners seeking redemption, and the curious, who were there to see a spectacle not to be missed. Worst of all were mischief makers, bent on disturbance. Something had to be done to preserve the sanctity of the Lord's Supper.

The first use of Communion Notes and Class Tickets took place in 1747. Class Tickets were given to members and signed and dated every quarter. In regard to those who received a Class Ticket, "On every ticket [Wesley] wrote, with his own hand, the member's name, 'so that,' says he, 'the ticket implied as strong a recommendation of the person to whom it was given as if I had wrote at length, 'I believe the bearer hereof to be one that fears God and works righteousness.'"³ Nonmembers who wished to participate in the Lord's Supper had to apply for a note. Communion Notes were also issued quarterly, but the officiating minister could issue a note prior to the service. Children could also participate, as the story of a young girl illustrates.

The Rev. John Fletcher was about to administer the Sacrament at West Street in which he was approached in the vestry by a young girl who asked for a "note" to stay. Fletcher gave her one, an "unconverted" girl as she was. She was converted later under the preaching of Thomax Maxfield and became a class leader at City Road Chapel, in the burial ground of which she was laid to rest in 1818.⁴

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 12* (Third Edition) (468). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (152). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ Luke Tyerman, L. (1870). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 1* (353–354). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

⁴ Luke Tyerman, *Life of Fletcher*, pp. 39-40.

This brings up the question of children and the Lord's Supper. I've already pointed out that confirmation was not a requirement. Baptism was. From the very beginning of Wesley's ministry, he paid a great deal of attention to children. "One of the serious functions of the Holy Club was the religious instruction of children. On board the 'Simmonds,' in Savannah and Frederica, Wesley ceaselessly cared for the children, teaching, catechizing, and preparing them for Confirmation or Holy Communion."¹ He instructed them and allowed them to partake of the Lord's Supper. When asked by the Moravian Mr. Spangenberg in July of 1737, about the proper age to prepare children for the Lord's Supper Wesley, replied:

We instruct children in Christianity from their infancy, but so as to regard their understanding rather than memory. I have known a child of eight years old admitted to communicate and a man of seventy not yet admitted.

There is the story of Elizabeth Bushell, who lived at Wilton, near Salisbury, who desired to take the Lord's Supper at the parish church with other members of the Methodist society. She was refused on the grounds of her age. On Wesley's arrival, the case was submitted to him. He took Elizabeth on his knee, conversed with her, and administered to her the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Wesley treated children as "little adults," expecting them to have religious experiences such as might be found in adults.

From the very beginning, Wesley was interested in children. The Methodist Societies admitted children at the age of nine or ten. What concerned Wesley was not the age but the faith of the person who wanted to participate in the Lord's Supper.

The Frequency

Wesley wrote a sermon for the use of students at Oxford. Fifty-five years later he made very few changes. The subject of that sermon had to do with the frequency or infrequency of Holy Communion. In light of both these attitudes, Wesley called for Constant Communion. Using Luke 22:18, which says, "Do this in remembrance of me," he began his first and major point, saying, "...it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord's Supper as often as he can."²

¹ John Wesley. (1909–1916). *Vol. 5: The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Volumes 1–8* (N. Curnock, Ed.) (262). London: Robert Culley; Charles H. Kelly.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (147). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

1. Holy Communion is the Plain Command of Christ

Wesley gives two or three reasons for Constant Communion. While he states clearly the first two points, his third point seems more like an extension of his second point. His first point is crystal clear. “The first reason why it is the duty of every Christian so to do is, because it is a plain command of Christ.”¹ Not only were these words a command, but they were among his last words to his disciples. This command was meaningful to those first Christians, who for several centuries celebrated it almost every day. “This is,” wrote Wesley, “First, a full *purpose* of heart to keep all the commandments of God; and, Secondly, a sincere *desire* to receive all his promises.”²

2. Holy Communion offers Pardon and Forgiveness

The second reason for Constant Communion has to do with its benefits. A Second reason,” says Wesley, “why every Christian should do this as often as he can, is, because the benefits of doing it are so great to all that do it in obedience to him; viz., the forgiveness of our past sins, the present strengthening and refreshing of our souls. In this world we are never free from temptations.”³ The grace of God confirms to us the pardon of our sins by enabling us to leave them behind. This is the food of our souls. Wesley continues:

This gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection. If, therefore, we have any regard for the plain command of Christ, if we desire the pardon of our sins, if we wish for strength to believe, to love and obey God, then we should neglect no opportunity of receiving the Lord’s Supper; then we must never turn our backs on the feast which our Lord has prepared for us⁴

3. Holy Communion Strengthens the Soul

Although Wesley doesn’t attempt to make a third point for constant communion, it seems to me that he makes a distinctive third point, which

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (147). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (149). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (148). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (148). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

is: “strength to believe, to love and obey God.”¹ This is distinctively different from receiving the benefits of pardon and forgiveness. When Wesley sums up his two reasons for observing constant communion, he doesn’t stop with pardon and forgiveness. He sums up his three points as follows:

Whoever, therefore, does not receive, but goes from the holy table, when all things are prepared, either does not understand his duty, or does not care for the dying command of his Saviour, the forgiveness of his sins, the strengthening of his soul, and the refreshing it with the hope of glory.²

There shouldn’t be any argument over constant communion. For several centuries the first Christians received Holy Communion every day, and certainly no less than four times a week. They fully expected everyone to partake of the Sacrament. Their opinion of anyone who refused was harsh. “If any believer join in the prayers of the faithful,” says an ancient canon, “and go[es] away without receiving the Lord’s Supper, let him be excommunicated, as bringing confusion into the Church of God.”³ Wesley accepts no excuses from the faithful, who ought to know better. The purpose of the Sacrament is “...the continual remembrance of the death of Christ, by eating bread and drinking wine, which are the outward signs of the inward grace, the body and blood of Christ.”⁴ How could anyone object to Constant Communion? Most of Wesley’s sermon *On Constant Communion* deals with the objections with which Wesley had to deal, and so let us take them up one by one.

The Objections

Before we look at Wesley’s response to five common objections to Constant Communion, we might ask the question, “Why Constant Communion? Why not frequent Communion?” Wesley answers these two questions by insisting that God’s commandments and God’s mercy are constant. God does not tell us to obey his commandments frequently, nor does he offer his mercy frequently. God’s Commandments are to be obeyed

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (148). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (148). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (149). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room. Wesley does not indicate the source or even name it.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (149). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

constantly and his mercy is offered constantly. While we might agree that one of God's Commandments is, "Do this in remembrance of me,¹" he clearly does not say, "as often as you can." We are obliged to obey every commandment of God constantly, not frequently. Wesley concludes that we should obey this commandment constantly and that this will enable us to accept God's mercy constantly. Wesley concludes:

You have now an opportunity of receiving his mercy;—why do you not receive it? You are weak:—why do not you seize every opportunity of increasing your strength? In a word: Considering this as a command of God, he that does not communicate as often as he can has no piety; considering it as a mercy, he that does not communicate as often as he can has no wisdom.²

1. I'm Unworthy of Constant Communion

The most common objection to constant Communion is, "I am unworthy." Those who use this objection quote the following Scripture: "he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself."³ Wesley responds by saying:

Here is not a word said of being unworthy to eat and drink. Indeed he does speak of eating and drinking unworthily; but that is quite a different thing; so he has told us himself. In this very chapter we are told that by eating and drinking unworthily is meant, taking the holy Sacrament in such a rude and disorderly way, that one was "hungry, and another drunken."⁴

"It is true," continues Wesley, "our Church forbids those 'who have done any grievous crime' to receive it without repentance. But all that follows from this is, that we should repent before we come; not that we should neglect to come at all." Where does the Bible teach to atone for breaking one commandment of God by breaking another?⁵

Another dimension to this objection is, "I cannot live up to the profession I must make when I receive it." If we cannot live up to the profession we must make, then we ought never to take Holy Communion

¹ Luke 22:19

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (151). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ 1 Corinthians 11:29 (KJV)

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (152). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁵ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (152). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

at all. The profession we must make is the same, whether we take Communion once a year or every day. Communion “...requires neither more nor less perfect obedience than you promised in your baptism. You then undertook to keep the Commandments of God by his help; and you promise no more when you communicate.”¹ Those who are afraid of “eating and drinking unworthily” never think about how much greater danger they face when they do not eat or drink it at all. Constant Communion strengthens the soul.

2. I'm too Busy for Constant Communion

The second objection against Constant Communion is, “I’m too busy to do the necessary preparations for Constant Communion.” Wesley’s answer is plain and to the point:

All the preparation that is absolutely necessary is contained in those words: “Repent you truly of your sins past; have faith in Christ our Saviour; ...amend your lives, and be in charity with all men; so shall ye be meet partakers of these holy mysteries.” All who are thus prepared may draw near without fear, and receive the sacrament to their comfort.

If you resolve and design to follow Christ, you are fit to approach the Lord’s table. If you do not design this, you are only fit for the table and company of devils.²

Make not reverence for God’s command a pretense for breaking it. Wesley concludes, “...to obey is better than” self-examination; “and to hearken,” than the prayer of an angel.³

3. Constant Communion abates Reverence for the Sacrament

The third objection claims that doing something too frequently lessens our reverence for it; therefore, it’s better to participate less frequently so that our reverence for the Sacrament will increase. Wesley’s answer is realistic and to the point. He compares reverence for the Sacrament to reverence for the Commandments.

Suppose it did; has God ever told you, that when the obeying his command abates your reverence to it, then you may disobey it? If

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (154). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (154). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (155). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

he has, you are guiltless; if not, what you say is just nothing to the purpose. The law is clear. Either show that the Lawgiver makes this exception, or you are guilty before him.¹

True, the constant receiving of the Lord's Supper may lessen our reverence for it in the short run, but it will not lessen the true religious reverence in the long run. It will confirm and increase it.

4. I have not found the Benefit I Expected

Many well-meaning persons have come to the following conclusion, "I have communicated constantly so long, but I have not found the benefit I expected." Wesley recognizes that this has been the case for many well-meaning persons; therefore, this fourth objection needs to be considered with sympathy and understanding. His answer is as follows:

...whatever God commands us to do, we are to do because he commands, whether we feel any benefit thereby or no. Now, God commands, "Do this in remembrance of me." This, therefore, we are to do because he commands, whether we find present benefit thereby or not. But undoubtedly we shall find benefit sooner or later, though perhaps insensibly. We shall be insensibly strengthened, made more fit for the service of God, and more constant in it. At least, we are kept from falling back, and preserved from many sins and temptations: And surely this should be enough to make us receive this food as often as we can; though we do not presently feel the happy effects of it, as some have done, and we ourselves may when God sees best.²

Wesley recognizes that we might ask, "Is it my own fault? Perhaps I did not properly prepare myself to take Communion?" All we can do is prepare ourselves as best we can, and the oftener we go to the Lord's Table, the greater the benefit we will find there. It takes patience.

5. The Church only requires Communion Three Times a Year

The final objection with which Wesley deals is the minimum requirement of the Church. The minimum requirement of the Church is that "every parishioner shall communicate at the least three times in the year." Wesley gives the following two responses to this fifth objection.

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (155). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (155). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

First, What, if the Church had not enjoined it at all; is it not enough that God enjoins it? We obey the Church only for God's sake. And shall we not obey God himself? If, then, you receive three times a year because the Church commands it, receive every time you can because God commands it.

But, Secondly, we cannot conclude from these words, that the Church excuses him who receives only thrice a year. The plain sense of them is, that he who does not receive thrice at least, shall be cast out of the Church: But they by no means excuse him who communicates no oftener. This never was the judgment of our Church: On the contrary, she takes all possible care that the sacrament be duly administered, wherever the Common Prayer is read, every Sunday and holiday in the year.¹

I've tried to be as concise as possible in treating the way in which Wesley dealt with the five most common objections to constant Communion. Wesley ends his sermon *On Constant Communion* with his own summary.

It has been particularly shown, First, that unworthiness is no excuse; because though in one sense we are all unworthy, yet none of us need be afraid of being unworthy in St. Paul's sense of "eating and drinking unworthily." Secondly, that the not having time enough for preparation can be no excuse; since the only preparation which is absolutely necessary, is that which no business can hinder; nor indeed anything on earth, unless so far as it hinders our being in a state of salvation. Thirdly, that its abating our reverence is no excuse; since he who gave the command, "Do this," nowhere adds, "unless it abates your reverence." Fourthly, that our not profiting by it is no excuse; since it is our own fault, in neglecting that necessary preparation which is in our own power. Lastly, that the judgment of our own Church is quite in favour of constant communion. If those who have hitherto neglected it on any of these pretences, will lay these things to heart, they will, by the grace of God, come to a better mind, and never more forsake their own mercies²

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (156). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition) (157). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Beliefs about the Lord's Supper

1. *The Lord's Supper as a Sign and Means of Grace*

The first element in Wesley's beliefs about the Lord's Supper is that it is a real means of grace, commanded by the Lord himself, bestowing grace and spiritual sustenance upon those who, in faith, receive it. What made the Sacrament so precious as a means of grace is that it conveyed the "real presence of Christ." Charles Wesley agreed and put it into song:

Great is Thy faithfulness and love;
Thine ordinance can never prove
Of non effect and vain;
Only do Thou my heart prepare,
And find Thy Real Presence there,
And all Thy fulness gain.¹

At this point I must point out the difference between Wesley's belief and that of Roman Catholicism, which Wesley strongly repudiated. To Wesley the presence of Christ is real, but it is not to be located in the elements. A repudiation of transubstantiation can be found in Wesley's reply to Roman Catholicism.

No such change of the substance of the bread into the substance of Christ's body, can be inferred from our Saviour's words, "This is my body;" (Matt. 26:26;) for it is not said, "This is turned into my body," but, "This is my body;" which, if it be taken literally, would rather prove the substance of the bread to be his body. Therefore Cardinal Cajetan acknowledges, it is nowhere said in the Gospel that the bread is changed into the body of Christ; but they have it from the authority of the Church. It is farther evident that the words are not to be taken in their proper sense; for it is called bread as well after consecration as before it. (1 Cor. 10:17; 11:26–28.) So that what was called his body was also bread at the same time.²

Wesley seems to advocate a mystical relationship between the believer and the elements of bread and wine. The elements are not merely signs and symbols. They are "the sure, confirming seal." They actually convey what they symbolize, but they remain bread and wine. Wesley refers to them not as the body and blood, but as *the bread of heaven* and *the heavenly wine*,

¹ John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), p. 170.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 10* (Third Edition) (118). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

which sustains the faithful. If this be the case, then why do not the faithful constantly commune?

Is not the eating of that bread and the drinking of that cup, the outward, visible means, whereby God conveys into our souls all that spiritual grace, that righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which were purchased by the body of Christ once broken and the blood of Christ once shed for us? Let all, therefore, who truly desire the grace of God, eat of that bread and drink of that cup.¹

2. The Lord's Supper as a Memorial

Jesus did say, "Do this in memory of me." When we partake of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we are taken back to Calvary. Charles Wesley again comes up with a hymn to describe the power of this Sacrament as a memorial of Jesus' death on the cross.

The cross on Calvary He bore,
He suffered once, to die no more.
But left a sacred Pledge behind:
See here!—it on Thy altar lies,
Memorial of that Sacrifice
He offered once for all mankind.²

What happened in the past only needed to take place once, but it affects the present in a very powerful way. It is more than a mere act of memory. The benefits of Christ's death on the cross are made available in the present.

3. The Lord's Supper as a Sacrifice

The death of Christ on the cross is inseparably linked to the Lord's Supper. His cross is the altar on which he was sacrificed, but the death of Christ is all-sufficient, and can never be repeated. Calvary is the finished work of Christ. "Tis done, the atoning work is done." Hence, Wesley repudiated the oft-repeated Sacrifice of the Mass.

For Wesley the functions of Victim and Priest are strangely interwoven in the person of Christ. While he was the Victim sacrificed on the cross, he was also the sinner's advocate, the Priest standing before the Throne of God, the interceding Son. The Sacrifice, according to Wesley, was not one offered by an individual priest for the forgiveness of himself and others.

¹ John Wesley, "The Means of Grace," *Sermons*, #16, ¶12.

² John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), p. 178.

The whole company of faithful believers were to become victim and priest. This concept is again expressed in one of Charles Wesley's hymns:

Ye royal priests of Jesus, rise,
And join the Daily Sacrifice;
Join all believers in His Name
To offer up the spotless Lamb.¹

4. *The Lord's Supper is a Communion with the Saints*

The Lord's Supper is a foretaste of the time when the faithful will commune with their Lord in Heaven. The early Methodists lived, communicated and died in the reality of the Communion of the Saints. The Church Militant and the Church Triumphant constitute "one family, divided by the narrow stream of death." The Lord's Supper was, and is, celebrated against the background of "angels and archangels," and with "all the company of heaven." Charles Wesley put this idea into one of his many hymns:

The Church triumphant in Thy love,
Their mighty joys we know;
They sing the Lamb in hymns above,
And we in hymns below.

Thee in Thy glorious realm they praise,
And bow before Thy throne,
We in the kingdom of Thy grace—
The kingdoms are but one.²

Much more could be said about Wesley's theology of the Lord's Supper and how this Sacrament was so powerfully used in the Methodist revival. We don't often realize that the Methodist revival was a Sacramental Revival, and from the beginning at Oxford, members of the Holy Club were called, in addition to Methodists, Sacramentalists. Let me close this section with John Bowmer's summary of Methodism's view of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is a real means of grace in which "all the benefits of Christ's passion" are, by faith effectively conveyed to all who have ears to hear and eyes to see. It is a memorial of Christ's suffering and death, yet not a mere memorial. It is an

¹ John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), p. 183.

² John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), p. 185.

active re-presentation of Christ's Sacrifice in which believers, by faith, stand before the Lamb "whose death is ever new." The Cross is eternal, a sacrifice offered "once only once and once for all" with which the redeemed, in the Lord's Supper, identify themselves and in which they are called upon to share. In this way they also demonstrate, for all to see, their allegiance to their Lord.¹

Who can administer the Lord's Supper?

Both John and Charles Wesley insisted that the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion could only be administered by those who had been ordained. The normative practice was for the members of the Methodist Societies to take Holy Communion in the Anglican Church, where ordained clergy would administer the Sacrament. According to Albert Outler...

It was his plain intention that his followers should depend on the Church, not only for the sacraments themselves but also for their doctrinal interpretation. He deliberately designed the Methodist preaching services so that they would not be taken as substitutes for Holy Communion in the parish church and he expressly forbade their being scheduled in direct competition with state church hours.²

Wesley's reasoning for this is clear. He wasn't trying to start a new Independent Church; rather, he only wanted to renew the Anglican Church.

The Methodist lay preachers wanted the authority to administer the Lord's Supper, but Wesley resisted granting them that authority. Wesley knew that if the Methodist lay preachers administered Holy Communion, it would be the end of any relationship with the Anglican Church. Wesley did his best to explain his reasons. He argued that there was a fundamental distinction between the prophetic and the priestly office. The priestly office required ordination and authorization by the Church. Wesley insisted that Methodist lay preachers were called to the prophetic office and were not authorized to administer the Sacraments. Many of the lay preachers grumbled, but they held to Wesley's restrictions until after his death in 1791.³ By the time of Wesley's death more than half the persons attracted

¹ John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Oressm 1951), pp. 185-186. (Paraphrased)

² Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 332.

³ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 128 and 138.

to the Methodist movement were from dissenter and non-conformist backgrounds or from no church at all. They had no interest in making sacrifices to renew a State Church, and had no interest in being under the jurisdiction of Anglican Bishops.¹

Wesley did provide an alternative to the Lord's Supper that did not require ordination. It was the Love Feast. He first encountered the Love Feast among the Moravians in Georgia, and he adapted it to the life of the societies, classes, and bands. The Love Feast was a lay fellowship meal, a celebration that did not require the presence of the ordained clergy. Theodore Runyon describes how it worked:

The format was simple; bread and water served at tables, while the participants shared in prayer and testimony. Yet the fellowship engendered by this humble meal was intense. Love Feasts were held quarterly, first in the bands and then extended to include all members of the societies. Admission was by a "class ticket," which was issued quarterly by class leaders to those who were regular in attendance and abided by the General Rules.²

Wesley's loyalties to the Anglican Church remained strong right up to his death. He had no intention of starting an Independent Church. He understood Methodism as a lay renewal movement within the Anglican Church. He expected members of the Methodist Societies to fill their sacramental needs by going to Holy Communion at least twice a month in the Anglican Church. At the same time, Wesley held Holy Communion for thousands with cooperating Anglican clergy.

Then war broke out between England and her colonies in America. Most of the Anglican Priests returned to England, leaving the American Methodists without access to the Sacraments. Wesley first sought the ordination of some of his lay preachers by the Bishop of London, who was responsible for the colonies, but with no success. He then turned to the Greek Orthodox Bishop residing in London. When that failed, he took a step he had resisted for so long. He ordained some Methodist lay preachers. He justified his action by Lord King's book, *An Inquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church*. King concluded that in the early church "Bishops and Presbyters were...of one order." Wesley was a Presbyter and felt justified in ordaining under special conditions for service in America. Wesley concluded that his ordination of

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (30–31). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 137

some of his preachers was necessary because of the special conditions in America.

As our American brethren are now totally disentangled, both from the state and the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again, either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty, simply to follow the Scriptures and the primitive church. And we judge it best, that they should stand fast in that liberty, wherewith God has so strangely set them free.¹

Eight days later Coke, Whatcoat, and Vasey set sail for America. At a conference of nearly sixty preachers, which met in Baltimore on December 24, 1784, Coke ordained Asbury and the two of them ordained a number of elders and deacons. Wesley's justification for ordaining Methodist preachers goes way back to practices in the early Church, which he had been trying to imitate in his attempt to renew the Anglican Church. Any more ordinations of Methodist preachers in England would have to wait for Wesley's death.

Word and Sacrament Today

In principle Wesley called everyone to the Lord Supper, just as he invited everyone to the Lord. In Wesley's theology, both Word [preaching] and Sacrament [the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion] converge. Christ is truly present in both the preaching of the Gospel and in the Sacrament of Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper. God's grace is offered in both, and one does not have to be converted prior to hearing a sermon or participating in Holy Communion. In both cases, God's grace is offered and accepted by faith. Word and Sacrament define the two essential characteristics of the Church. According to our Articles of Religion, "A visible Church is a company of faithful or believing people—coetus credentium. ...among whom the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered."²

So, why have we neglected Constant Communion? Probably for the same reasons given in Wesley's time. I agree completely with the way in which Wesley dealt with the five objections to Constant Communion. We have a sermon every Sunday. Why not Holy Communion? Our modern objection would be, "It will take too much time." We want to keep worship within the sacred sixty minutes. By leaving Holy Communion out, we

¹ Luke Tyerman. (1871). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 3* (436). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (30–31). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room. or Article XIII "On the Church."

emphasize the greater importance we give to preaching. We practice Constant Preaching. Why not Constant Communion? Grace can be offered through both preaching and communion.

A Story for the Word

The Story of Jesus, which best describes what should be happening in our preaching of the Word, is the Parable of the Prodigal Sons.¹ The first prodigal is the younger son who demanded his share of the inheritance and went off into a distant country where he squandered his property in dissolute living. When it was all gone, he began to be in need, but no one gave him anything. When he came to himself, he decided to go home and ask his father to accept him as a servant, but his father ran out to meet him, accepting him as a son. He bestowed grace upon grace to his repentant son. But the younger son is not the only prodigal.

The second prodigal is the elder son, who refuses to have anything to do with his younger brother, even after that brother has repented. When his father was celebrating, the elder brother refused to join the party. At this point his father offered more grace to him than to his younger brother. He said, “Son, you are always with me; and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” Grace is offered to both prodigals, but it needs to be accepted by faith. Jesus’ point in this parable is to unite both prodigals with one another and their father. That is the goal of preaching the Gospel, to unite all of God’s children with one another and with their Creator.

A Story for the Sacrament

The Story of Jesus, which best describes what should be happening in Holy Communion, is the story of Cleopas and his unnamed companion, who left the scene of the resurrection, even though they heard that the tomb was empty.² Jesus began walking with them, but they did not recognize him. Then Jesus said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. Imagine that, Jesus used the Old Testament to tell them who he really was, and still, they did not recognize him.

¹ Luke 15:11-32

² Luke 24:13-35

As evening fell, they invited Jesus to spend the night with them. As they sat down to share a meal, Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.” Then they reflected on the experience and said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour, Cleopas and his companion returned to Jerusalem and found the eleven and their companions gathered together, and they told them “what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.” This is the goal of Holy Communion, but it needs the assistance of the Word, both the Old and New Testaments.

The Invitation to Christian Discipleship

Wesley invited people to become disciples of Jesus Christ. The invitation was the same in Word and Sacrament. The traditional invitation within the Holy Communion service is:

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to almighty God.

The invitation calls for repentance, unity with others, the intent to lead a new life, and following the commandments or teachings of Jesus. We make this same commitment in the baptismal and confirmation professions. We are not to make these commitments frequently, but constantly. We live constantly by Word and Sacrament. This is what Wesley meant by Constant Communion.

How does it Work?

What happens when we take Holy Communion? Wesley began with what does not happen. The bread and wine do not change into flesh and blood. They remain bread and wine; and yet, both John and Charles Wesley insist on the Real Presence of Christ at the communion table.¹ This is not something that can be seen. It can only be experienced by faith. The symbols of bread and wine confront us with our part in the crucifixion of the Son of God and our need for divine forgiveness. These symbols also promise to communicate divine pardon. How this happens is difficult to explain in prose. It’s easier to describe in poetry. Both Isaac Watts and

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 10* (Third Edition) (118). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Charles Wesley attempt to describe what happens when divine grace finds acceptance in human faith. It's a mystical moment that defies all explanation.

At the cross, at the cross,
where I first saw the Light,
and the burden of my heart rolled away;
it was there by faith I received my sight,
and now I am happy all the day.¹

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
my chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.²

If this is what happens to those who respond to the invitation to Christian Discipleship in the Sermon and in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, then Constant Communion is automatic. It's like "praying without ceasing"³

Jesus assures us that "where two or three are gathered in [his] name, [He is] there among them."⁴ Jesus also ends his prayer for the disciples by asking for the same unity that exists between him and the Father to exist between him and his disciples.

Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.⁵

Paul warns the Corinthians that they are "God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in" them.⁶ This is also the mystery described by Paul in his letter to the Christians in Colossae. Paul states clearly that, "He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation..." Salvation in Wesleyan theology is the restoration of the image of God, which has been

¹ Isaac Watts, "Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: `1989) # 359.

² Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be that I should Gain," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: `1989) # 363.

³ See 1 Thessalonians 5:17

⁴ Matthew 18:20

⁵ John 17:25-26

⁶ See 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19.

marred by sin. In Jesus we find that perfect image. How can that image be restored in us? Paul goes on to describe the mystery as “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”¹ Both the Word and the Sacrament converge to offer divine grace, to be received by faith. When this happens, the Real Presence of Christ is not in the printed words of Scripture, nor is it in the elements of bread and wine. It’s in us. Remember what Jesus said in the final words of his Great Commission: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”² When we become aware of the Real Presence of Christ in us, it will transform everything. It will be the beginning of our sanctification. Wesley warns us not to take the above mystery of the Real Presence of Christ individualistically. Christianity is essentially a social religion.

In order fully to explain and enforce these important words, I shall endeavour to show, First, that Christianity is essentially a social religion; and that to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it. Secondly, that to conceal this religion is impossible, as well as utterly contrary to the design of its Author³

Who Can Administer the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion?

Wesley has convinced me of the need for Constant Communion. I agree with him on every point except one. Wesley separated the prophetic and priestly functions. He refused to allow his lay preachers to administer Holy Communion. They were only to perform the prophetic aspects of ministry—the preaching of the Word. Lay preachers and members of Methodist Societies were to go to the Anglican Clergy for the Sacrament of Holy Communion. I don’t like disagreeing with Wesley on anything, but on this I must. How could those early Methodists practice Constant Communion under a clergy that was hostile to them? I recognize Wesley’s concern for not separating from the Anglican Church, but as it turned out, separation was inevitable. By resisting separation, Wesley was forced to separate the preaching of the Word from the administration of the Sacrament.

In promoting Constant Communion, Wesley believed he was following the example of the early church. He indicates that those early Christians, 3,000 in number, communicated “daily in the breaking of bread and in prayer.”⁴ How could this be? At the same time, Stephen, who was not set aside for the preaching of the Word, is out there preaching; and Philip, who

¹ Colossians 1:15-16

² See Matthew 28:20

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (296). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁴ See Acts 2:42.

was not set aside for any priestly ministry, baptized an Ethiopian Eunuch.¹ This can only mean that the prophetic and priestly ministries had not yet been separated. Wesley tries to keep them separate even as he rationalizes the ordination of Methodist preachers in America in 1784. We don't separate them today. We ordain elders for Word and Sacrament. This should not mean that the laity should not be involved in Word and Sacrament. It only means that these are the primary duties of elders. We allow lay preaching. Why should we not allow lay persons to administer the Lord's Supper? That's the only way we will succeed in promoting Constant Communion.

One reason we don't allow laity to administer the Lord's Supper is because we want the Sacrament to be understood, and so we have a liturgy with all the important parts. We do allow the laity to assist, but an elder must be present. Occasionally we bless the elements of bread and wine so that the laity can take the Sacrament to the sick and shut-ins. Why not expand the practice of the Lord's Supper to small groups that meet on a regular basis? If the Lord's Supper is a means of communicating divine grace, even to the unconverted, then we ought to celebrate it every time we meet. It should be celebrated in corporate worship and in small groups.

In small groups it can be celebrated around a simple table. In corporate worship, the people should be invited to kneel in groups around the altar, while the congregation sings hymns of invitation to Christian discipleship. Around the table I would call it the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and around the altar I would call it the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In the last congregation that I served, we celebrated Holy Communion in the Sanctuary the first Sunday of every month, and we celebrated the Lord's Supper every Sunday prior to corporate worship in the Fellowship Hall. I agree with Wesley on Constant Communion, but I don't agree that only the elders can administer the Sacrament. Constant Communion requires lay priests, just as the preaching of the Word requires lay preachers. If we took the Protestant Reformation seriously, we would practice the priesthood of all believers, and we would not separate Word and Sacrament.

¹ Acts 7 and 8.

5. UNIFYING LOVE

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.*

John 13:34-35

*Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?
May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?
Without all doubt, we may.*

John Wesley

The Catholic Spirit

In John 17:21, Jesus prayed, “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Wesley lived in a time of intolerance, as do we. The heritage in which he grew up included Puritanism, Anglicanism, Moravian Lutheran Pietism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. In Wesley’s attempt to renew the Anglican Church, people of various traditions, such as Quakers, Baptists, and Presbyterians, joined the United Societies. By the time of Wesley’s death, more than half the persons attracted to the Methodist movement came from Dissenter and Non-conformist backgrounds, or from no church at all. They had little interest in renewing the Anglican Church and no interest in being under the jurisdiction of Anglican bishops. How did Wesley deal with such diversity, and how can we?

Wesley found the key to unity, of all places, in the Old Testament story of Jehu and Jehonadab. As Jehu approached Jehonadab, he asked, “Is your heart as true to mine as mine is to yours?” Jehonadab answered, “It is.” Then Jehu said, “If it is, give me your hand.”¹ Wesley used this question and answer to promote religious unity. The reference to the heart, was of course, a reference to Jesus’ commandment to love God and one’s neighbor, including one’s enemy.² All Christians approve of this commandment, but do they practice it? Daily experience shows us the contrary. For Wesley having a right heart brought up the following three questions:

¹ 2 Kings 10:15

² John 13:34-35

1. Is thy heart right with God? Dost thou believe his being, and his perfections? his eternity, immensity, wisdom, power; his justice, mercy, and truth? Dost thou believe that he now “upholdeth all things by the word of his power?” and that he governs even the most minute, even the most noxious, to his own glory, and the good of them that love him? Hast thou a divine evidence, a supernatural conviction, of the things of God? Dost thou “walk by faith, not by sight?” looking not at temporal things, but things eternal?
2. Dost thou believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, “God over all, blessed for ever?” Is he revealed in thy soul? Dost thou know Jesus Christ and him crucified? Does he dwell in thee, and thou in him? Is he formed in thy heart by faith? Having absolutely disclaimed all thy own works, thy own righteousness, hast thou “submitted thyself unto the righteousness of God, which is by faith in Christ Jesus? Art thou found in him, not having thy own righteousness, but the righteousness which is by faith?” And art thou, through him, “fighting the good fight of faith, and laying hold of eternal life?”
3. Is thy heart right toward thy neighbour? Dost thou love as thyself, all mankind, without exception? “If you love those only that love you, what thank have ye?” Do you “love your enemies?” Is your soul full of good-will, of tender affection, toward them? Do you love even the enemies of God, the unthankful and unholy? Do your bowels yearn over them? Could you “wish yourself” temporally “accursed” for their sake? And do you show this by “blessing them that curse you, and praying for those that despitefully use you and persecute you?”¹

If the above is true, then says Wesley, “give me thy hand.” Wesley continues to describe what this means in several lengthy paragraphs, but the following two paragraphs get at the heart of his message:

“If it be, give me thy hand.” I do not mean, “Be of my opinion.” You need not: I do not expect or desire it. Neither do I mean, “I will be of your opinion.” I cannot, it does not depend on my choice: I can no more think, than I can see or hear, as I will. Keep you your opinion; I mine; and that as steadily as ever. You need not

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition., p. 498). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

even endeavour to come over to me, or bring me over to you. I do not desire you to dispute those points, or to hear or speak one word concerning them. Let all opinions alone on one side and the other: only “give me thine hand.”

I do not mean, “Embrace my modes of worship,” or, “I will embrace yours.” This also is a thing which does not depend either on your choice or mine. We must both act as each is fully persuaded in his own mind. Hold you fast that which you believe is most acceptable to God, and I will do the same. I believe the Episcopal form of church government to be scriptural and apostolical. If you think the Presbyterian or Independent is better, think so still, and act accordingly. I believe infants ought to be baptized; and that this may be done either by dipping or sprinkling. If you are otherwise persuaded, be so still, and follow your own persuasion. It appears to me, that forms of prayer are of excellent use, particularly in the great congregation. If you judge extemporary prayer to be of more use, act suitable to your own judgement. My sentiment is, that I ought not to forbid water, wherein persons may be baptized; and that I ought to eat bread and drink wine, as a memorial of my dying Master: however, if you are not convinced of this act according to the light you have. I have no desire to dispute with you one moment upon any of the preceding heads. Let all these smaller points stand aside. Let them never come into sight “If thine heart is as my heart,” if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: “give me thine hand.”¹

What prevents the various denominations and religions from fulfilling the commandment to love one another? “How many hinderances lie in the way?” asks Wesley, only to answer, “The two grand, general hinderances are, first, that they cannot all think alike; and, in consequence of this, Secondly, they cannot all walk alike....”² Wesley then concludes, with his three questions, and his answer: “But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union; yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may.”³

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (499). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (493). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (493). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Opinions

Wesley begins the discussion by acknowledging that many good persons may entertain different and even peculiar opinions. We all have a tendency to think that we hold the right opinions, and those other groups are mistaken. Can we not be assured that all of our own opinions, taken together, are true. “Nay,” says Wesley, “every thinking man is assured they are not; seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*: ‘To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity.’”¹

The answer lies not in trying to come to some kind of consensus on our differing opinions. That will probably never happen. One of the difficulties in ecumenical relationships has to do with combining tolerance and conviction. Is there any way to combine strong conviction with genuine tolerance? Wesley thinks there is, and puts it as follows:

Every wise man, therefore, will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions, than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him, and only asks him with whom he desires to unite in love that single question, “Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?”²

The question is not, “Can we be of the same opinion,” but “can we unite in love?” In other words, are our hearts right? If so, then we can say, “Give me your hand” and we can put our hands to work, even though we hold different opinions in our heads.

Worship

As long as there are differing opinions, there will be different ways of worshipping God and a variety of practices. We all may agree that God is a Spirit; and they that worship God must do so in Spirit and in Truth; and yet, the modes of worshipping God are as numerous as our differing opinions. How shall we choose among such a great variety? Wesley answers:

No man can choose for, or prescribe to, another. But every one must follow the dictates of his own conscience, in simplicity and godly sincerity. He must be fully persuaded in his own mind; and

¹ John Wesley (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (495). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (495). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

then act according to the best light he has. Nor has any creature power to constrain another to walk by his own rule.¹

As strong as Wesley feels about modes of worship, he has no interest in imposing his modes of worship on anyone else. In talking about his own Anglican Church, he says:

I believe it is truly primitive and apostolical: But my belief is no rule for another. I ask not, therefore, of him with whom I would unite in love, Are you of my Church? of my congregation? Do you receive the same form of Church government, and allow the same Church officers, with me? Do you join in the same form of prayer wherein I worship God? I inquire not, Do you receive the supper of the Lord in the same posture and manner that I do? nor whether, in the administration of baptism, you agree with me in admitting sureties for the baptized; in the manner of administering it: or the age of those to whom it should be administered. Nay, I ask not of you, (as clear as I am in my own mind,) whether you allow baptism and the Lord's supper at all. Let all these things stand by; we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season; my only question at present is this,—“Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?”²

Theology

Just what does Wesley mean by the unity of hearts? One thing he is not doing. He is not throwing out his faith in order to walk in love with anyone and everyone. He states his belief in God and in Jesus Christ, looking for ways of working with others. Wesley is giving nothing of his beliefs up for the sake of uniting in love. His beliefs are what inspire and motivate him.

On The Three Grand Doctrines of Methodism

In addition to what Wesley believed about God and Jesus Christ, he also affirmed what he called the three grand doctrines of Methodism. He held these doctrines with a strong conviction, but he never thought they should interfere with finding unity in love.

I think it great pity, that the few clergymen in England, who preach the three grand spiritual doctrines,—original sin, justification by

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (496). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (496–497). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

faith, and holiness consequent thereon,¹—should have any jealousies or misunderstandings between them. What advantage must this give to the common enemy! What a hindrance is it to the great work wherein they are all engaged! How desirable is it, that there should be the most open, avowed intercourse among them! Surely if they are ashamed to own one another, in the face of all mankind, they are ashamed of Christ!.²

Original Sin

Before we can proceed, I must say something about one of the three grand doctrines of Methodism. I have already discussed the distinctive emphases on Salvation by grace through faith and Sanctification through good works, but I haven't dealt with original sin. We are in the same place today as in Wesley's time. Original sin is not a popular doctrine in Methodism. Wesley began his sermon on Original Sin with a quote from Genesis 6:5; "*And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*" He then describes the contemporary opposition to the doctrine.

How widely different is this from the fair pictures of human nature which men have drawn in all ages! The writings of many of the ancients abound with gay descriptions of the dignity of man; whom some of them paint as having all virtue and happiness in his composition, or, at least, entirely in his power, without being beholden to any other being; yea, as self-sufficient, able to live on his own stock, and little inferior to God himself.

Accounts of this kind have particularly abounded in the present century; and perhaps in no part of the world more than in our own country. Here not a few persons of strong understanding, as well as extensive learning, have employed their utmost abilities to show, what they termed, "the fair side of human nature." And it must be acknowledged, that, if their accounts of him be just, man is still but "a little lower than the angels;" or, as the words may be more literally rendered, "a little less than God."

Wesley disagrees with the culture, and asks, several questions: "But, in the mean time, what must we do with our Bibles? —for they will never agree with this. These accounts, however pleasing to flesh and blood, are utterly

¹ Sometimes he says, "holiness of heart and life."

² Luke Tyerman. (1876). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 2* (3rd edition) (402). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

irreconcilable with the scriptural.” Scripture affirms that “by one man’s disobedience all men were constituted sinners;” that “in Adam all died,” spiritually died, lost the life and the image of God; that fallen, sinful Adam then “begat a son in his own likeness;” nor was it possible he should beget him in any other; for “who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?”¹

“But was there not good mingled with the evil? Was there not light intermixed with the darkness? No; none at all: “God saw that the whole imagination of the heart of man was only evil.” It cannot indeed be denied, but many of them, perhaps all, had good motions put into their hearts; for the Spirit of God did then also “strive with man,”² “And this account of the present state of man,” concludes Wesley, is confirmed by daily experience. It is true, the natural man discerns it not: And this is not to be wondered at. So long as a man born blind continues so, he is scarce sensible of his want.”³

There are three symptoms of this fatal disease of original sin. The first is pride, and all pride is idolatry. The second symptom is self-will, and self-will operates without fear or shame. The third symptom is the love of the world, which is deeply rooted in our nature, as the pride of life, and the desire for praise and honor.⁴ “The man, with all his good breeding, and other accomplishments,” says Wesley, “has no pre-eminence over the goat: Nay, it is much to be doubted, whether the beast has not the pre-eminence over him.”⁵ Only divine grace can heal this fatal disease. Hereby the great Physician applies medicines to heal this sickness, to restore human nature, totally corrupted in all its faculties by the gift of grace to be received by faith. Our response must follow.

By repentance and lowliness of heart, the deadly disease of pride is healed; that of self-will by resignation, a meek and thankful submission to the will of God; and for the love of the world in all its branches, the love of God is the sovereign remedy. Now, this is properly religion, “faith” thus “working by love;” working the

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (54). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (57). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (58). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (62). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁵ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (61). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

genuine meek humility, entire deadness to the world, with a loving, thankful acquiescence in, and conformity to, the whole will and word of God.¹

Two more things need to be said. First, it is vitally important to know the end or goal of religion, and secondly we need to understand our disease so that we can accept the cure. Let's look first at what Wesley names as the end of religion.

Ye know that the great end of religion is, to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained by the sin of our first parent. Ye know that all religion which does not answer this end, all that stops short of this, the renewal of our soul in the image of God, after the likeness of Him that created it, is no other than a poor farce, and a mere mockery of God, to the destruction of our own soul.²

Wesley concludes his sermon "On Original Sin" by warning us to "Know your disease! Know your cure! Ye were born in sin: Therefore, 'ye must be born again.' born of God. By nature ye are wholly corrupted. By grace ye shall be wholly renewed. In Adam ye all died: In the second Adam, in Christ, ye all are made alive."³ Only the renewed person in Christ can fully understand that which follows.

Love

The most important question is not, "What is your opinion," but, "Is thy faith ενεργουμενη δι' αγαπης,—filled with the energy of love? Dost thou love God...with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength?" Dost thou seek all thy happiness in Him alone? And dost thou find what thou seekest? Does thy soul continually 'magnify the Lord, and thy spirit rejoice in God thy Saviour?'"⁴ Most of us can agree with loving God. This is the first of the great commandments, which everyone can accept, even though they may not always fulfill the commandment.

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (64). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (64–65). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (65). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (497–498). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

The second part of the great commandment is more difficult, and Wesley throws in a few kinds of people to love that makes it even more difficult.

Is thy heart right toward thy neighbour? Dost thou love, as thyself, all mankind without exception? “If you love those only that love you, what thank have ye?” Do you “love your enemies?” Is your soul full of good-will, of tender affection, toward them? Do you love even the enemies of God, the unthankful and unholy? Do your bowels yearn over them? Could you “wish yourself” temporarily “accursed” for their sake? And do you show this by “blessing them that curse you, and praying for those that spitefully use you and persecute you?”¹

Wesley follows up his interpretations of the Double Commandment with the following question: “Do you show your love by your works?” He then interprets what it would mean to show our love by our works.

While you have time, as you have opportunity, do you in fact “do good to all men,” neighbours or strangers, friends or enemies, good or bad? Do you do them all the good you can; endeavouring to supply all their wants; assisting them both in body and soul, to the uttermost of your power?—If thou art thus minded, may every Christian say, yea, if thou art but sincerely desirous of it, and following on till thou attain, then “thy heart is right, as my heart is with thy heart.”²

As one can see, this is not a simple invitation to get involved in ecumenical activities with just anyone, regardless of their theological opinions or their modes of worship. What we have just discussed are the grand doctrines or teachings of the Christian faith. These make up the core of Christian faith, which inspires and motivates us to get involved in good works.

The Smaller Points

Wesley names a number of smaller points, which are not as important to him as the three grand doctrines, but this doesn’t mean that they were not important to him. He doesn’t give them up, and he doesn’t expect those who disagree with him to give up their beliefs. Some may not view these as smaller points, and that could interfere with ecumenical relationships

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (498). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (499). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

and activities. Wesley, however, considers the following the smaller points that should not get in the way of doing good works with other Christians.

We must both act as each is fully persuaded in his own mind. Hold you fast that which you believe is most acceptable to God, and I will do the same. I believe the Episcopal form of Church government to be scriptural and apostolical. If you think the Presbyterian or Independent is better, think so still, and act accordingly. I believe infants ought to be baptized; and that this may be done either by dipping or sprinkling. If you are otherwise persuaded, be so still, and follow your own persuasion. It appears to me, that forms of prayer are of excellent use, particularly in the great congregation. If you judge extemporary prayer to be of more use, act suitable to your own judgment. My sentiment is, that I ought not to forbid water, wherein persons may be baptized; and that I ought to eat bread and drink wine, as a memorial of my dying Master: However, if you are not convinced of this, act according to the light you have. I have no desire to dispute with you one moment upon any of the preceding heads. Let all these smaller points stand aside. Let them never come into sight. “If thine heart is as my heart,” if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: “Give me thine hand.”¹

Give Me Thy Hand

What does Wesley mean when he says, “Give me thy hand?” Wesley names four things that he would expect from someone with whom he could work.

Love me! “I mean, first, love me: and that not only as thou lovest all mankind; not only as thou lovest thine enemies, or the enemies of God.... I am not satisfied with this, —no; ‘if thine heart be right, as mine with thy heart,’ then love me with a very tender affection, as a friend that is closer than a brother; as a brother in Christ, a fellow citizen of the New Jerusalem.... Love me as a companion in the kingdom and patience of Jesus, and a joint heir of his glory.”²

Pray for me! “I mean, Secondly, commend me to God in all thy prayers; wrestle with him in my behalf, that he would speedily correct what he sees amiss, and supply what is wanting in me. ...that I may have a

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (499). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (500). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

fuller conviction of things not seen, and a stronger view of the love of God in Christ Jesus; may more steadily walk by faith, not by sight; and more earnestly grasp eternal life. Pray that the love of God and of all mankind may be more largely poured into my heart; that I may be more fervent and active in doing the will of my Father which is in heaven; more zealous of good works, and more careful to abstain from all appearance of evil.¹

Provoke me to love and to good works! “Quicken me in the work which God has given me to do, and instruct me how to do it more perfectly. Yea, ‘smite me friendly, and reprove me,’ wherein-so-ever I appear to thee to be doing rather my own will, than the will of Him that sent me. O speak and spare not, whatever thou believest may conduce, either to the amending my faults, the strengthening my weakness, the building me up in love, or the making me more fit, in any kind, for the Master’s use!”²

Love me in deed and in truth! “Lastly, love me not in word only, but in deed and in truth. So far as in conscience thou canst, (retaining still thy own opinions, and thy own manner of worshipping God,) join with me in the work of God; and let us go on hand in hand.”³

What the Catholic Spirit is Not

First, the catholic spirit is not an indifference to all *opinions*. “Go, first,” says Wesley, “and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ, and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit.” Secondly, the catholic spirit is not indifference to *public worship*. The man of a truly catholic spirit, “having weighed all things in the balance of the sanctuary, has no doubt, no scruple at all, concerning that particular mode of worship wherein he joins. He is clearly convinced, that this manner of worshiping God is both scriptural and rational.” Thirdly, the catholic spirit is not indifferent to all *congregations*. The catholic spirit will be fixed in his or her congregation, as well as his or her own principles. The catholic spirit participates in Christian fellowship, receives the Lord’s Supper, joins in public praise and thanksgiving, rejoices to hear the word of reconciliation, and offers the grace of God to all.⁴

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (500–501). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (501). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (501). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (503). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

What the Catholic Spirit Is

Sometimes it's easier to define something by what it's not, and Wesley has done that in the paragraph above. Each one of those statements can drop the negative and become a positive. However, Wesley does draw a conclusion.

...a man of a catholic spirit is one who, in the manner above-mentioned, gives his hand to all whose hearts are right with his heart: One who knows how to value, and praise God for, all the advantages he enjoys, with regard to the knowledge of the things of God, the true scriptural manner of worshipping him, and, above all, his union with a congregation fearing God and working righteousness: One who, retaining these blessings with the strictest care, keeping them as the apple of his eye, at the same time loves, —as friends, as brethren in the Lord, as members of Christ and children of God, as joint-partakers now of the present kingdom of God, and fellow-heirs of his eternal kingdom,—all, of whatever opinion, or worship, or congregation, who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; who love God and man; who, rejoicing to please and fearing to offend God, are careful to abstain from evil, and zealous of good works. He is the man of a truly catholic spirit....¹

Unity

Can Wesley's sermon on the Catholic Spirit be put into practice today? Did Wesley himself practice what he preached? Wesley tried by defining the grand doctrines of original sin, salvation by grace through faith, and holiness of heart and life. He then listed a number of smaller points in which disagreement didn't matter. Some have quoted Wesley to say, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Others have claimed that Wesley was only quoting Augustine, who's creed would not allow it, even though his heart might have approved of it. Actually, this quote is of a much later origin. "It appears for the first time in Germany, a.d. 1627 and 1628, among peaceful divines of the Lutheran and German Reformed churches, and found a hearty welcome among moderate divines in England. The authorship has recently been traced to Rupertus Meldenius, an otherwise unknown divine, and author of a remarkable tract in which the sentence first occurs."² While I can't read Wesley's mind, my

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (503–504). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² P. Schaff & D.S. Schaff. (1910). *Vol. 7: History of the Christian church* (650). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

assumption would be, that like Augustine, his creed wouldn't allow it, even though his heart would have approved of it.

Let's take the example of the General Rules. The first rule states all those things that Christians should not do.

First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind; especially that which is most generally practised: Such is, the taking the name of God in vain; the profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work thereon, or by buying or selling; drunkenness, buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity; fighting, quarreling, brawling; brother going to law with brother; returning evil for evil, or railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling; the buying or selling uncustomed goods; the giving or taking things on usury, that is, unlawful interest; uncharitable or unprofitable conversation, particularly speaking evil of Magistrates or of Ministers; doing to others as we would not they should do unto us; doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as the "putting on of gold or costly apparel;" the taking such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus; the singing those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God; softness, and needless self-indulgence; laying up treasures upon earth; borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.¹

Are the above among the smaller points, or are they part of the grand doctrines? Wesley certainly treats them as flowing from the grand doctrines. Indeed, those who don't practice these general rules, have no right to call themselves Methodists. Wesley put it as follows:

If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul as they that must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways; we will bear with him for a season:

¹ John Wesley & Charles Wesley. (1872). *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, &c. In *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (270). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

But then if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.¹

In a later edition of the General Rules, the following was inserted among the things that Methodists were not to tolerate: “Slaveholding; buying or selling slaves.” Even though some Methodist churches tolerated slavery, I can’t imagine ever counting slaveholding among the smaller points to be tolerated, even for the sake of unity.

We still have issues that many of us would not place among the smaller points, such as abortion, homosexuality, and war. The divisions are deep on these issues, and there doesn’t seem to be a path to unity on them. Perhaps the way forward is to emphasize Wesley’s second General Rule, which is to do good.

It is expected of all who continue in these societies, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation, Secondly, by doing good, by being, in every kind, merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and as far as is possible, to all men;—to their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison;—to their souls, by instructing reproving, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine of devils, that “we are not to do good unless our heart be free to it:” By doing good especially to them that are of the household of faith, or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others, buying one of another; helping each other in business; and so much the more, because the world will love its own, and them only: By all possible diligence and frugality, that the gospel be not blamed: By running with patience the race that is set before them, “denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily;” submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should “say all manner of evil of them falsely for the Lord’s sake.”²

¹ John Wesley & Charles Wesley. (1872). *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, &c. In *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (271). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley & Charles Wesley. (1872). *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, &c. In *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (270–271). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

In *The Character of a Methodist*, Wesley concludes with a similar call to do all the good one can do.

Lastly. As he has time, he “does good unto all men;” unto neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies: And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies, by “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison;” but much more does he labour to do good to their souls, as of the ability which God giveth; to awaken those that sleep in death; to bring those who are awakened to the atoning blood, that, “being justified by faith, they may have peace with God;” and to provoke those who have peace with God to abound more in love and in good works. And he is willing to “spend and be spent herein,” even “to be offered up on the sacrifice and service of their faith,” so they may “all come unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”¹

Wesley has difficulty separating doctrine from practice. When it comes to doing no harm and doing all the good we can do, Wesley does not consider these practices little points. They are part of his third grand doctrine of holiness of heart and life. They are essential Christian behavior.

Although Wesley went to America to be a missionary to the Native Americans, he ended up being a chaplain to the colonialists, and not a very good one at that. Most of what Wesley has to say about unity falls within Christians behaving like Christians so that they can get on with their discipleship. From what Wesley says about Christian unity, he tries to define what Christianity is, so that the various Christian sects might be able to work together, but he is concerned about much more than social action or social service. They are part of his holiness of heart and life, and these things are vitally part of the transformation of individuals, who will then join themselves to the mission of spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land, beginning with the church. Wesley made two remarks that illustrate how he could not separate evangelism from social activities. In his first remark, he says, “that Christianity is essentially a social religion; and that to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it.” Secondly, that to conceal this religion is impossible, as well as utterly contrary to the design

¹ John Wesley & Charles Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (346). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

of its Author.¹ “Gaining knowledge is a good thing; but saving souls is better.”²

Practical Unity

One thing Wesley is not doing is to create some kind of generic church, which includes all opinions, right or wrong. He names the three grand Methodist doctrines and distinguishes them from the lesser points. The difficulty lies in other denominations including some of Wesley’s smaller points as grand doctrines. That makes true unity difficult. Wesley himself is not willing to deviate from his theological position for the sake of unity. He clearly distinguishes Methodism from the various Christian and nonChristian groups in his time. In *The Character of a Methodist*, he says:

...we are distinguished from Jews, Turks, and Infidels. We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice; and herein we are fundamentally distinguished from those of the Romish Church. We believe Christ to be the eternal, supreme God; and herein we are distinguished from the Socinians and Arians. But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.³

Wesley is looking for a unity in practice, not a unity of opinions. He has strong opinions, but he was willing to work along side of anyone who loved God and was filled with the energy of love. Working with others, Christian or nonChristian, is one of Methodism’s finest traits, and it’s still practical today.

There are plenty of human needs to go around. The main ones would be affordable housing, adequate nourishment, and access to health care. A fourth need might be meaningful work with an adequate salary to pay for the three needs just mentioned. In my opinion, affordable housing stands at the top of the list. If a family has affordable housing, which takes up a major portion of their income, then there would be sufficient resources to fulfill the other needs. Habitat for Humanity is an ecumenical Christian organization dedicated to eliminating substandard housing and homelessness worldwide. Its “ministry was founded on the conviction that every man, woman and child should have a simple, decent place to live in

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 5* (Third Edition) (296). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (304). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition) (340). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

dignity and safety.” All who desire to be part of this mission are welcome, regardless of religious preference or background.

Habitat for Humanity is “driven by the desire to give tangible expression to the love of God through the work of eliminating poverty housing.” Their mission and methods are derived from three key theological concepts.

1. *Putting faith into action.* Habitat’s ministry is based on the conviction that to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, we must love and care for one another. Our love must not be words only—it must be true love, which shows itself in action. Habitat provides an opportunity for people to put their faith and love into action. We bring diverse groups of people together to make affordable housing and better communities a reality for everyone.
2. *The Economics of Jesus.* When we act in response to human need, giving what we have without seeking profit, we believe God magnifies the effects of our efforts. We refer to this perspective as “the economics of Jesus.” Together, the donated labor of construction volunteers, the support of partner organizations and the homeowners’ “Sweat equity” make Habitat’s house building possible.
3. *The Theology of the Hammer.* Habitat is a partnership founded on common ground—bridging theological differences by putting love into action. Everyone can use the hammer as an instrument to manifest God’s love. Habitat’s late founder, Millard Fuller, called this concept “the theology of the hammer.” We may disagree on all sorts of other things, said Fuller, “but we can agree on the idea of building homes with God’s people in need, and in doing so using biblical economics; no profit and no interest.”¹

While Habitat for Humanity International aims at eliminating poverty housing, Heifer Project International works with communities to end hunger and poverty and care for the earth. Moved by the plight of orphans and refugees of the Spanish Civil War as he ladled out meager rations of powdered milk, Dan West, an Indiana farmer, volunteer relief worker and Church of the Brethren member, grasped that the people needed “a cow, not a cup”—cows that could produce milk so families would not have to

¹ The above material was taken from the web site of Habitat for Humanity International, May, 2013.

depend on temporary aid. From that simple idea, Heifer International was born.

West's vision of a worldwide program to end hunger and poverty was born of his Christian faith, and today, Heifer works with people of all beliefs—and no belief—to overcome poverty and hunger. We ask no faith statement from partners or participants and almost all staff in the countries where we have programs are indigenous to that country. Their religious beliefs vary widely, but they share Heifer's singular commitment—to help poor and hungry people help themselves.

By giving families a hand-up, not just a handout, we empower them to turn hunger and poverty into hope and prosperity, but our approach is more than that. By bringing communities together and linking them with markets in their area, we help bring sustainable agriculture and commerce to areas with a long history of poverty.

And when not just one but many families gain this new sustainable produce and income, it brings new opportunities for building schools, creating agricultural co-ops, and forming community savings and loan groups to help fund entrepreneurial start-ups. Newly formed women's groups help increase the communities' full potential, as neighbors who may have never interacted now come together to help the community prosper.

It's a lofty goal, but it's happening! In communities around the world, Heifer Project's twelve cornerstones model is helping people lift themselves out of hunger and poverty. The twelve cornerstones are:



1. *Passing on the Gift* allows families who received Heifer gifts to become donors as they pass on these gifts to other families in need.



2. *Accountability* means that we are mutually accountable to the communities we serve for how we achieve common goals.



3. *Sharing & Caring* embodies the belief that global problems can be solved if everyone commits to sharing resources and caring for others.



4. *Sustainability & Self-reliance* is the goal for families we work with so that they will continue to thrive after our support ends.



5. *Improved Animal Management* means that project participants learn how to keep their animals safe, healthy and productive.



6. *Nutrition & Income* are the rewards Heifer expects recipients to reap from their gift animal through the consumption and/or sale of products such as milk, eggs, cheese, honey and wool.



7. *Genuine Need & Justice* ensures that those most in need are given priority in receiving animals and training.



8. *Improving the Environment* through sustainable farming techniques, reforestation, and tree-saving biogas is at the core of our projects.



9. *Full Participation* is expected by all participants. Leaders at the grassroots level should involve all members in decision making.



10. *Training & Education* are key to ensuring that animals are well cared for and that self-reliance is achieved by project participants.



11. *Spirituality* is expressed in common beliefs about the value and meaning of all life, a sense of connectedness to the earth and a shared vision of the future.



12. *Gender & Family Focus* encourages women and men to share in decision making as well as in the benefits the animals and training bring.¹

Habitat for Humanity and Heifer Project have demonstrated with the theology of the hammer and the theology of the heifer or goat, or any other animal, that we can set aside our opinions in order to work together. No one is asked to give up their opinions. We are only asked to unify our love and compassion for all humanity. We may not all believe the same things, but we can all do great things together.

I wish I knew of some ecumenical ministries tackling health care and jobs. There are many worthy organizations and programs, such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, dealing with all kinds of human need. What one quickly realizes is the tremendous amount of money and volunteer labor that is needed. This will be the topic of the final chapter. What did Wesley have to say about stewardship, and are his ideas still relevant today?

¹ The above information about Heifer Project International was taken off their web site, May, 2013

6. TOTAL GIVING

*Each of you must give as you have made up your mind,
not reluctantly or under compulsion,
for God loves a cheerful giver.*

2 Corinthians 9:7

Render unto God, not a tenth, not a third, not half, but all that is God's.

John Wesley

Wesley begins his sermon on *The Use of Money*, with *The Parable of the Dishonest Manager*, which is directed at the disciples and all the children of God. After telling the parable, Jesus concludes, in Luke 16:9, that “the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light.” Wesley comments on Jesus’ point by saying, “in their own way, they (the children of this age) are more consistent with themselves; they are truer to their acknowledged principles; they more steadily pursue their end ‘than the children of light’—than they who see ‘the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’”¹ Wesley agrees with Jesus and outlines the Christian principles of total giving.

Neither Jesus nor Wesley approve of what the dishonest manager did, but they acknowledge that he was at least consistent in applying the principles of the children of this age. The issue is not money, but the use of money. The children of light need to learn how to use money. They need to be consistent with what they believe.

[Money] is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked: It gives to the traveller and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of an husband to the widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defence for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!²

Therefore it is of the highest concern that all who exercise faith in God learn how to employ this valuable talent. Fortunately, all the instructions,

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition) (125). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 126). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

which are necessary for this, may be reduced to three plain rules. The rules may be plain, but applying them is not simple. Let's take a look at Wesley's three plain rules for the total use of God's excellent gift of money.

Three Plain Rules

Gain all you can! The first of these three plain rules is to gain all we can. Here we may speak as the children of the world, and we can meet them on their own ground. We cannot proceed with their principles. We have our own principles and the first one is that life and health are more valuable than profits. We ought not to gain money at the expense of life and health. Neither should we begin or continue in any business, which deprives us of food and sleep. If we are already engaged in such an activity, we should exchange it, as soon as possible, for something which, if it lessen our gain, will, however, not lessen our health.¹

"We are, Secondly," writes Wesley, "to gain all we can without hurting our mind, any more than our body."² We ought not to engage in any sinful activity that is contrary to God, or country. It is as sinful to defraud the king or the government of lawful customs, as it is to steal from our neighbor. To gain money we must not lose our souls by cheating or lying. On the other hand, there are business activities, which many pursue with perfect innocence, without hurting their body or mind. And yet perhaps, we cannot. To do so would injure our conscience and soul. None of us can determine this for another. We all have to judge for ourselves and abstain from whatever threatens to be hurtful to our soul.

"We are, Thirdly, to gain all we can, without hurting our neighbor. This we may not, cannot do, if we love our neighbor as ourselves."³ If we love everyone as ourselves, we cannot hurt anyone *in their substance or in their body*. We ought not ruin a neighbor's trade or business in order to advance our own. Nor should we sell anything that would impair our neighbor's body. At this point Wesley attacks spirituous liquors and the whole liquor industry. Wesley recognizes the rare occasion when these products might be used for medicine, but challenges us to name ten distillers who sell and prepare spiritous liquors only for this end. If they are needed, it is more likely to be for the unskillfulness of the practitioner. Those who sell

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 127). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 127). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 128). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

spiritous liquors may live in estates and sumptuous palaces, but at the expense of hurting the bodies and souls of their neighbors.¹

Are not surgeons and physicians, who play with the lives or health of their patients to enlarge their own gain, partakers of the same guilt, though in a lower degree. They are guilty of hurting their neighbors when they...

purposely lengthen the pain or disease, which they are able to remove speedily? who protract the cure of their patient's body, in order to plunder his substance? Can any man be clear before God, who does not shorten every disorder "as much as he can," and remove all sickness and pain "as soon as he can?" He cannot: For nothing can be more clear, than that he does not "love his neighbour as himself;" than that he does not "do unto others, as he would they should do unto himself."²

In addition to hurting the body, Wesley attacks those who injure the soul. Christians should not work directly or indirectly in any activity that promotes unchastity or intemperance. Wesley gets very specific when he names taverns, victualing-houses, opera houses, play-houses, or any other place, which promotes fashionable diversion. At the same time, he also recognizes that not all of the places mentioned need to be avoided. Wesley gives a simple test, which follows:

If these profit the souls of men, you are clear; your employment is good, and your gain innocent; but if they are either sinful in themselves, or natural inlets to sin of various kinds, then, it is to be feared, you have a sad account to make. O beware, lest God say in that day, "These have perished in their iniquity, but their blood do I require at thy hands!"³

It might be surprising to discover that Wesley encouraged Methodists to gain all they could. This is the first and great rule of Christian wisdom, to gain all we can, but only by honest industry. Wesley summarizes how we must proceed.

Use all possible diligence in your calling. Lose no time. If you understand yourself, and your relation to God and man, you know you have none to spare. If you understand your particular calling,

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 129). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 129). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 130). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

as you ought, you will have no time that hangs upon your hands. Every business will afford some employment sufficient for every day and every hour. That wherein you are placed, if you follow it in earnest, will leave you no leisure for silly, unprofitable diversions. You have always something better to do, something that will profit you, more or less. And “whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” Do it as soon as possible: No delay! No putting off from day to day, or from hour to hour! Never leave anything till to-morrow, which you can do to-day. And do it as well as possible.¹

We are to gain all we can without hurting our bodies, our souls, and our spirits. At the same time we are not to hurt the bodies, souls, and spirits of our neighbors. This first principle on the use of money would likely move Methodists into the middle class, and even into the upper class. This worried Wesley, so, he had to define the second principle on the total use of Money—Save all you can! We now turn to that principle.

Save all you can! “Having gained all you can,” says Wesley, “by honest wisdom and unwearied diligence, the second rule of Christian prudence is, ‘Save all you can.’” “Do not throw your precious talent into the sea. Do not throw it away in idle expenses, which is the same as throwing it into the sea.” Do not waste any part of your precious talent merely to gratify the desire of the eye by superfluous or expensive apparel, or by needless ornaments. Waste no part of it in painting, gilding; in elegant rather than useful gardens. In other words, live frugally.²

We are not to throw money away upon our children, any more than we would upon ourselves, in delicate food, in gay or costly apparel, in superfluities of any kind? We are not to leave it to them to throw away. If we have good reason to believe that they would waste what is now in our possession, we are not to leave them any more than they will need to live as they have been accustomed to, while living under our roof. What if we could leave them with more? Wesley’s answer is as follows:

If I had one child, elder or younger, who knew the value of money, one who, I believed, would put it to the true use, I should think it my absolute, indispensable duty, to leave that child the bulk of my fortune; and to the rest just so much as would enable them to live in the manner they had been accustomed to do. “But what, if all

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 130). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., pp. 130–131). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

your children were equally ignorant of the true use of money?" I ought then (hard saying! who can hear it?) to give each what would keep him above want; and to bestow all the rest in such a manner as I judged would be most for the glory of God.¹

Wesley admits that he is not so sure that he could do what he suggests, but he affirms that this is what ought to be done.

Give all you can! If all we do is gain and save all we can, we have done nothing. We have not saved anything if we don't use it. We may as well throw our money into the sea, as bury it in the earth. Not to use, is effectually to throw it away." A third rule needs to be added to the two preceding. Having, First, gained all you can, and, Secondly, saved all you can, Then "give all you can."²

In order to see the ground and reason for this, consider why the Creator of heaven and earth brought us into being and placed us in this world. He placed us not as the proprietor, but as a steward. As such he entrusted us with goods of various kinds; but the sole property still rests in Him. The direction God has given us in the use of our worldly substance may be comprised in the following:

First, provide things needful for yourself; food to eat, raiment to put on, whatever nature moderately requires for preserving the body in health and strength. Secondly, provide these for your wife, your children, your servants, or any others who pertain to your household. If, when this is done, there be an overplus left, then "do good to them that are of the household of faith." If there be an overplus still, "as you have opportunity, do good unto all men." In so doing, you give all you can; nay, in a sound sense, all you have: For all that is laid out in this manner is really given to God.³

By doing the above, we render to God what is God's, not only by what we give to the poor, but also by what we expend in providing things needful for our own household.

If any doubt should arise in our mind concerning what we are going to spend on ourself or our family, there is an easy way to remove it.

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., pp. 132–133). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 133). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., pp. 133–134). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

Calmly and seriously inquire, (1.) In expending this, am I acting according to my character? Am I acting herein, not as a proprietor, but as a steward of my Lord's goods? (2.) Am I doing this in obedience to his word? In what scripture does he require me so to do? (3.) Can I offer up this action, this expense, as a sacrifice to God through Jesus Christ? (4.) Have I reason to believe, that for this very work I shall have a reward at the resurrection of the just?¹

By answering these four questions, you should receive a clear light as to the way you should go. You will seldom need anything else to remove any doubt. If doubt remains, Wesley suggests the following prayer:

Lord, thou seest I am going to expend this sum on that food, apparel, furniture. And thou knowest, I act therein with a single eye, as a steward of thy goods, expending this portion of them thus, in pursuance of the design thou hadst in entrusting me with them. Thou knowest I do this in obedience to thy word, as thou commandest, and because thou commandest it. Let this, I beseech thee, be an holy sacrifice, acceptable through Jesus Christ! And give me a witness in myself, that for this labour of love I shall have a recompence when thou rewardest every man according to his works.²

Now, if the Holy Spirit confirms in our conscience that this prayer is well-pleasing to God, then we have no reason to doubt but that expense is right and good.

What about tithing? Wesley rejects the tithe as *the* Christian stewardship principle. He asks us if we would rather be Jewish and give a portion or a Christian and give everything. The Christian principle of giving is as follows:

Render unto God, not a tenth, not a third, not half, but all that is God's, be it more or less; by employing all on yourself, your household, the household of faith, and all mankind, in such a manner, that you may give a good account of your stewardship.³

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 134). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., pp. 134–135). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 135). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

We are to give all that we have and all that we are, as a sacrifice of sweet smelling savor to God. We are to lay up a good foundation so that when we attain eternal life, we won't be ashamed.

If tithing is not the standard for giving, how do we calculate how much we should give? The answer will be different for every individual or family. The amount we will be able to give depends on how well we follow the three plain rules or principles of stewardship. Here is Wesley's summary of how it works:

Gain all you can, without hurting either yourself or your neighbour, in soul or body, by applying hereto with unintermitted diligence, and with all the understanding which God has given you;—save all you can, by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire; to gratify either the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life; waste nothing, living or dying, on sin or folly, whether for yourself or your children;—and then, give all you can, or, in other words, give all you have to God.¹

The Problem of Wealth

Wesley knew that if Methodists followed his first two stewardship principles, they would become wealthy. and wealth would undercut the goals of the Methodist revival. In his *Thoughts on Methodism*, Wesley warns:

I fear, wherever riches have increased, (exceeding few are the exceptions,) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore do I not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.²

Wesley's solution to this problem involves his emphasis on total giving. It is clear that most modern Methodists don't follow all three stewardship principles. Many Methodists are in agreement with gaining all they can, but frugality has not been a stewardship principle that has been very attractive among us. When it comes to giving, the tithe, ten percent,

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 135). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 13* (Third Edition., p. 260). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

has been our goal, not the beginning of giving everything. We still think that ten percent belongs to God and ninety percent belongs to us. Wesley closes his *Thoughts on Methodism* with his solution to the problem of wealth:

Is there no way to prevent this? this continual declension of pure religion? We ought not to forbid people to be diligent and frugal. We must exhort all Christians to gain all they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich! What way, then, (I ask again,) can we take, that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who “gain all they can,” and “save all they can,” will likewise “give all they can;” then, the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven.¹

Before proceeding, we need to deal with Wesley’s definition of wealth. Wesley defines wealth in such a way that most of us are wealthy. Here’s Wesley’s definition: “Whoever has sufficient food to eat, and raiment (clothing) to put on, with a place where to lay his head, and something over, is *rich*.”² Wesley includes in this definition those who are only desiring or seeking these things. The problem with the wealthy is that they are building up their own treasures in this world, and not in heaven. Wesley does suggest a legitimate formula for those desiring to lay their treasures up in heaven.

It is allowed, (1.) That we are to provide necessaries and conveniences for those of our own household: (2.) That men in business are to lay up as much as is necessary for the carrying on of that business: (3.) That we are to leave our children what will supply them with necessaries and conveniences after we have left the world: And, (4.) That we are to provide things honest in the sight of all men, so as to “owe no man any thing:” But to lay up any more [on earth], when this is done, is what our Lord has flatly forbidden.³

If you desire to be “a faithful and a wise steward,” out of that portion of your Lord’s goods which he has for the present lodged

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 13* (Third Edition., pp. 260–261). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition., p. 3). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition., pp. 3–4). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

in your hands, but with the right of resumption whenever it pleaseth him, (1.) Provide things needful for yourself; food to eat, raiment [clothing] to put on; whatever nature moderately requires, for preserving you both in health and strength: (2.) Provide these for your wife, your children, your servants, or any others who pertain to your household. If, when this is done, there is an overplus left, then do good to “them that are of the household of faith.” If there be an overplus still, “as you have opportunity, do good unto all men.” In so doing, you *give all you can*; nay, in a sound sense, all you have. For all that is laid out in this manner, is really given to God. You render unto God the things that are God’s, not only by what you give to the poor, but also by that which you expend in providing things needful for yourself and your household.¹

Is the above too much? Would we rather have more for ourselves? Would more wealth make us happy? Wesley gives his answer:

Open your eyes! Look all around you! Are the richest men the happiest? Have those the largest share of content who have the largest possessions? Is not the very reverse true? Is it not a common observation, that the richest of men are, in general, the most discontented, the most miserable? Had not the far greater part of them more content, when they had less money?²

To illustrate the above, Wesley tells the story of a man he met in London, who earned five thousand pounds a year and gave away nine tenths. He considered it a burden, and said, “O Mr. Wesley, these are the crosses I meet with daily!” Wesley replies, “Would he not have been less impatient, if he had had fifty, instead of five thousand, pounds a year?”³ It all depends. Does one view giving as a burden or a joy?

One can become wealthy without trying. In the desire to furnish the poor with cheaper, shorter, and plainer books, Wesley “wrote many small tracts, generally a penny a-piece; and afterwards several larger.” Some of these had such a sale as he never thought possible; and, by this means, he became rich. But he never desired or sought such wealth. When he did

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition., p. 10). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition., p. 11). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition., p. 13). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

become aware of it, he lay up no treasures upon the earth. He received no profit at all from the sale of his tracks and books.¹

Allow me now to summarize Wesley's three plain stewardship principles. They are as follows:

Gain all you can, without hurting either yourself or your neighbour, in soul or body, by applying hereto with unintermitted diligence, and with all the understanding which God has given you;—**save** all you can, by cutting off every expense which serves only to indulge foolish desire; to gratify either the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life; waste nothing, living or dying, on sin or folly, whether for yourself or your children;—and then, **give** all you can, or, in other words, give all you have to God.²

Wesley not only practiced these stewardship principles for himself, he advised them to the Methodist Societies as well. In regard to the preaching-houses that were being built, he gave the following advice, consistent with his three plain stewardship principles:

Let all preaching-houses be built plain and decent; but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable: Otherwise the necessity of raising money will make rich men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent upon them, yea, and governed by them. And then farewell to the Methodist discipline, if not doctrine too.³

“Is there no way to prevent this? asks Wesley; only to answer, “There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who ‘gain all they can,’ and ‘save all they can,’ will likewise ‘give all they can;’ then, the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven.”⁴[August 4, 1786]

Wesley's Example

Wesley practiced what he taught. In 1731, Wesley began to limit his expenses so that he would have more money to give to the poor. His

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7* (Third Edition., p. 9). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 6* (Third Edition., p. 135). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

³ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition., p. 332). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

⁴ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 13* (Third Edition., pp. 260–261). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

records for that year indicate that his annual income was 30 pounds and his living expenses were 28 pounds. He had 2 pounds to give away. The next year his income doubled, but he still managed to live on 28 pounds, so he had 32 pounds to give to the poor. In the third year his income jumped to 90 pounds. Instead of letting his living expenses rise with his income, he kept them at 28 pounds so that he could give away 62 pounds. In the fourth year, his income soared to 120 pounds. As before, he kept his living expenses at 28 pounds and gave away 92 pounds. His budget looked like this:

Year	Income	Living Expenses	Gave to the Poor
First Year	30 Pounds	28 Pounds (93%)	2 Pounds (7%)
Second Year	60 Pounds	28 Pounds (47%)	32 Pounds (53%)
Third Year	90 Pounds	28 Pounds (31%)	62 Pounds (69%)
Fourth Year	120 Pounds	28 Pounds (23%)	92 Pounds (77%)

Wesley became one of England’s most wealthy citizens, yet, as his income increased, he lived within 28 pounds a year and gave everything else away.¹ As far as we know, Wesley continued this practice right up to his death. Because of his charitable nature, Wesley died poor, leaving behind him a good library of books, a well-worn clergyman’s gown, and The Methodist Church.²

Can We Incorporate these Principles?

Wesley defined wealth and stewardship in such a way that most of us are rich and need to achieve some kind of total giving. Let’s take another look at Wesley’s definition of wealth: “Whoever has sufficient food to eat, and raiment (clothing) to put on, with a place where to lay his head, and something over, is *rich*.” According to Wesley’s definition of wealth, most of us are rich, even if we don’t feel rich. Does Jesus define wealth in the same way? It all depends on the situation. In Mark 10:17-22, a man ran up to Jesus and knelt before him, and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus did not give this young man a difficult answer. He replied, “You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You

¹ Matt Friedman, “The Accountability Connection,” *New Man*, Victor Books, July/August, 1994, p. 12.

² At the time of Wesley’s death there were 541 itinerant preachers and 135,000 members of the Methodist Societies.

shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.” All this man had to do was to say, “Thank you, I’ll do as you suggest.” Instead, he boasted, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Looking at him, Jesus loved him, and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Jesus knew that the man had many possessions beyond what he needed for food, clothing, and shelter, and that he was not willing to let go of any of them. When the man realized what it was going to cost him, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus turned around and shocked his disciples by saying, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” (Mark 10:23-27)

Now the disciples were puzzled. Peter spoke up and said, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” And Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.” (Mark 10:28-30) Jesus does not strip everyone of all their possessions, only those who have become addicted to money. In spite of Jesus’ difficult words, the disciples didn’t walk away.

A Modern Miracle

Is it still possible for those who are addicted to their possessions to leave them and follow Jesus? One story comes immediately to mind. It is the story of Linda and Millard Fuller, the founders of Habitat for Humanity. Millard says that he had been involved in the world of commerce since he was six years old. Later, as a law student at the University of Alabama, he launched a series of business ventures with a fellow student. The businesses blossomed, and by Commencement Day, both of them were making \$50,000 a year, and questioned the wisdom of even graduating. Eight years later, they owned a plush modern office building in Montgomery with 150 employees and as president of the company, Millard’s salary was now \$100,000 a year. Then one day in

1964, the treasurer tossed a stack of papers on Millard's desk, and said, "Congratulations. You are a millionaire." Both Millard, and his partner, had reached their goals of becoming millionaires before they were thirty years old. The treasurer, a bright, pretty young woman, asked, "What is your next goal?" Millard replied, "My next goal" Why, ten million! Why not?" In reflecting on this Millard said:

I pushed my chair back from the desk and spent a few minutes thinking over the past. In a very short time, I had amassed a fortune, with all the trimmings. We lived in a beautiful house in the Cloverdale section of Montgomery; plans were already being drawn for a \$100,000 mansion to be built on a 20-acre lot I had recently bought at the edge of the city. I was driving a brand-new Lincoln Continental; on nearby Lake Jordan we had a lovely weekend home, complete with two speedboats. Out in the country, my partner and I owned three farms, totaling 2,000 acres, with hundreds of cattle, saddle horses, and numerous fishing lakes. And of course there was the business, making money at an ever-increasing rate. I had much to be proud of—possessions, prestige, and prospects for more of the same.

In spite of all of his success, his life was a thunderstorm about to break. Although he was less than thirty years old, he could not breathe properly and the pressures were so great that several times a day he had to gasp desperately for breath. The close and loving relationship that he had with his wife Linda had cooled to the point where they shared very little except their king-sized bed. In writing about it, Millard put it as follows:

We had everything—successful business, cattle ranch, cabin on the lake, speedboats, expensive clothes, Lincoln Continental, big house, and plans for a mansion. But deep in the recesses of my mind I was beginning to wonder: Is more and more of this to be the sum total of my life? Am I really devoting myself to the things God intended for me?

Millard had considered himself a Christian, but, as business demanded more and more of his time, he sensed that his interest in the church was declining. In November of 1965, Linda brought the whole matter to a crisis point when she suddenly and firmly announced that she had to go to New York to think about the future of their marriage. "I was in agony," said Millard, "Never before or since have I suffered as I did during those days. Everything else—business, sales, profits, prestige, everything which had seemed so important—paled into total meaninglessness." After a week of misery, Millard could no longer sit still. He had the pilot of his company

take him to Niagara Falls. When the pilot asked him, why Niagara Falls, Millard replied, "Because I've never been there."

Upon arriving in Niagara Falls, they took a taxi to the Canadian side to find a hotel for the night. They turned on the television and watched a program about a young woman who became a missionary and fell in love with a young Chinese military officer, who had to end his military career in order to marry her. He went to an elderly village leader to ask for advice. The elderly leader thought for a moment, and then replied, "A planned life can only be endured." That statement penetrated Millard's innermost being. That's exactly the kind of life he had been living, and his only goal was to get richer and richer. What would be the end, but to be buried in the rich section of the Montgomery cemetery? "With those words ringing in my ears, I phoned Linda and persuaded her to let me come to New York to talk to her."

Linda had been counseling with Dr. Lawrence Durgin, pastor of the Broadway United Church of Christ. She had been impressed with him and had decided to seek his advice rather than that of someone in their home area. Linda described her counseling sessions, but confessed that she had not arrived at a decision about their marriage. That evening they decided to go to Radio City Music Hall to see the movie entitled, "Never Too Late." What a prophetic title. Millard thought, "It is never too late to come back from a wrong turn, to correct a broken relationship, but how?"

After the movie, they went downstairs for refreshments while they waited for the stage show. As they were sipping orange juice, Linda broke down and began crying. Millard couldn't get her to stop, so they stumbled out into the cold November night, leaving the orange juice and their umbrella behind. They walked around for awhile, holding on to each other while Linda's sobs subsided. They sat down on the front steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral and talked. They walked some more, and eventually ended up in the doorway of a shop just off Fifth Avenue. There it happened. Linda faced Millard and bared her soul. She confessed the ways in which she had betrayed their relationship. Then Millard poured out his own agony and regret for the ways he had betrayed her. The wall had broken down, and love rushed in like a mighty flood. They grabbed each other and held on as the tears flowed down their cheeks.

After a long while they took a taxi back to their hotel. They stayed up all night talking, singing, and praying. The song that emerged was, "We're Marching to Zion." The tune filled their hearts and souls. They couldn't stop singing it. They were still singing it three days later on the plane to Montgomery, cheerfully ignoring the stares of their fellow passengers.

We're marching to Zion,
Beautiful, beautiful Zion;
We're marching upward to Zion
The beautiful city of God.
Come, we that love the Lord,
And let our joys be known,
Join in a song with sweet accord,
Join in a song with sweet accord,
And thus surround the throne,
And thus surround the throne.

As Millard and Linda talked about their future, they both felt a strong sense of God's presence. "We felt that God was calling us out of this situation to a new life, a new way of walking. To prepare for this new thing—whatever it was—we felt it necessary to leave the business, sell our interest in it, and give away all the proceeds." The miracle had occurred. "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." (Mark 10:27) The Fullers went on to establish a world wide ministry to provide affordable housing for the working poor. At the time of this writing Habitat for Humanity, with a broad base of volunteers, builds a new home somewhere in the world every four minutes.¹

Can the Miracle be Reproduced?

Millard and Linda Fuller weren't even Methodists, but they practiced total giving. If Methodists won't practice their own stewardship principles, others will. Can this miracle work among us and all other Christians? Jesus seems to approve of total giving. Remember how he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury? Many rich people put in large sums. Then a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, worth about one penny. Jesus called his disciples together, and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had; all she had to live on."² Does this mean Jesus is asking us to put everything into the collection plate every Sunday. "No!" What he is saying here is that this woman, who gave the little amount that she had, was a good steward. She doesn't throw the little money she has into the sea. Without a doubt, regardless of her poverty, this woman was a

¹ Millard tells this story in the first couple of chapters of *Bokotola* (Hourston: Dugout), 1997.

² Mark 12:41-44.

cheerful giver. In writing to the church in Corinth, Paul calls the entire congregation to reproduce this miracle and become cheerful givers:

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written,

“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.”¹

Obviously, Jesus did not expect the poor widow to consistently put all her living in the collection plate. She had to live on something. Wesley makes the same point. We have a responsibility to take care of ourselves and our families, but not in luxury. After we have taken care of ourselves and our families, we have a responsibility to take care of our spiritual families. If we have lived frugally, as Wesley recommends, we will be able to contribute to the well-being of the poor and all other people in need, and we will do it joyfully.

Wesley only had himself to support, and so setting his budget at 28 pounds per year was not complicated. He didn't have to save up to support his family in retirement or provide for them in the event of his death. He doesn't seem to take into consideration what a catastrophic illness might cost him. He just gave everything beyond his 28 pounds away. In our time it is difficult to know how much we need to save for healthcare, retirement, and the support of our family following our death. Wesley did mention these responsibilities, but he did not attempt to give amounts or percentages. He did however reject the tithe as the goal of giving. In the first year, when he budgeted 28 pounds, he only gave away 7% of his income; but, in the years that followed he moved from 53% to 77% in his contributions. That kind of giving today would certainly raise a red flag for an IRS audit.

Wesley called for total giving. Everything we have belongs to God, and the money we spend is God's money. This means that our spending should be consistent with our faith, and if we're not sure of an expenditure, Wesley offers some questions we might ask ourselves prior to making the purchase. I'm sure that most Methodists don't bother asking these questions. Wesley knew that if Methodists followed his first two plain rules

¹ 2 Corinthians 9:6-9

that they would move into the middle class, if not the wealthy class. Knowing how difficult it was for the rich to enter into the Kingdom of God, Wesley placed the greater emphasis on giving all that we have, and to do so joyfully.

So, how does one proceed in total giving? First, we have to acknowledge with Wesley that we don't own anything. We are but stewards of all that we possess. Secondly, we have to start somewhere with our giving, but tithing should not be the goal. It might be appropriate to start with the tithe. This does not mean that 10% belongs to God (or the church) and 90% belongs to us. We must acknowledge that everything belongs to God and that we are only starting our charitable donations at 10%. We will use some of our resources to take care of our other responsibilities. At the same time, we will live as frugally as we can so that we can increase our charitable donations beyond the tithe. This is as important for the poor as it is for the rich. The way Wesley defines wealth, *as having something over one's basic needs*, makes most of us rich.

A third question must be asked: Does it all have to go to the church? There are thousands of organizations that need money for ministries very similar to what we find in churches, and many of them are performing ministries that the churches ought to be doing, or at least supporting. If the church would do what I'm about to suggest, then, I would recommend giving our total financial gifts through the church. I didn't get this idea from Wesley, but I believe it is consistent with his principle of total giving. The church needs money to pay its staff and to maintain a place for public worship. I think that requires approximately half of our total financial donations. At the same time the church needs to live within its budget, which must be set within its expected income. The church should not attempt to live beyond its means.

I'd like to see two financial drives every year, one for the church budget and one for missions. Although Conference Apportionments contain some elements of mission, the average person has little input; therefore, in my opinion, Conference Apportionments should be part of the church's budget. At another time in the year, perhaps during Advent or Lent, or both, a second financial drive should invite members to make financial commitments to the ministries or missions of their own choice. The church could have a mission fair and invite the various ministries and missions, both within and outside of the structure of the church, to be present to share their stories and answer questions. During such an event, people might be asked to commit funds and to volunteer for the ministry or mission of their choice. Total giving does not only mean giving money. It also includes discovering one's spiritual gifts and putting them to use. This

may require more money, that never finds its way into any church offering and that's okay.

For Wesley total giving wasn't an option. It was a necessity. Without total giving, the Methodist movement was doomed to fail. According to Wesley the revival of true religion could not continue very long. Why? Because true religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality; and these cannot help but to produce riches. As riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world. Wesley puts it as follows:

How then is it possible that Methodism, that is, **the religion of the heart**, though it flourishes now as a green bay tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently, they increase in goods. Hence, they proportionably increase in pride, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.¹

There is only one solution to this dilemma. The answer does not lie in forbidding people from becoming diligent and frugal. We must encourage all Christians to gain all that they can, and to save all they can; that is, in effect, to grow rich. What then will save them from the uttermost hell? "There is one way," concluded Wesley, "and there is no other under heaven. If those who *gain all they can*, and *save all they can*, will likewise *give all they can*, then the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven."² The religion of the warm heart will have to learn how to open that heart to total and joyful giving.

¹ Luke Tyerman. (1871). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 3* (p. 520). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

² Luke Tyerman, (1871). *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 3* (p. 520). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

THE CONCLUSION

The essence of it is holiness of heart and life.

John Wesley

Accepting the Method

We don't have to practice the *method* of Methodism, but if this is our intention, we will take seriously the six characteristics of the heart of Methodism.

The first characteristic is the primacy of scripture. This involves becoming Biblically literate with all of scripture. This will involve studying every single book in the Old and New Testaments. Some of these books are difficult, both in the New as well as in the Old Testament. It means working through Leviticus as well as Revelation. Only after we have done this, are we able to develop a mature theology and a practical ethic. As we work on our theology and morality, we need to keep one principle in mind. Jesus is the Word of God, and we interpret all of scripture through him. The Bible is the book that contains the Word of God. Jesus is the lens through whom we hear the Good News and see in his face the Glory of God.

The second characteristic is scriptural salvation. The focus here is not on heaven, but life here on earth, which is a preparation for heaven. Why do we need salvation? The answer is simple. We have marred the image of God, which needs to be restored. The process begins when we "come to ourselves" and realize what we have done. We are willing to go home and live as slaves, but God runs out to meet us and accepts as sons and daughters, his own children. At this point God's divine grace begins the process of transforming us, that is, restoring in us the image in which we have been created. Our goal in life changes from seeking happiness for ourselves to aiming at holiness of heart and life. Wesley called this Christian perfection or entire sanctification. I call it unifying love

Class Meetings are by far the most important characteristic of Methodism. John Wesley called the Class Meeting the *sinew* (muscle) of Methodism. I would call it the *heart* of Methodism. I thought that the word "accountability" would scare people off, but I was wrong. The idea of a long term commitment to a small group frightens more people than "accountability." The majority of those who join a small group discover it to be more significant than attending weekly worship, and yet, it's not supposed to take the place of corporate worship. Covenant Discipleship, the contemporary term for Class Meetings, helps us to balance our

discipleship between acts of mercy and acts of piety. Priority is always to be given to mercy. It also helps us to balance the private and the public acts of piety. Priority is always given to the public acts of Justice and worship. To reject these connections is to hold onto a rope of sand.

Constant Communion is the command of Christ and a Christian's privilege. We can experience the presence of Christ by faith, which transforms us. The first Christians shared the bread and the cup daily. We should at least participate in Holy Communion weekly. This may not be possible for the laity because very few Methodist congregations offer Holy Communion every week. There is another way to practice constant Communion and that is in Covenant Discipleship Groups. The only thing that keeps that from happening is the requirement for an ordained clergy person to administer Holy Communion. Since we believe in the priesthood of all believers, it seems legitimate to me to allow committed laity to administer Holy Communion to one another. After all, laity assist the clergy in administering Holy Communion on Sunday morning, and we profess to believe in the priesthood of all believers.

Unifying love is our ecumenical hope. There is no way that all the churches and religions will come to agreement on theology and ethics. Placing our hope on emphasizing our common beliefs and downplaying our differences will never unify us. We just have to learn how to tolerate different opinions, different understandings of morality, and different ways that churches and religions organize themselves. The emphasis needs to be placed on learning how to love God, ourselves, and our neighbors near and far. When our hearts are filled with the energy of love, then we can work together for the common good in spite of our differences. Both Habitat for Humanity and Heifer Project have paved the way for us. What is needed in practical terms is perfect love, a distinctive Methodist term. To avoid misunderstanding, I have called it unifying love.

The final characteristic of the heart of Methodism is total giving. Tithing is not the goal; it's the starting point. By gaining all we can and saving all we can, we put ourselves in the delightful position of giving all we can. Yes, we have to support ourselves and our families; but, we don't have to do that in luxury. Do we have to give it all to the church? If the church could overcome its fascination with expensive buildings, I would say yes, providing the church would invest at least half of its income in funding ministries like Habitat for Humanity and Heifer Project. These two ministries are only examples. There are many more effective ministries in which the church should invest its resources. If the church won't do it, then Christians should divide their gifts between the church and these ministries.

I like how John Wesley began and ended his definition of Methodism in *The Character of a Methodist*. He wrote the document to defend what Methodism stood for when it was facing opposition and persecution. After working through the principles and practices of Methodism, Wesley wrote:

If any man say, “Why, these are only the common fundamental principles of Christianity!” thou hast said; so I mean; this is the very truth; I know they are no other; and I would to God both thou and all men knew, that I, and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men, by any but the common principles of Christianity.¹

This has been my intention as well. I have attempted not only to define the heart of Methodism, but the heart of Christianity itself. Methodist is only a generic term which describes one method of living out the Christian life. If members of The United Methodist Church, of which I am an ordained elder, won’t follow these principles, there are plenty of Christians in many other denominations who will. If ever these essential characteristics should evaporate, what remains will be dung and dross. As long as they are joined together, no weapon formed against them shall prosper.²

¹ John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8* (Third Edition., p. 346). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

² John Wesley. (1872). *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 13* (Third Edition., p. 260). London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.

IMPORTANT DATES

1. BIRTH AND EARLY YEARS

Born in Epworth, England in on June 17, 1703

Parents were Susanna & Samuel Wesley
10 out of 19 children survived
John was the 15th child
Charles was born on December 18, 1707

Fire consumed the Epworth parsonage
on February 9, 1709

Wesley was saved from the burning
parsonage
Wesley considered himself
“a brand plucked from the burning.”

2. EDUCATION

Charterhouse School (age 10)
Oxford University in 1720

Graduated from Christ Church College, Oxford in 1724
Ordained a Deacon September 19, 1725
Received a Teaching Fellowship at Lincoln College, Oxford in 1726
Ordained to the Priesthood on September 22, 1728

Helped his Father at Epworth (1727-29)

Curate (pastoral assistant) to his Father

Returned to Oxford

Three Books that guided Wesley:

Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis
Holy Living and Dying by Jeremy Taylor
A Serious Call to Holy Living by William Law

The Oxford Student Group (The Holy Club): Started by Charles Wesley, but John took over the leadership

Members:

Charles Wesley
John Wesley
Robert Kirkham,
William Morgan
George Whitefield

Activities:

Systematic Bible Study
Mutual Discipline
Constant Communion
Visited prisoners
Comforted the sick

Names given to them

Holy (Reforming) Club
Bible Moths
Methodists
Enthusiasts
Sacramentalists
Supererogation Men

“A year or two after, Mr. Law’s ‘Christian Perfection’ and ‘Serious Call’ were put into my hands. These convinced me, more than ever, of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian; and I determined, through his grace, (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of,) to be all-devoted to God, to give him all my soul, my body, and my substance.” (1729)

“O give me that book! At any price give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book.”

3. MISSIONARY YEARS

Missionary to Georgia from 1735 to 1737

Departed for Georgia on October 19, 1735
Charles went as secretary to James Oglethorpe
Charles Delamotte and Benjamin Ingham went with them
George Whitfield intended to join them later

Charles returned in 1736

The Love Affair with Sophia Hopkey, who was 18 years old

John returned on February 1, 1737

While John Wesley was in Georgia, August Spangenberg asked him, “John Wesley, do you know whether or not you are saved?” After thinking about it he replied, “I hope I am.” He believed in salvation by faith long before he was converted and he even preached the doctrine but he says following his conversion, “But still I fixed not this faith on its right object; I meant only faith in God, not faith in or through Christ.”

One of the Moravians on board ship asked John Wesley the question: “Do you know Jesus?” Wesley replied by saying, “I know that he is the savior of the world.” The Moravian answered that by saying, “Yes, but do you know him?”

“What have I learned myself in the meantime? Why (what I least expected), that I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.”

4. CONVERSIONS

Charles had his experience on s sickbed on May 21, 1738

Peter Bohler came to his bedside and asked him; “Do you hope to be saved?” Charles replied to him with a “Yes.” Bohler then asked him, “For what reason do you hope it?” Charles said, “Because I have used my best endeavors to serve God.” Peter walked out very disturbed, but on May 21, 1738, Wesley said from his sickbed after many tears and dejection; “I saw that by faith I stand.”

Charles said, “I don’t care who writes the theological books, so long as I can write the hymns.”

John had his experience at a meeting on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1738. Peter Böehler invited him to attend.

Aldersgate was a place where devout Christians met to confess their sins to one another. The society that Wesley went to, had only nine members present that night. Only three were educated.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. James Hutton: Bookseller | 6. A Barber |
| 2. John Shaw: Attorney | 7. A Poulterer |
| 3. John Wesley: Clergy | 8. A Clogmake |
| 4. John Bray: Mechanic | 9. A Barrel repairer |
| 5. A Barber | |

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

I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitely used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there, what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, ‘This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?’ Then was I taught, that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation: But that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of his own will.

After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations; but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and He ‘sent me help from his holy place.’ And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror.”

The Visit to Herrnhut (Moravian community led by Count Zinzendorf)

5. FIELD PREACHING

The Decision to Preach in the fields, homes, and marketplaces (1739)

George Whitefield was the first to preach in Bristol
 Wesley preached his first open-air sermon on April 2, 1739

Opposition to Wesley was generated by his...

- Unconventional methods
- Plain speaking about personal and social sins (slavery)
- Emphasis on the need for repentance
- Emphasis on experiencing the grace of God

Wesley's original objective was to renew the Church of England

"I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way—having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a Church."

"I love a commodious room, a soft cushion and a handsome pulpit, but field preaching saves souls."

"I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation." March 20, 1739

6. SOCIETIES AND CLASSES

Wesley found it necessary to organize his converts (1739)

- The first Society was formed on May 1, 1739
- Societies were formed in the London-Bristol-Newcastle Triangle
- Societies (1739) and Classes (1742)

The First Annual Conference of Methodist leaders began on Monday, June 25, 1744. The conference dealt with three questions:

1. What to teach?
2. How to teach?
3. What to do? (How to regulate our doctrine, discipline, and practice)

Wesley took trips to Wales, Ireland, and Scotland

"Our societies were formed from those who were wandering upon the dark mountains, that belonged to no Christian Church; but were awakened by the preaching of the Methodists, who had pursued them through the wilderness of this world to the Highways and the Hedges—to the Markets and the Fairs—to the Hills and the Dales—who set up the Standard of the

Cross in the Streets and Lanes of the Cities, in the Villages, in the Barns, and Farmers' Kitchens, etc.—and all this done in such a way, and to such an extent, as never had been done before since the Apostolic Age.”

“Give me a hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergy or laymen, for such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth.”

There was one condition for membership—that of desiring to flee from the wrath which is to come. No doctrinal tests were ever laid down. On the Methodists, Wesley said...

“...do not impose, in order to their admission, any opinions whatever. Let them hold particular or general redemption, absolute or conditional decrees; let them be churchmen, or dissenters, Presbyterians or Independents, it is no obstacle. Let them choose one mode of baptism or another, it is no bar to their admission. The Presbyterian may be a Presbyterian still; the Independent and Anabaptist use his own mode of worship. So may the Quaker; and none will contend with him about it. They think and let think. One condition, and one only, is required—a real desire to save the soul. Where this is, it is enough; they desire no more; they lay stress upon nothing else; they only ask, ‘Is thy heart herein as my heart? If it be, give me thy hand.’”

The Methodist Covenant (1752)

1. That we will not listen or willingly inquire after ill concerning one another;
2. That, if we do hear any ill of each other, we will not be forward to believe it;
3. That as soon as possible we will communicate what we hear by speaking or writing to the person concerned;
4. That until we have done this, we will not write or speak a syllable of it to any other person;
5. That neither will we mention it, after we have done this, to any other person;
6. That we will not make any exception to any of these rules unless we think ourselves absolutely obliged in conference.

“Entire sanctification, or Christian Perfection, is neither more nor less than pure love—love expelling sin and governing both the heart and life of a child of God.”

The First Methodist Chapels

The first chapel to be built was The New Room in Bristol (1739)
The Foundry in London (Late 1739)

Wesley preached 40,000 sermons and traveled 250,000 miles

Wesley traveled 5,000 miles a year
Wesley preached 4 to 5 sermons a day

7. MARRIAGE

Wesley Married Mary Vazeille, a widow with 4 children in 1751 at 48
She left him, but there was no divorce

8. THE SPLIT WITH THE ANGLICAN CHURCH

The Deed of Declaration in 1784

Rules and regulations for the guidance of the Methodist Societies
This widened the split with the Anglican Church

The Ordination of Elders in 1784

Wesley appointed Thomas Coke to be a superintendent to the Methodists in America

This empowered Coke to ordain others
This was the biggest break with the Anglican Church
This was the birthday of the American Methodist Episcopal Church
Frances Asbury was ordained a Bishop (December 24, 1784)

“How easy now are Bishops made
At man or woman’s whim!
Wesley his hands on Coke hath laid,
But who laid hands on him?” —Charles Wesley

“How can you, how dare you suffer yourself to be called Bishop? I shudder, I start, at the very thought! Men may call me a knave or a fool, a

rascal, a scoundrel, and I am content: but they shall never by my consent call me Bishop! For my sake, for God's sake, for Christ's sake put a full end to this!" — John Wesley

"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 power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast...the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out."

"If the Methodist leave the Church of England, God will leave them."

The English Church did not begin until after Wesley's death

9. DEATH

Charles Wesley died on March 29, 1788

John Wesley died on March 2, 1791 at 88

John is buried in the graveyard of City Road Chapel, London
Hostility with the Anglican Church subsided in his latter years
There is a memorial plaque in Westminster Abbey

John Wesley wrote his own epitaph: "Here lieth the body of John Wesley, a brand plucked out of the burning, who died of a consumption in the fifty-first year of his age, not leaving, after his debts are paid, ten pounds behind him; praying, God be merciful to me, an unprofitable servant." — November 26, 1753.

"The best of all, God is with us." — John Wesley's final words

The Heart of Methodism

John Wesley feared that Methodism would continue as an Institution, but that it would lose its emphasis on its goal of holiness in heart and life. Methodism exercised at least six principles that kept holiness of heart and life in its focus. Wesley tried to apply these six principles in the renewal of the Anglican Church., but now they need to be applied to Methodism itself.

About the Author



Dr. Reuteler holds a B.A. in the Humanities from Texas Wesleyan University, a B.D. in New Testament and Systematic Theology from Candler School of Theology, and a Ph.D. in Christian Social Ethics from Emory University. In addition to being a Dempster Scholar, he served congregations in Texas, Georgia, and Wisconsin. He also taught at the Methodist Theological School in Sibuluan, Sarawak (Malaysia) and currently lives with his wife Barbara in Aurora, Colorado.