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The Wesleyan class meeting: A guide on the quest for perfection

Chrisley, Hillary Andréa, D.Min.

School of Theology at Claremont, 1989

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**THE WESLEYAN CLASS MEETING:
A GUIDE ON THE QUEST FOR PERFECTION**

**A Professional Project
Presented to
the Faculty of the
School of Theology at Claremont**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry**

**by
Hillary Andréa Chrisley
May 1989**

This professional project, completed by

Hillary Andrea Chrisley,

*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty
of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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Abstract

The Wesleyan Class Meeting: A Guide on the Quest for Perfection

Hillary Andréa Chrisley

The local United Methodist churches in the United States have replaced the Biblical understanding of perfection with the definition propounded by contemporary society. This project critiques that definition. Finding it inadequate, an alternative is examined: perfection as understood from a specific theological perspective.

The relation of perfection to the Wesleyan concepts of prevenient grace, justification, and sanctification are explored. These concepts are manifestations of the invitation God extends to all. This invitation calls us to follow God's commandments — to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves — while living in a world that has forgotten its Creator. God, a loving Creator, desires that we respond affirmatively to the invitation to live our lives in harmony with God's will.

The United Methodist Church faces a dilemma. The Church must live in the world, which professes easy yet ineffective answers to the attainment of perfection. However, the Church desires to respond to God's love with obedient love.

Since the Church is a gathering of *people*, throughout the ages the Church has recognized the need of people to wrestle together with the great issues of life. One effective means of receiving encouragement in this process is through the small group. Several historical examples of small groups are offered. The greatest

emphasis is placed on a traditional United Methodist small group: John Wesley's class meetings.

In reviewing the history of the United Methodist Church it is noted that an emphasis within the Church on the doctrine of perfection resulted in the formation of intentional small groups. These groups not only had their origin in the Wesley class meeting, but were also organized on the model offered by Wesley.

Today, the Church can once again benefit from the emphasis on perfection and the implementation of the class meeting. Suggestions for the practical use of the class meeting within the local church are given. The relationship between the class meeting and the local church is highlighted. The Church's role in the world, and the asset class meetings offer to this role, is discussed.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those involved in the process of this project. I especially would like to thank Ann Taves and Cornish Rogers for their insightful advice. Also, a thank you to Harlowe and Emily Schmidt for the use of their computer, printer and for their hospitality. For his patient guidance, Ron Chrisley has my appreciation. The people of St. Matthews are deserving of my gratitude for their support and encouragement. A special thank you goes to the people of St. Matthews who participated in the Wednesday night Class Meeting.

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To Todd, my partner on the quest

CHAPTER 1

The Modern Quest for Perfection

The Good Life

A majority of people in the United States are on a quest. They are on a quest for perfection. They are taking seriously the Constitutional conviction that everyone is entitled to pursue happiness. The pathways leading to perfection and happiness are thought to be parallel. The propaganda being fed to the people of the United States indivisibly links the attainment of perfection to the attainment of happiness.

Perfection is a word that is used in the United States today to mean something without a flaw -- unmarred, without blemish. Webster's dictionary defines perfection as being "1. complete in all respects, without defect or omission; sound; flawless 2. in a condition of complete excellence, as in skill or quality; faultless; most excellent. . . ."1

An undisputed authority in the lives of the majority of North Americans is the media: television, radio, newspapers, movies.² The media is intent on sending into the homes, and therefore, into the minds, of people a very attractive and alluring message. In a number of subtle (and not so subtle ways) we are taught that we, ordinary, everyday people, can achieve a state of perfection. We can become perfect and ideal people. The message we receive daily is that we can

¹ "Perfection." Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1055.

² William J. Donnelly, The Confetti Generation (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1986), 53. For a discussion on the rise of television media, and its effects on the American ethos, refer to Part One of Donnelly's book.

be flawless in all facets of our lives, that we can be complete and faultless, infallible in our choices and in our execution of those choices. When we are complete, and have everything we have ever wanted -- only then will we be happy. And perhaps the most seductive concept of all is that this perfection is within our reach! According to the media, it only takes a wish upon a star and magically "anything your heart desires will come to you." A significant corollary in the media's presentation of perfection is the message that we can achieve the ideal in *this life*. We can have heaven on earth. This good life is not a promise of pie in the sky in the sweet by and by. But to use the words of a current advertisement, "The future is now!" This opportunity for the perfect life is offered to us in any number of different ways (over the air waves, in print) but these presentations have one common denominator -- perfection for a price.

The word "perfection" conjures up a number of images for people in the United States today. It can be a word of hope: a word that conveys an optimistic confidence that humanity is not doomed to remain in its present position, that humanity can progress on to bigger and better things. Perfection implies that it is possible to have a larger slice of the pie -- to have our cake and eat it too. It implies that the ideal person, whose image is carved out so intricately for us by the media, is within reach. Perfection means that the average American can pick himself or herself up by the bootstraps. An ordinary person, according to this contemporary understanding of perfection, can go from emotional, physical, and financial rags to unspeakable, incredibly enviable riches.

The Treadmill

On the other hand, perfection is a word that also produces anxiety for those of us in the United States. Pressure to become perfect engulfs the day-to-day world of North Americans. There is pressure, from within and without, to be the perfect mother, the perfect father, the perfect employee, the perfect mate, the

perfect student. Perfectionism, in this sense, is a United States society-produced ethic. Anxiety invariably comes when we feel this pressure to be perfect and find that no matter how hard we try or how many products we buy that we cannot achieve it.³

There is a struggle going on inside of us. Our passion is to achieve the ideal, to be perfect, to transcend mundane reality, to have all of your dreams and desires satisfied. But this yearning for a better life battles head to head with the fact of our inability to achieve perfection. Many of us feel that we are so far from the ideal persons we see paraded in front of us on the T.V. or Silver Screen that we claim: "I certainly couldn't be perfect -- not me, I am a nobody." Others of us hold on fast to what little we have: "That's just the way I am; I am comfortable in my patterns. I don't dare risk what little I have. It is better to have a little happiness than to have a lot of disappointment." While others of us are nestled in apathy or hopelessness: "It is not worth trying to change things. Some things are just *meant* to be this way. Besides, somebody's got to be low on the totem pole."

It is so easy to fall into the trap of this perfection ethic; we are practically pushed, and the hole is deep! Deep within ourselves we realize a lack in our lives. Evidence abounds that we feel an emptiness in our lives: the abuse of drugs and alcohol, and meaningless sexual encounters. There is a gap between who we are and who we have been created to be. We yearn to have this deficiency rectified, this gaping wound healed over. We yearn for completion, for restoration.

³ A current analysis of this area, handled with pointed humor, has been written by Carol Orsborn, Enough is Enough: Exploding the Myth of Having It All (New York: Putnam, 1986). Although written primarily for women, Orsborn's examination of the American stress on having it all is pertinent to this discussion. She recognizes the need within each of us to be fulfilled. Her concern is with the way in which we seek fulfillment: by becoming Superwomen (and men). Lacking an explicit Christian perspective, her suggestions can carry the reader only so far out of this trap. However, her identification of the problem and insight into human nature are valuable.

We *know* we do not measure up. We behold the images of perfection disseminated by the media in an almost constant barrage. Then we compare what we have, what we do, and who we are with this image. We are unable to duplicate the qualities of the perfect person. We are very much aware that we do not conform to this ideal as we look in the mirror, see our unorganized houses, recall our flawed work record, compare our lives to those "shakers and movers" who are capable of accomplishing a myriad of things in their lives.

Thanks to television, magazines, radio, papers, advertisements and books, we are exposed to examples of the perfect life. We are shown the perfect way to climb the corporate ladder. We "look in on" the perfect family. These examples pervade our hearts and minds as they blare from the television, the movies, the cover of Time. We *know* we are not all that we can be. Our hearts ache when we feel our deficiency: a gap between who we are and what we have been created to be. We yearn to redeem the situation. And we think: if only we could get our lives in gear, have everything going perfectly and without a hitch. Then we would be happy.

The TV and the magazines, movies and advertisements constantly remind us that we are not at all perfect. In order to be perfect, our dress, health, bodies, mental achievements, economic situation, family relationships, and even our leisure time must correspond to the characteristics of the ideal person. And when these facets of our lives come up short of perfect, we feel a sense of anxiety. A sense of hopelessness. Our lives are spent trying to assuage this anxiety by possessing more and more. But this does not last long. No sooner than we make our purchases than we feel the anxiety beginning to come to the surface

again. It seems that the more we buy, the more we feel we need. We are on a treadmill.⁴

The Quest for Security

It is as if we are stranded in a lifeboat, so thirsty, knowing full well that to drink the sea water around us means certain and slow death; yet we drink because we cannot control our appetites. We drink because we believe we have no other alternative.

An element of the modern quest for perfection is that we cannot, we dare not, share with others our deep feelings of inadequacy. For to be perfect in our society means to be without pain. An ideal existence would mean no conflicts with our teenagers, no financial problems, no marital difficulties. In the perfect life, there would be no intrusion upon our lives that we did not wish. If on the TV screen we see the emaciated children of Ethiopia, we simply turn the channel to watch the "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" or to "Fantasy Island". Perfect people (or so we are taught) are supposed to be able to handle whatever comes their way. Perfect people are supposed to be able to handle everything by themselves, with tact, and without an ounce of perspiration. All effort and investment are channelled into sustaining equilibrium and the status quo. There is never any suffering when you are living the good life, for all aspects of a perfect person's life are in control.

Become perfect! Achieve the impossible -- listen to that voice inside of you longing for notoriety, for comfort, for ease. Become the superman or superwoman who has it "all together". Have that perfect "10" body, the ideal home and yard, the right car, belong to the right circle of people. Have a

⁴ Alfred C. Krass, Evangelizing Neopagan North America (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1982),

harmonious family, never a hair out of place, and be at ease in every social situation. Be the top CEO in your organization. Vacation at the best places. And have every creation that comes out of your oven be deserving of applause and gold medals!

Jim Wallis, in his book Call to Conversion, after watching just one evening's offering of television could adeptly describe the attempts of the advertising cartel to sell us their idea of the good life.

In one night I saw advertised an array of gadgets and comforts beyond the wildest dreams of any previous generation. Products and experiences beyond a king's reach in former times are now offered as Christmas gifts among America's affluent.⁵

What Wallis saw astounded him. He saw appliances that were advertised as "time savers," toys that simulated war, clothing and perfumes that promised love and sex appeal to the wearers, and products priced so "low" that "anyone can afford it."⁶ The message came over the air waves loud and clear - happiness, fulfillment, even love can be purchased.⁷ Wallis warns us of the effects of this message:

What was happening through the television that night I watched was spiritual formation. Far more effective than crude totalitarianism, this continual electronic suasion is forming the values, the mind, and the spirit of each of us in our all-consuming society. Such spiritual formation whets our appetite for more while closing our eyes and hardening our hearts to the worldwide consequences of our materialistic way of life. In fact, most advertising appeals directly to one or more of the seven deadly sins: pride, lust, envy, anger, covetousness, gluttony, and sloth. And are the television programs sandwiched around these ads much different? Not really.

⁵ Jim Wallis. *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), xii.

⁶ Wallis, xii.

⁷ "The power of television took us by surprise. In one decade it exploded on the landscape as the ultimate consumer product, next to a house and a car, the symbol of the good life in America" (Donnelly, 17). Here we have a product which we buy in order to secure our place in the good life. Ironically, this status symbol is an instrument that advertising uses to sell us more promises of the good life!

Even the television preachers tell us that prosperity is evidence of God's blessing; by implication, poverty is a sign of God's disfavor.⁸

The world tempts us: "Be perfect and you will be happy. Be imperfect and you will be unhappy." For North Americans, being happy is a life-long pursuit. We want to be happy, and we will buy and try just about everything to make ourselves happy. Likewise, we will try and buy just about everything to keep from being unhappy. We are *afraid* of being unhappy. We are afraid of a number of things:

We are afraid of economic hardship and diminishing resources; of the enmity between black, white, red, brown, and yellow peoples; of the volatile gulf between rich and poor; of the hurt between men and women; of violence stalking on every side; of the drift toward nuclear holocaust; and of the ways that restoring broken fellowship might disrupt our lives and our security. We fear for ourselves and for our children. . . . We are insecure, frightened of our own emotions, and wary of trusting one another. We feel both the guilt of our sin and the vulnerability of our broken places. Above all, we fear pain, suffering, and finally death.⁹

There is no room for fears or insecurities in the carefree life of the perfect person. The quest for perfection is the quest for security.

The New Idol

The modern quest for perfection has caught the Church in its web. Christians in the United States rely on the promise of the American way of life to provide happiness and fulfillment. The Church is not immune from the effects of the media in urging us to buy our way to perfection. Christians and non-believers alike have succumbed to the lure of the promise of perfection. In fact, it is a source of pride among some evangelical Christians that they

have proven that they can "make it" in this society - and that they have made it on terms that this society understands: success, fame,

⁸ Wallis, xiii.

⁹ Wallis, 163.

prosperity, political influence, and, above all, a thoroughgoing loyalty to the "American way of life."¹⁰

Perfection has become the new idol for Americans. The One to save us from our fears, redeem us from the errors of our ways, and to give us abundant life is our god Perfection.

With no strength to resist the idols that dominate our culture, God's people fall away. Eventually, they do not even see the need to resist; rather, they find ways to make their religion compatible with the worship of the other gods. The Israelites usually did not reject the worship of Yahweh altogether; they wanted to worship Yahweh *and* Baal. Like the people around them, they were loyal to many gods.

The same is true today. Our churches do not dispense with the worship of the Lord; they simply include the worship of other gods. We want God's life, but we want the good life too. We seem to believe that we can pay homage to our many cultural idols and still retain our integrity as God's people.¹¹

It must be recognized that the perfection that the world demands, expects, and dangles in front of us, is not the answer to fill the void. It will not bridge the gap. Perfection, as the world advertises it, is an attempt of humanity to do things on its own. It is a chimera. It is a false idol. The promise of perfection offered by the media is a misdirection of our time, talents, energies, and money. We buy the products they sell us, we measure ourselves according to their standards, and we find ourselves nowhere closer to perfection. Those who benefit are those who would prey on our inadequacies. In the long run, the only ones who profit from the promotion of perfection are those who sell the anti-aging cremes, the body building equipment, the glamor magazines, and the self-help books.

¹⁰ Wallis, 25.

¹¹ Wallis, 30.

All the "solutions" for which we reach, whether in the personal realm or in the field or international affairs, are dead-ends. Americans' inner emptiness is not going to be satisfied by hedonism and pagan or Christo-pagan religions of "self-actualization." America's emptiness as a nation is not going to be satisfied by another generation of exploiting poor nations nor by inflicting armed terror on our enemies.¹²

As imperfect people we sin. We pursue our desires rather than our needs. We choose each day whom we would serve -- ourselves, the progression of humanity. By believing in the common interpretation of perfection as the answer to our human situation we replace God with Humanity. The heresy of perfection lies in the elevation of humanity to the state of unqualified self-sufficiency. We believe we are the Creator and that others should cater to our desires. We voluntarily seek out what we want rather than what God wants. We voluntarily seek out that which we are told will be the best for us, from the most unlikely source -- other misguided people!

What alternative do we have for bridging the gap between who we are and who we ought to be? Is there a method, a 12-step program, or a guide book to aide us in becoming perfect? Is there an answer that will satisfy our need for restoration? What can bring us lasting happiness? How can we "be all that we can be" and still be aware of the universal implications of our actions? How can the Church in North America dislodge itself from the web known as the modern quest for perfection? Perhaps we need to look beyond what we want, and look to what God requires of us.

¹² Krass, 145.

CHAPTER 2

What God Requires

The Grace of God

We are searching for a way to bridge the gap between who we are and who we have been created to be. Instead of accepting guidance from fellow creatures about what we can become, why not consult the Creator? Rather than striving to fulfill the requirements for perfection proposed by the media, we need to discover what God requires of us. Who better is qualified to show us what we are meant to be than the One who created us?

All that God does is motivated by grace and all that we have is due to grace.¹ Grace is that which comes undeservedly to one who has not earned it. All that God has given and enables to be is a by-product of this unearned favor. This God has chosen, out of love, to be active in the life of Creation.² The God who actively created not only the heavens and earth, but all good things, has a great potential to be powerful. But is there a limit to this power? Yes, there is a limit to God's power. But it as a *self-imposed* limit.³ Whereas God, the One who created the world, has the power to create and create only as God can -- perfectly. God has chosen not to use this power to create a perfect world. Why

¹In discussing what God requires of us, I find it necessary to deal with the fundamental Methodist topics of grace and holiness. My understanding of these two central themes has been greatly influenced by John Wesley and the subsequent Methodist tradition.

² Here I am drawing on Wesley's view of grace as "God's love, immanent and active in humanity." Albert C. Outler, ed., John Wesley (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), 33.

³ Wesley definitely held to the belief of an omnipotent God (Outler, John Wesley, 187.) I, too, believe in an all-powerful God, but based on the application of the Methodist Quadrilateral (Scripture, Reason, Experience, Tradition) I believe that God's use of brute power is subsumed by God's desire to act out of love. This love requires a reduction in power.

would God do this? God does consider power to be an important thing, but not as important as God's love for Creation itself. But since power does have importance, God, by grace, allowed those created to enjoy the benefits and responsibilities of power.

In order for this to occur, God's power had to be self-limited, and the variable of human unpredictability entered in. God gracefully considered the intelligence and the capabilities of humanity by sharing a portion of that which reveals God's image in us -- the ability to make choices and to interact with our environment. The power given to humanity by God is scaled down in proportion to God's, but it is still a considerable amount. We are capable of decision-making, realizing potential, creating, reflecting, and developing new ideas. Correspondingly, we are able to produce hurt, destruction, brokenness, and death. Along with power comes the responsibility for those things and people that are affected by our use of power. We can choose to act responsibly, or not, with our power.

God has not set these things in motion and has let the world turn as it may. As is recorded in the Bible, God has continued to play a role in the lives of people and in the maintenance of the earth. God went to all the trouble of constructing a world that is beautiful as well as complex (can beauty not be?). In creating this world, God has appealed not only to our intellect -- the world was not made haphazardly, it fits together intricately -- but also to our senses -- there are colors, sights, sounds, textures, and emotions. Only a Creator in love with Creation would go to all that trouble! It is because of love such as this that God continues to be active in the world, not only active historically, but active emotionally as well. God rejoices with those who are happy and feels deeply the groans of humanity on this earth. To put it anthropomorphically, God is a thinking and feeling God.

Free Will and Sin

It does seem strange to us that a God would prefer endowing people with power and capabilities, and thereby introducing the potential of human error, rather than having an orderly, fault-free world. This is a God that works on the principle of enabling love instead of controlling power. God would rather give humanity free will⁴ than ultimately control the world. God has created humanity in the image of God and therefore has given us the power as well as the capacity for extending enabling love. Perhaps there is more to challenge God, as well as ourselves, in a world where God must actively be involved if we are not to be swallowed up by our own mistakes or the effects of entropy. It is sad to see that humanity has been so adept at twisting this central principle of creation and has gone instead in search of self-fulfillment.⁵ But, perfection, as the world purveys, is unattainable to us. We strive for fulfillment only to find that we cannot achieve it on our own. What gets in the way of our reaching this wholeness? Why do we fail in our striving to be perfect? We cannot achieve anything completely or produce anything without flaw on our own because we ourselves are not complete or without flaw. We are creatures who have twisted our original nature, we are not what we were created to be. We are a people who sin.

⁴ A distinct belief of Wesley was God's bestowal on humanity of the quality free will. Wesley was concerned that this quality be highlighted in so far as it distinguished his thought from those who held to Calvinistic Predestination. (Outler, John Wesley, 448.) Whereas Wesley would say free will allows us to work together with God, I would also say that in order for us to work with God, God's power must then be limited.

⁵ Wesley held to the doctrine of original sin resulting from the Fall in the Garden of Eden. This disobedient act of Adam and Eve is the reason we, too, sin and are no longer in union with God. (Outler, John Wesley, 139.) Similar to Wesley, I believe that humanity is no longer in union with God. However, I understand the Adam and Eve myth in Genesis as descriptive of a universal truth of humanity's propensity to sin. The twisting of the image of God in humanity, and therefore the central principle of enabling love, occurs whenever we chose to disobey God.

We have been given power by God, and the free will to decide how we will exercise this power. When we choose to reach out to others, we find that we do not have selfless motives. When we attempt to do what is right, we find that we do not do the right thing. We find that the "spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." We cannot do the good we wish to do. Such sin is *involuntary* yet still sin. Often we do not even choose to do good. We choose, outright, to do that which we know will be harmful to ourselves or others. We deliberately choose to do that which will take away from the wholeness and fullness we know to be best for us. We deliberately decide against that which God requires. Such sin is "a conscious and deliberate violation."⁶

Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of a known law of God. Therefore every voluntary branch of the law of love is sin; and nothing else, if we speak properly.⁷

Our propensity to sin has been likened to our being diseased. We are infected with the virus of sinning and it has permeated every part of our lives. We are individually and corporately infected with sin: "The whole world is, indeed, in its present state, only one great infirmary. All that are therein are sick of sin; and their one business is to be healed."⁸ The Church is a body of believers whose individual selves are sinful, thus making the Church prone to sin. Wallis draws parallels between the dilemma of the modern Church and its Biblical counterpart.

The Bible and the history of the church reveal that our tradition is one of very forgetful people. We easily lose our memory and our identity as God's children. Uncertain of who we are, we become easy prey to forces from the surrounding culture. The power of those outside influences grows stronger than anything happening

⁶ Albert C. Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1975), 38.

⁷ John Leland Peters, Christian Perfection and American Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961), 39.

⁸ Peters, 45.

within the community of faith. In biblical language, we become vulnerable to false gods and fall into idolatry. . . . We have forgotten who we are as God's people, and we have fallen into the worship of American gods. Now God's word to us is to return. Church historians may someday describe our period as the "American Captivity of the Church." It is no less real than the Babylonian Captivity in the history of Israel.⁹

Our sin is not only individual or corporate, in the sense of only affecting the Church, but is also institutional. Our systems and institutions are rife with sin, and more often than not, we are unaware of it. As long as there have been humans, there have been societies. And these societies have coursing within their veins the disease that their citizens carry in themselves. God throughout the ages has commissioned people from within each society to address the institutional sin that has infected the people.

The Scriptures teach that evil is rooted not only in the human heart but also in the principalities and powers, in the structures of society. According to the Bible, social sin is often accompanied by an inability to recognize the sin described as blindness. Often, we are involved in destructive social arrangements without being aware of it. We are barely conscious of the harm we inflict on others when it is done through the social institutions to which we belong. Personal sin is more visible to us than sin rooted in the system. . . . We cling tenaciously to the beliefs and symbols that make our institutions seem right and good, and we easily overlook the sin built into the system, even as it destroys others' lives and eats away at our humanity. The prophets punctures such collective myths and delusions. They called the people to see their disobedience to God and the harm they were doing to others through the structures of their corporate life.¹⁰

Prevenient Grace

Thankfully, God does not abandon us to our own evil. Thankfully, it *is* God's will that we be restored to the original image. God desires that the broken

⁹ Wallis, 31.

¹⁰ Wallis, 35.

relationship be mended. God has created each of us to be the sons and daughters of God, to belong to the family of God.

As can be expected of any loving parent, and therefore even more so from the Divine Parent, God wills a full life for us all. As in the lines from the hymn with the same name: "God Wills a Full Life for Us All, / Loves us with tender care."¹¹ We are called to exercise those characteristics that make us most like our Parent; God wants us to be like God.

Since before time began God has been creatively reaching out to form relationships. The Creation of the heavens and earth, robed in flora and fauna and populated with people and animals, is an example of God's participatory nature. God is constantly trying to reach us. Before we are even aware of God's interest in us, God is anticipating a favorable response on our parts. This is called *Prevenient Grace*. This unearned favor is the power that allows depraved humanity to turn to God and respond to God's call to relationship.¹²

The modern quest for perfection is indicative of our search for restoration. We yearn to return to our rightful heritage. We long to be restored to fellowship with our Creator. We feel that what God has for us is better than what we can achieve on our own. We want wholeness. We are constantly searching for fullness. We are seeking that which will fulfill our *raison d'etre*.

Justification

God is very much aware of our need for fulfillment. God is also very much aware of the state of affairs in our lives and in our world. God knows because God chose to live with humanity as a human. Such an event made possible our

¹¹ Words by Paul R. Gregory. Reprinted in Everflowing Streams: Songs for Worship, eds. Ruth C. Duck and Michael G. Bausch (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 48.

¹² Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit, 39.

relating to God in a new way. Rather than relating to God as a Cosmic Lawgiver, we are now able to respond to God as our Parent. Jesus' relationship to God serves as a model for this bond.¹³

This *Incarnation* is another evidence of God's loving grace -- for while people were still holding to the ideal of self-fulfillment at the expense of others, God decided that we would be given another chance. God not only desired that all of the wrong we had done in the past be forgiven, but that we be given a way to see the reflection of God in ourselves one more time (to remind us of the way things can and will be). This took a lot on God's part. God did not require that humanity be held accountable for its own misdoings. Rather, God decided to do whatever it took to return the world to the right track. The death of Jesus on a particular day in the history of the world was what the world made out of what God provided. This, for some reason, was what God decided to call *enough* to make up for what humanity had inflicted upon themselves, the earth, and God. This forgiveness was accomplished out of love. God has gracefully provided a way for humanity to see more of God and therefore more of the reflection of God in ourselves. This is an example of the complex simplicity of grace!

[John] Wesley insists, however, that man has no power in and of himself to do other than evil. When he turns to God, it is grace (prevenient) co-operating with grace (redemptive). And this redemptive grace is conceived of as infused rather than imputed. Its effects not simply a changed relationship but a changed nature. And it is sufficient to effect man's complete salvation. It is this high doctrine of grace which makes possible in a single system a synthesis of total depravity and Christian perfection.¹⁴

¹³ Theodore Runyon, lecture presented for the course "Theology of the Church and Sacraments," School of Theology at Claremont, 14 July 1986.

¹⁴ Peters, 43.

God's Word is a double-edged sword with a message of judgement and a message of Grace. The same God who despairs when we are not the people we were created to be is the same God who gives us a way out of our dilemma.

The Gift of Grace also comes from [the One] who speaks the word of judgement. Grace is the Wesleyan motif through and through. Grace is free and sufficient. It means newness and surprise. It is productive of real change. It enhances love. It inspires gratitude. Because Christ lives, we are become new creatures who have put off the old man. Our lives are caught up in the miracle of love freely given. Judgement and grace, these are the content of renewal. Holding these before our eyes will spare us from succumbing to aberrations which produce only debris along the Christian way.¹⁵

There is nothing we, as humans, can do in order to be made righteous in God's eyes. Our repentance cannot undo the damage that has been done. But God's grace is such that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." As was stated above, the death of Jesus Christ was what God decided to call enough to make up for what humanity had inflicted upon themselves, the earth, and God. This forgiveness is accomplished out of love, and is called *Justification*.¹⁶ This is the kernel of the Good News, of the Bible.

What is the good news? When all that sin had done, or could ever do, was laid on Jesus, it did not overcome him. Death could not swallow him. The grave was denied its victory. The witness of history and of his followers is that "he is risen." He is alive. He has triumphed over all. He is the victor over every sin, hate, fear, violence, and death. Nothing is stronger than his victory - nothing past, nothing present, and nothing future. If this is God's way of salvation and liberation, do we have the right to choose any other way for relating to the world?¹⁷

¹⁵ Samuel Emerick, ed., Spiritual Renewal for Methodism (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, 1958), 54.

¹⁶ Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit, 51. Wesley often used legal language to describe the benefits of Christ's saving actions.

¹⁷Wallis, 165-66.

But we find ourselves surrounded by the media, tempted by the American dream, and frustrated in our desire to find happiness and satisfaction. The media that brings us promises of a perfect life and a happy home, also brings us news of the state of our world. The nightly news broadcasts show us war-torn areas, famine, and the rise of illiteracy in North America. We see before our very eyes a paradox. As the number of people who have achieved the good life increases, so, too, does the number of powerless people increase.

Everywhere we look, the value of human life seems to be steadily diminishing. A spirit of fearful insecurity and mass resignation abounds. Young people say that they don't expect to live out their lives, and couples hesitate to bring children into the world. We have become alienated from the poor, from the earth, from the survival of future generations, and, at root, from God. The cost of our much-touted style of life has been higher than any of us could have realized. Family life, community spirit, and mutual aid have been replaced with the lifeboat ethic of protecting, defending, and competing for scarcer resources. . . . 18

Crisis has become a word to describe our whole way of life. The world appears to be falling apart while social commentators argue the probabilities of which might come first, economic disaster or nuclear destruction. Politicians, unable to change the momentum or face the hard choices, are reduced to boosting national morale while defending the status quo. In this perilous situation, appeals for change based on fear seem only to dig us in deeper. Similarly, individual self-improvement, education, and gradual social reform are all old solutions that seem unable to save us now. Repair in the road is no longer helpful if we are headed in the wrong direction. Rather, we need to be converted. We need to turn around. We need nothing less than a spiritual transformation.¹⁹

If we truly desire to be fulfilled, to be all that we can be, we *must* change our direction. Our lives must be turned around. We need to be converted from the quest for perfection, as we have come to know it, to God's way of fullness.

18 Wallis, xi.

19 Wallis, xii.

God's ways are not our normal ways. God calls us to change our harmful ways. God invites us to experience a life infected with God's enabling love. A life where sin may still be present, but does not have a stranglehold on us. A life where we fully realize our heritage as sons and daughters of God. We are invited to live a life worthy of our calling as human beings. Recognition of our inability to achieve fullness on our own reminds us that we are the created and not the Creator. Recognition of our inability to save ourselves from the clutches of sin reminds us that we must turn to Another. On our own we are not capable of living our lives to the fullest. Our ways are inadequate and twist an already warped humanity even more. Only the One who has our welfare in mind, has only pure love for us, and wills nothing but the best for us can help us out of our dilemma. This loving God will not give us a stone when we ask for bread or a snake when we ask for a fish (Matt. 7:9).²⁰ This is the One to whom we should look for our fullness.

The Will of God

God loves us and desires restoration for our broken relationship. In this restoration we will be no longer deliberately acting against God's wishes, but will want to do God's will. Our yearning for completeness can begin by admitting our need for Another. Our hunger for wholeness can begin to be satisfied by conforming our will to the will of God. We, as corrupted people, "may rise even to sanctity. This hopeful conclusion is prompted by Wesley's concept of God. He sees [God] not as *Deus Absconditus* or wholly other but as compassionate, sanctifying spirit."²¹ If God has our best interest in mind, then by following

²⁰ All references are to the Revised Standard Version.

²¹ Peters, 64.

God's guidance we can be "not conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of [our] minds" (Rom.12:2a).

We can find our completeness when we conform our will to the will of God. What is the will of God? To answer this question we must turn to the source of authority Wesley relied upon the most: Scripture. "Do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). God wills that the twisted image be restored to its full reflection. God wills a full life for us all. God wills that our needs be met: emotionally, physically, and spiritually. "And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?' And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:35-39).

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. To love God is to have a personal relationship with God. In order to have a relationship with anyone we must have some form of contact with them. A personal contact is just as necessary with God as it is with anyone with whom we wish to have a meaningful relationship. Talking with, sharing with, caring for, having common goals, trust, commitment, honesty -- these are but a few of the elements integral to a meaningful relationship. True, loving friends are connected, and in losing themselves in each other, they find more of themselves. God has given us being, and has given us God. Our response is to give ourselves to God. "It will be noted that this is a perfection not of self-realization but of self-surrender -- the unreserved human capitulation to the extended love of God."²² Wesley asserted each person can be "a consciously voluntary instrument" of the

²² Peters, 65

grace of God. When we give our lives to God they are no longer to revolve around ourselves, but are to have God at their center.²³

Self-surrender to God is a way to find ourselves and to find ourselves fulfilled. A life of allowing God's will to be our will is a life that puts God at the center of everything. John Wesley found this to be a milestone in deciding the course of his life.

Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God; all my thoughts, and words, and actions; being thoroughly convinced there was no medium but that every part of my life (not some only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or self; that is, in effect, to the devil.

I saw that "simplicity of intention, and purity of affection," one design in all we speak or do, and one desire ruling all our tempers, are indeed "the wings of the soul," without which she can never ascend to the mount of God.²⁴

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Self-surrender to God is not losing contact with one's self. It is losing one's self in order to find it. Many of us do not love ourselves *as we are*; the modern quest for perfection is a *dead* giveaway to the fact! Acceptance of God's unconditional, prevenient love for us allows us to love ourselves as Divinely-created beings. God requires us to extend God's enabling-love for us to the rest of creation. We are to love those we like, and we are to love our enemies. We are to care for the city and we are to care for the land. We are to live our lives in dependence on God and in interdependence with the rest of creation. Choosing to live our lives in conformity with God means to choose *not* to be conformed to the world's idea of perfection. Choosing God's will is to exclude from our lives that which will not conform to God's will.

²³ Peters, 199-200.

²⁴ John Wesley, A Plain Account of Christian Perfection (London: Epworth, 1952), 5-6.

Sanctification

In the Wesleyan "Order of Salvation," after we are given the power to turn to God (prevenient grace) and are restored to God's favor (justification), we are graced with a new nature. A real and inward change occurs in a person's life. We are enabled by the grace of God, working through the power of the Holy Spirit, to live holy lives. This is called *Sanctification*. This step in the "Order of Salvation" is one of a continuing, moment-by-moment reliance upon God's grace to live a life worthy of our calling. This process is a "going on" to perfection.

Wesleyan concepts of justification and sanctification show that life as a Christian is one of dependence upon our Creator, as well as one of hope and joy! Our lives are to be led in response to God's love. We are very much aware that we are not perfect, but we are also aware of the potential we have within us for growth in grace. We are not expected to be perfect in order to gain God's love, but rather we strive to live our lives in holiness *because* God loves us. We can show our love of God in our daily actions. Our life-styles need to be transformed. We cannot continue living the way we do *and* serve God.

The power of today's evangelism today is tested by the question, What do we have to explain to the world about the way we live? But that question is no longer being asked of Christians. No one is asking why we live the way we do. Why? Because most people already know the answer: Christians live the way they do for the same reasons that everybody else lives the way they do. . . . No one expects anything different of Christians. The predictability of the Christian style of life, or, more to the point, the loss of a distinctively Christian lifestyle, has severely damaged our proclamation of the gospel. We have lost that visible style of life which was evident in the early Christian communities and which gave their evangelism its compelling power and authority.²⁵

²⁵ Wallis,19.

It was not always this way. The early church linked faith with lifestyle in such a way that they were easily distinguished from the surrounding society. Their lives revolved around the teachings of Christ.

They became well known as a caring, sharing, and open community that was especially sensitive to the poor and the outcast. Their love for God, for one another, and for the oppressed was central to their reputation. Their refusal to kill, to recognize racial distinctions, or to bow down before the imperial deities was a matter of public knowledge.²⁶

The perfection offered by the world leaves us hollow and wanting more. The promise of a content and complete life is dangled in front of us by the media and we rise to the bait. What God offers us is *another* kind of perfection; it is sanctification or "imperfect perfection." God offers us the opportunity and power to be holy and whole. With guidance from the Holy Spirit we are able to live our lives with one design: to conform to the will of God. We see the paradox of "imperfect perfection" when we see that "in the sense of living in unbroken conscious relationship with Christ" we can become perfect children of God. But when it comes to "absolute conformity to the perfect will of God"²⁷ we can never fully arrive. So each moment of our lives must be empowered by the Holy Spirit as we confess our sins and grow in grace. "Entire sanctification is spiritual health - fully restored. But such restoration is maintained on a 'moment-by-moment' basis."²⁸ Unlike perfection offered by today's society, Christian perfection is not an end in itself. It is a gradual process of reliance on God's grace and guidance. We begin our "spiritual biography with a sense of [our] need of

²⁶ Wallis, 13-14.

²⁷ Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 170.

²⁸ Peters, 45.

Christ and never [reach] the point where that need ceases to be ever-present." ²⁹ With "imperfect perfection" voluntary, deliberate sin no longer has a hold on us. The will of God becomes our desire. Christian perfection, on the other hand, does *not* mean that we are free of such fallibilities of humanity as ignorance, mistakes, "weakness or slowness of understanding," or temptation. It is not *sinless* perfection in the sense that human frailties will be extinguished from our lives. However, it *is* perfection in the sense that our lives come closer and closer to being aligned with the will of God.³⁰

God is the Creator of all good things. This loving God desires to be in unbroken relationship with us. Despite our choice to turn away from the fullness God has in mind for us, God continually reaches out to us. Knowing that we cannot become all we were meant to be on our own, God has provided a restoration of our broken relationship with God. God provides reconciliation. Our response to this gift of reconciliation is to live our lives in conformity to the will of God. This involves directing all of the facets of our lives to one goal -- being what God would have us be as a part of Creation. As we participate in this process of "going on to perfection," we find that we are traveling a path trod centuries before, and that we are not alone on our journey to completion.

²⁹ Peters, 52.

³⁰ Wesley, 16,19, 45.

CHAPTER 3

The Small Group Quest for Perfection

Sharing our Struggles

Seeking perfection and striving to do what God requires can be a difficult struggle. Once we have decided to satisfy our yearning for completion by living our lives as God would have us live them, will we be able to see it through? With the many pressures of our lives tugging at us, how can we live a life of discipleship modeled after God's will? How can we manage to be faithful followers day-in and day-out?

In North America, we who consider ourselves a part of the Protestant Church find the living out of our Christian lives to be far less "dramatic" than others in the world. Our standards for living a life of discipleship are much less exciting and a lot less expensive than those who must put their lives on the line every day for the gospel's sake.¹ How can we, in our society, live our lives as people of God? We have heard the commandment to love God and to love our neighbor. Will we ever be able to do it? "We are indeed searching for answers, searching for God's will in our lives, for some assurance that in the midst of the tension in which we live, we are following the carpenter from Nazareth."²

When we look around, we find that we are not alone in our quest for God's way of perfection. Others around us are in the same boat and are sending out distress signals. Despite our current society's emphasis on the individual, we are

¹ David Lowes Watson, Accountable Discipleship: Handbook for Covenant Discipleship Groups in the Congregation (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984), 2.

² Watson, 4.

a *social* species. We desire personal contact and find it extremely difficult to live without interaction with others. We look to one another for guidance and mutual support. We have all at one time or another sought out the comfort of another person when we were in the midst of sorrow, doubt, or struggle. We join groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Parents Without Partners, Take Off Pounds Sensibly, in order to have personal contact and mutual support with others who understand our situation. Likewise, we have all rushed to share with another person our good news and great joy. It only makes sense that when it comes to trying to live out our Christian lives in the world that we share our struggles and triumphs with others. "Yet, as Christians, we persistently neglect to apply this principle to the most basic requirement of our discipleship - making sure that we avail ourselves of the means of grace."³ What is needed is a practical, meaningful, and effective approach towards this end.

Throughout the history of the Church, the small group has proven useful. The growth (and decline) of small groups emphasizing the quest for perfection can be traced by the enthusiasm (or lack thereof) of the doctrine of holiness. There has always been a thread of interest in the Christian life based on God's will. Those interested in the pursuit of perfection have found the organization of believers into small groups to be advantageous to their spiritual formation. This interest has carried into the modern day.

Wesley's Class Meetings

John Wesley realized the potential for small group interaction to enhance the quest for holiness and when the opportunity presented itself, Wesley took full advantage. The devising of societies and class meetings within the Methodist movement was purely uncontrived. It seems that after some fiery preaching,

³ Watson, 12.

several people approached John Wesley and his brother and asked them how to live holy lives, remain faithful, and be encouraged in Christ. The new converts were being ridiculed by friends and family for being too dedicated. Wesley's advice was for them to meet together to support one another. When he learned that they wanted him to visit and instruct them, he realized that there were too many of them to visit separately. He then asked them to meet one night a week and proposed to give "the best advice I can." Wesley had but one requirement for entrance into his society: "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins." And thus the Methodist Society was born.

The formation of the class meeting occurred just as spontaneously as the societies. One of Wesley's concerns was the payment of debts in Bristol and, while discussing how to raise money, it was suggested that members of the society give a penny a week until the debt was paid. When it was pointed out that many people might not be able to pay even a penny, one man promised to be responsible for a number of the members. Wesley approved of this method, and thus *classes* were formed.

It struck me immediately. "This is the thing; the very thing we have wanted so long." I called together all the leaders of the classes, (so we used to term them and their companies) and desired that each would make a particular inquiry into the behavior of those whom he saw weekly. They did so. Many disorderly walkers were detected. Some turned from the evil of their ways. Some were put away from us. Many saw it with fear, and rejoiced unto God with reverence.⁴

It is easy to draw connections to Wesley's formation of classes with his earlier experiences.⁵ While at Oxford, Wesley and his brother were members of a small group of students who were devoted to living holy lives. As a member of

⁴ John Emory, ed., The Works of John Wesley, vol. 7. (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1856), 179.

⁵ Orlando Chapman, "The Origin, Growth, and Contemporary Relevance of the Methodist Class Meeting" (Th. M thesis, School of Theology at Claremont, 1963), p. 11, 13.

the Holy Club, Wesley learned the value of a group committed to one another and to God's Word. Wesley's next experience with small groups came when he visited the Moravians

He observed that the members of the church were divided by marital status, sex, and age into classes. The larger classes were subdivided into smaller classes or bands under the guidance of a leader. Each leader met with a senior officer and reported "whatsoever hindered or furthered the word of God in the souls committed to their charge." This organization is very much like that found in the Methodist Societies, enough so, to suggest a positive connection.⁶

Wesley adapted the Moravian bands to his use while serving in Savannah, Georgia.⁷ Perhaps Wesley had not realized that such groups could be adapted for the people in Bristol, or maybe Wesley had remembered the value of such meetings and had been waiting for an opportunity to implement this concept. Whether or not Wesley had classes in mind, he was brave enough to try them within this context, and Methodism is the better for it.

There is some question as to whether "bands" and "classes" refer to the same sub-group within Wesley's society. Orlando Chapman asserts that Wesley made no formal distinction between the two terms and referred to them interchangeably.⁸ In other references to these terms, a major distinction appears to be found in the make-up of the groups. The bands were a select group of believers of the same sex and slightly more advanced in faith, while the classes were primarily a mixed group of the same inclination.⁹ In Leslie Church's

⁶ Chapman, 13.

⁷ Chapman, 15.

⁸ Chapman, 22,25.

⁹ Emerick, 21.

opinion, the more organized class-meetings were very beneficial to the Methodist society as a whole.

Though the Bands and Select Societies fulfilled a purpose, they did not provide fellowship for the great majority of the people. It was only when the idea of the class meeting was born, 1742, that Methodism had its family hearth round which all could gather, whether they were beginners, or veterans, and feel themselves at home, their Father's welcome guests. This is the "crowning glory"; and it has done more than any other Methodist organization to influence the world.¹⁰

The class meeting provided an intimate, confidential time for self-examination, prayer, and praise that was not easily obtained in public worship. John Miley, in his treatise written in support of the class meeting, claims that such meetings fulfilled a need within people -- that of fellowship, since humans were not made to live in solitude. Miley proceeds to comment that in class meetings a mutuality is obtained where the old and young, strong and weak, sick and healthy, benefit from one another. Here Christian unity and communion can be found in the sharing of Christian experience.

As was mentioned earlier, the original purpose of the class assembly was to raise funds. It was soon found that the leader of the group was unable to visit each member separately, and as a result greater oversight was achieved by meeting together. The class allowed for a consistent review of the spiritual state of its members. It not only provided a way of restoration for the backslider, it was also a means for releasing those who would not be restored to the society¹¹

There is a vast number of recorded instances where visitors are overwhelmed by the sincerity and commitment of the class. One such case is

¹⁰ Chapman, 28.

¹¹ John Miley, Treatise on Class Meetings (Cincinnati: Swormstedt & Poe, 1854), 23,32, 49

that of Billy Hibbard's wife. Hibbard, who had become a Methodist through the working of a class, was preparing to attend a meeting:

and as my wife had so repeatedly said that she would not be a Methodist, or go with me to my meetings, I said nothing to her. But now she said, "I have a mind to go along with, if you will carry the child." I said "o yes." So for the first time, she went with me to a prayer meeting. After we returned home, and I was kindling a fire she sat holding the child. I said, "how did you like the meeting?" She said nothing. I blowed up the coal, and got the fire blazing; then I asked her again. . . and turning to her I saw tears running down her face. Seeing this, I renewed my question in a softer tone. She answered, "O how they love one another, I never saw such love in all my life." I said, "my dear, that is our religion." "Well, I believe it is a good religion," said she.¹²

Since the meetings were confidential, it is difficult to discover exactly what happened as the class met. But it is generally understood that each class was supervised by a class leader. It was this person's responsibility, according to Wesley: (1) to see each person in his class once a week, to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort them, (2) to receive what they are willing to give toward the expense of the society, and (3) to meet the assistant and the stewards once a week.¹³ At first each leader was appointed by Wesley, but as the movement grew, the leaders were chosen by the preachers and later by the classes. There was great respect for the class leader, who was also given great responsibility. The leader was a spiritual guide, confidant, an exhorter, and a friend. The office of class leader was open to both sexes, with the

¹² This account can be found in the first volume of History of American Methodism, ed. Emory Bucke (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 308, in an article by Leland Scott entitled "The Message of Early American Methodism."

¹³ Nehemiah Curnock, ed., The Journal of John Wesley, vol. 5 (London: Epworth, 1938), 404-405.

understanding that women could lead male classes and men could lead a class of women.¹⁴

There were expectations for members participating in the class. Chapman has compiled a list of rules:

1. Assemble once a week.
2. Be regular and punctual in attendance.
3. Contribute willingly to the expenses of the Society.
4. Speak freely the soul's true state, the sins, the temptations experienced since the last meeting.
5. Treat everything in the class meeting with the strictest confidence.
6. "Bear one another's burdens," by prayer, good counsel, sympathetic understanding, and any other means within your power.
7. Evidence the desire of salvation by using the means of grace such as:
The public worship of God.
The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.
The Supper of the Lord.
Family and private prayers.
Searching the Scriptures.¹⁵

The meetings were scheduled at a convenient time and place for the members. Each class member was to come to the meeting prepared to share the state of his or her soul when it came their turn. A class leader, James Field, preferred to begin promptly, have the class sing a few verses of a hymn, pray for the class and its concerns, and to provide an opportunity for each member to share his or her own experience. The classes lasted anywhere from one to two

¹⁴ Chapman, 57, 79.

¹⁵ Chapman, 44.

hours, depending upon the preference of the leader. Faithful attendance was required and it was the duty of the leader to take roll and visit the absentee members. The leader then reported the attendance to the circuit preacher when the preacher visited the meeting. The preacher made inquiries as to each member's "progress" and depending upon his findings, the minister decided who was eligible for a "ticket." If everything was progressing smoothly, the class member was issued a ticket which gave the bearer access to attend congregational meetings of the society, Covenant Services, and Love Feasts. A class member could engage in any society anywhere, since the ticket was an indicator of the bearer's good character.¹⁶ A ticket was renewable quarterly and included the names of the members and the preacher, as well as the date it was issued.¹⁷ If for some reason, such as irregular attendance, a class member did not live up to the rules of the class, he or she was unequivocally expelled from the class. The one expelled was welcomed back only if penitent and ready to reform.¹⁸

Palmer's Tuesday Meetings

A generation after Wesley's death still found an enthusiasm for living the sanctified life. This emphasis on holiness remained true to Wesley's precedent and was coupled with the implementation of the class meeting. One notable example is that of Phoebe Palmer and the Tuesday Night Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness.¹⁹

¹⁶ Chapman, 50, 52.

¹⁷ This practice as recounted in the History of American Methodism by Arthur Bruce Moss in "Methodism in Colonial America," 1:117, reminds us of such previously common practices in Methodism that have since gone by the wayside.

¹⁸ Chapman, 48.

¹⁹ According to Charles Edward White, in The Beauty of Holiness (Grand Rapids: Asbury, 1986), page 167, Phoebe Palmer did not promote class meetings per se. However, in her eyes, their absence was considered a hindrance to the Spirit of God. Perhaps their necessity to the life of one seeking holiness was assumed. Whether Phoebe outright promoted class meetings,

Phoebe Worall and her sister Sarah were raised in the Methodist tradition. As a young boy, their father had been converted to Methodism and the search for holiness after hearing John Wesley preach.²⁰ Sarah, having been influenced by Wesley's writings, sought holiness for her life. In 1835 she had an experience of sanctification and began prayer meetings for those seeking perfect love.²¹

Meanwhile, Phoebe had married a physician, Walter Clarke Palmer. Walter's parents were practicing Methodists and class meetings were held in the Palmer household.²² The quest for holiness was on Phoebe's heart as well. She focused on the intent of her actions as the key to living a life based on God's will. "The only way to know her labors were in the Lord was to be conscious that the spring of every motive was pure. If she could be certain her motives were pure, she would know that nothing of self was vitiating her efforts to serve God."²³ She shared her resolution to live her life based on pure love as its motivation at the very next Tuesday Meeting. Her sanctification experience came a little later, surprisingly enough as a "simple and reasonable" happening.²⁴

When Sarah moved, Phoebe took over the leadership of the Tuesday Meetings. "Its specific purpose remained the promotion of the doctrine of entire sanctification. It continued as such for over sixty years, meeting each Tuesday

or not, the Tuesday Meetings were a vibrant example of the the reciprocal link between the Methodist understanding of holiness and class meetings.

²⁰ White, 1.

²¹ Charles Edwin Jones, Perfectionist Persuasion: The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867-1936 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1974), 2.

²² White, 4.

²³ White, 14

²⁴ White, 20. White provides much more detail on the life, theology, and contributions of Phoebe Palmer. He provides examples of the influence of Methodism and Methodists on her thought, sanctification experience, and her subsequent relief work in New York City.

principally in the Palmer home in New York City."²⁵ Although not labeled as such, the order of the Tuesday Meetings resembled that of the Wesley class meeting. The meetings in the Palmer home were inclusive of laity and clergy and opened with scriptures, followed by a song, prayer, and an opportunity for testimony from anyone present.²⁶

Many came to the meeting to find holiness. They would rise to declare their need, voice their aspirations, and ask their questions. In the midst of so many who had found what they were seeking, these inquirers would be reminded of the shorter way to sanctification, urged to make entire consecration, challenged to believe God's Word, and encouraged to confess what God had done for them. The support and the sympathy of the group helped many over the final barrier to holiness, and seeing another person receive the blessing strengthened the faith of those who had already professed it.²⁷

Soon the meetings outgrew space in the Palmer living room. The faithful Palmers enlarged their house. But when the meeting size grew to over two hundred people strong, their solution was to move to a larger house!²⁸ Prominent Methodists as well as leaders of other denominations were participants. These Tuesday meetings began a nationwide sweep of meetings based on the Palmer pattern. Soon a publishing house was established and the Guide to Holiness was published. "Providing a vehicle of discussion for scattered perfectionists, the Guide united holiness believers both inside and outside the church."²⁹

²⁵ Peters, 110.

²⁶ White, 162.

²⁷ White, 162.

²⁸ White, 164.

²⁹ Jones, 3.

Dr. Palmer discontinued his homeopathic medicine practice to assist Phoebe in carrying out revivals and camp meetings. "Like many other American revivalists, the Palmers extended their ministry to Europe, spending the years 1859 to 1863 there."³⁰

To be sure, during this period of history in the United States, there was an accentuation on the link between the work of the Spirit in one's life and the life style one led. The emphasis soon concentrated on behavior and outward appearance. Subsequently, tensions arose -- even among church members. When those who felt themselves compelled to hold to a mere holiness-centered doctrine could not find what they were looking for in their church, they "came-out." Those whom the church considered unsympathetic to the church's exemplification of holiness were "put-out."³¹

Various holiness groups, with various names, were trying to live a life of sanctification, perfection, and perfect love. They held camp meetings and revivals, and remodeled numerous buildings to hold the capacity crowds who came to hear speakers and testimonies. The Association for the Promotion of Holiness

endorsed regional, state, and local associations modeled after the national organization. These associations, designed to provide occasional services, conventions, revivals and camp meetings, were to promote brotherly watch care among holiness adherents. In communities containing several individuals who professed perfect love, Association leaders encouraged the formation of holiness bands (prayer groups similar to Mrs. Palmer's Tuesday Meetings) where believers might be nurtured and seekers after Christian Perfection be encouraged in their quest.³²

³⁰ Jones, 3.

³¹ Peters, 140.

³² Jones 48-49.

Decline of the Meeting

Frederick Norwood dates the decline of the class meeting at the middle of the nineteenth century. It has been shown that there is a direct correlation between the decline of the class meeting and the decline of the itinerancy. When the circuit riding preacher's duties changed and preachers began to settle down in parishes, the need for class leaders (and invariably the class) lessened.³³ There were those who tried valiantly to restore the prestige of the class meeting to what it had been, as is evidenced by the Christian Advocate's section "The Leader and His Class." A volume dated January 3, 1878, devotes several columns to an article by The Reverend A. D. Wilbor expressing the benefits of the class meeting. In his article Wilbor gives his opinions as to why the class meetings are failing and proceeds to suggest ways to build the structure back to its original integrity. As far as Wilbor is concerned, the class meeting should be voluntary, rather than required, and should be honed down to the original number of 12 to 15 members rather than trying to function as large groups. One begins to wonder how far the class meeting had strayed from its original focus when Wilbor suggests that leaders might try to encourage regular attendance, to bring the Word of God into greater use, sing new songs, and have the class participate in benevolent enterprises! The meetings must have been quite the antithesis of the early intimate gatherings.

In the dull, lengthy, lugubrious, singsong, affected, unnatural, funeral modes of talk in the class is found one great reason why young converts, and intelligent young people who are brought into the church, abominate the class-meetings.³⁴

³³ Frederick Norwood, The Story of American Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 131-132.

³⁴ A.D. Wilbor, "The Leader and His Class," Christian Advocate 53, no. 1 (Jan.3, 1878): 6.

It was Wilbor's vision that the church return to the original form of the class meeting since he felt that the Church needed this very thing to restore its vitality.

The Christian Advocate continued to run articles such as those by Bishop Peck and Noah Levings, who praised the class meeting and offered advice on making the structure of the class more interesting. The Advocate also began to include testimonies from those who had had spiritual experiences at meetings. In 1880, an article was written which gives yet another reason for the decline in attendance at meetings:

the leader of twenty to forty years' standing has run it in the same old ruts till a change would be equally as profitable here as with the pastors, where variety of talent meets variety of temperament, and thus gives to each a portion in due season.³⁵

Lack of variety, dullness, large groups, etc., seem to have added to the decline of the class meeting. It is interesting to note that by July 1, 1880, the Christian Advocate dropped its regular section on class meetings and introduced a section called "Wit, Humor, Wisdom" in its place. No mention was made of the section devoted to class meetings when the new format of the paper was explained by the editors.³⁶

Along with the change in the structure of the itinerancy of the Methodist preachers, and the doldrums into which the class meetings had fallen, there were other "distractions" to cause the decline in the importance of the meetings. These included the slavery controversy and the subsequent Civil War and rise in national prosperity, the fanaticism of the Millerites, and the Mexican War.³⁷

³⁵ X.Y., "The Leader and His Class," Christian Advocate 55, no. 5 (Jan. 29, 1880): 70.

³⁶ "Wit, Humor, Wisdom," Christian Advocate 55, no. 27 (July 1, 1880):11.

³⁷ Peters, 99-100,118.

These happenings preoccupied the lives of North American Methodists to the detriment of the pursuit of holiness.

The "purpose in reviewing the signs of this decline is not simply to analyze a dead flower, but rather to seek for any light that these clues may shed upon our attempt to recapture the glory of a once-powerful spiritual movement."³⁸ Despite the reasons for its decline, the class meeting has played a vital role in the history of the Methodist people. It had a significant impact upon the people, and upon ministers as well. Many of the Methodist preachers were trained and heard the call while leading classes. The class meeting provided a fertile ground for speakers and leaders whose talents may have gone otherwise undetected.³⁹ Miley recognized a half dozen benefits of the class meeting. They provided training for the young and inexperienced -- those not knowledgeable in the ways of religion and faith. Class meetings also gave one the opportunity for Christian communion and for self-examination. Within a group of devoted Christians, one could not help but partake in the "communion of saints." The class was a place of fellowship, mutuality, love caring, support, of one aim. There was also the "preservation from delinquency and the reclamation of the delinquent" to be found in class. If temptations called, one could always find strength to turn away, thanks to the encouragement of the other members. And those who had turned away from the class might return due to the guidance of a loving class member.

The class meeting gave the ordinary person a chance to grow in "Christian graces and talents" by conversing with and learning from other Christians. The meetings were also an aid to the preacher who could not properly visit all of the parishioners. The leader oversaw the group and passed on information about the

³⁸ Emerick, 39

³⁹ Chapman, 72.

group's progress to the preacher. And practically speaking, the class meetings helped to usher in and retain new converts after successful revivals.⁴⁰

It is obvious that the class meeting met the needs of the people of the Methodist society at this point in the movement's growth. There was a sense of fellowship and support, finances were regulated, education beyond the Sunday sermon was available. It gave people a chance to carry on conversation about Christian life, oversight of the community was achieved, and everyone was given the opportunity to share deep religious experiences. The class meetings fell into decline due to a lack of a flexible structure and a reluctance to be imaginative in running the meetings. The change in the role of the preacher from circuit rider to parish minister aided the decline of the classes. Society as a whole was losing its interest in holiness and perfection towards the end of the century. Likewise, personal experience as a criterion for faith was being challenged by those who relied more heavily upon doctrine.⁴¹

This, by no means, assumes that the quest for perfection and the use of small groups to that end had been forgotten. "But always, somehow, the [Methodist] church was never without its witness to the possibility through grace of the attainment of an elevent [*sic*] and dynamic piety."⁴²

Other Small Groups

In these more recent years, we find that people are continuing the quest for wholeness. John Peters, in his discussion on Christian Perfection and American Methodism, recognizes the contemporary (1956) search for perfection.

⁴⁰ Miley, 169 ff.

⁴¹ Ann Taves, lecture presented for the course "United Methodist Studies," School of Theology at Claremont, 6 May 1985.

⁴² Peters, 182.

In prayer groups, research groups, "Camps Farthest Out," Ashrams, and various other fellowships the disciplined search for a "higher level of spiritual life" is being carried on. Results vary widely, but the very existence and multiplicity of these groups testify to the spiritual hunger of the modern heart for something more than traditional pulpit fare.⁴³

Many types of small groups have evolved in our society and in our churches. Within these groups we have found a way to deal with the questions in our lives. In order to better understand the dynamics of the class meeting, it is helpful to look at a small group with some similarities. Although not a group based on the pursuit of holy living, Alcoholics Anonymous does recognize our tendency to misjudge the object of our quest. AA also recognizes our need for fellowship as we try to change our lives for the better. Alcoholics Anonymous is an organization that is based on the concept of self-help with the support of others in a similar condition. "The spark that was to flare into the first AA group was struck as Akron, Ohio, in June, 1935, during a talk between a New York stockbroker and an Akron physician."⁴⁴ The stockbroker was having great difficulty in breaking the habit of drinking. When the harmfulness of alcoholism was brought home to him, in desperation he turned to another alcoholic. They shared their struggles and consequently the stockbroker never drank again. The sharing of one alcoholic with another proved so helpful that it "indicated that strenuous work, one alcoholic with another, was vital to permanent recovery."⁴⁵ As the two recovering alcoholics shared their discovery with others, the program grew into what we know now as the organization of AA.

⁴³ Peters, 195.

⁴⁴ Alcoholics Anonymous, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), xvii.

⁴⁵ Alcoholics Anonymous, xvii.

AA accentuates the need for the acknowledgement of a Higher Power as a step toward becoming a recovering alcoholic. It recognizes that people are on a quest and that often we forget to place our discipleship of a Higher Power at the forefront. "In our quest for physical comfort, we have pursued and even worshipped material wellbeing often at the expense of emotional and spiritual health, having almost completely lost sight of the fact that spiritual health *is* our wealth."⁴⁶

There are no membership requirements to join a local chapter of AA, other than to profess: "(a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives. (b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism. (c) That God could and would if He were sought."⁴⁷ The foundation of AA is the local chapter. Each chapter can be as small as two people or as large as two hundred. There are no dues, no oaths, no sign-up procedures, no required attendance, and anonymity is preferred. The chapters are open to all regardless of race, sex, age or religious preference. The form of the meetings may vary but there "may be discussion, question-and-answer, participation, study and speaker meetings."⁴⁸

Today, the emphasis on perfection is making a comeback. We are recognizing the futility of centering our lives on anything other than God. We are full of questions as to how to live our lives as faithful disciples in this unfaithful world. We find that once again a remnant is found in the Church; "there is something in the doctrine that will not leave the Church undisturbed. . . . By it the

⁴⁶ The Twelve Steps for Everyone. . . Who Really Wants Them, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: CompCare Publs, 1975), 4.

⁴⁷ Alcoholics Anonymous, 60.

⁴⁸ The Twelve Steps, 8.

Church is reminded of that quality of righteousness, the hunger for wholeness is her badge of identity."⁴⁹

Covenant Groups

Small groups, and Wesley's class meetings in particular, are being revived in the local church. David Lowes Watson has adopted Wesley's class meetings as a basis for what he terms Covenant Discipleship. Those in the church who find themselves willing to commit to participation in a small gathering, guided by an agreed-upon covenant, form groups. Watson has found that approximately 15% of the congregation will join such a group.⁵⁰ Each Covenant group draws up a formal covenant based upon three elements found in the *General Rules* adhered to by the early Methodist societies -- the avoidance of wrong doing, the doing of good, and participating in the means of grace. The members of the groups may include additional stipulations.⁵¹ The covenant is signed and a copy is given to each member.

The group is led by an appointed leader, at least for the few first meetings. At that point, leadership becomes shared within the group. At the close of each meeting the leader for the next week is selected. A comfortable, convenient place is used, and the members agree to one hour meetings. The meeting is opened and closed with a prayer. Each point of the covenant is "taken in order as a point of accountability."⁵² Each person shares the struggles and victories of the last week in keeping to the covenant.

⁴⁹ Peters, 196.

⁵⁰ Watson, 57.

⁵¹ Watson, 59.

⁵² Watson, 66.

As far as possible, the entire covenant should be covered each week. But as groups develop their own dynamic, and as people begin to talk about their spiritual pilgrimages more openly, it may not be possible to cover all of the clauses in the time available. The leader should therefore exercise discretion as to which clauses will be selected for the meeting in hand, and the group should be ready to be accountable the following week for any clauses which have been omitted.⁵³

The relationship between the pursuit of perfection and the small group has been recognized by Methodists and non-Methodists alike. Small groups, especially those based on Wesley's class meetings, are making a comeback in the local church. Every aspect of the local church can benefit from the implementation of the Wesley class meeting. The role of the church in the world can also be enhanced by the quest for holiness and the class meeting.

⁵³ Watson, 66.

CHAPTER 4

The Class Meeting in the Church and in the World

The Church

A church is a gathering of people who are committed to discipleship. Each person has a ministry to contribute to the church and to the world. The general ministry is a blanket call to all Christians to share the transforming power of Christ in their lives and to share the potential for others to experience this. It is open to all who wish to participate and knows no human barriers. It is witnessing to the love of God and the effects of this love (grace) in one's life. The general ministry is a call to explore, with others, the way to live as Christians in the world. This can take place in worship, in delving into the Scripture, by reflecting upon tradition, and by relating reasoning to what we experience. Such exploration is done in the context of the Christian community, the Church. Each community will ask its own questions about the relevance of the Gospel to today's world. Each community will approach the discussion in its own way. But a common characteristic shared by each church is that they are a fluid entity. Leonardo Boff states it in this manner:

The Church is not only the institution with its sacred scriptures, hierarchy, sacramental structures, canon law, liturgical norms, orthodoxy, and moral imperatives. All of that is important, but the Church is also an event. It emerges, is born, and is continually reshaped whenever individuals meet and hear the word of God, believe in it, and vow together to follow Jesus Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit.¹

¹ Leonardo Boff, Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church. Trans. John W. Diercksmeier. (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 127.

The community of the Church is composed of individuals who have a common experience of Christ -- who have felt the transforming power of the Spirit and recognize themselves as recipients of God's grace. Since the Church is a gathering of people, the quest for perfection by North American churches parallels that of their members. The churches are as easily swayed and misguided as their constituents. In the attempt to become successful, churches have adopted the strategies of Wall Street and big name corporations. In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies can be found on the library shelves in pastors' studies. Such a how-to book has been a key to marketing the church in today's society. The delineation between Church and society has become foggy. The Church has appropriated many techniques and goals from the business world. This in itself is not a bad thing, as long as the techniques and goals set forth by Christ are not lost in the adoption process.

We have seen that Jesus' first sermon was a simple one: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." That kind of preaching is little evident in the churches today. In the U.S. churches, it is not the kingdom of God that is at hand; it is the American culture that is at hand. It is the social, economic, and military system of the United States, not the kingdom of God as reflected in the Sermon on the Mount that reigns supreme. This self-evident fact derives from a failure of conversion and has become the principal obstacle to genuine faith in our time. Our conformity to the culture has made the fullness of the teaching of Jesus incomprehensible to many. Our conformity has left our congregations emotionally high but spiritually weak.²

This conformity to the standards of the world to define our success as Christians does not imply a lack of commitment. It dramatically shows a misdirection of commitment and a misunderstanding of the imperative to define "successfulness" as "faithfulness."

² Wallis, 31.

Many of us tend to underestimate the hunger in the churches for something different, some new vision and focus of power. I often sense in the churches an underlying uneasiness about feeling so at home in this culture. There are people scattered throughout the churches who sense that their commitment to Jesus Christ ought to mean more than it does. There is a desire and fragile hope for something new. In spite of all we have said about the American captivity of the churches, an integrity of faith remains in the church's life. In most churches I have visited, a small flame flickers that invites rekindling. As a result, I'm not ready to give up on the churches, and I'm certainly not willing to give up on the gospel.³

A church that has forgotten what it is, has forgotten its purpose. A church that has forgotten its reason to be, has forgotten its goal. An erring church is very fertile ground for the small group approach to discipleship! Perfection, already attained, is not a prerequisite for God's saving action. Jesus, in Luke 5:31-32, reminds us of this. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." The church is in a position to benefit from Wesley's class meetings, since these groups began as an "in house" reform of the church. "Methodism in its beginning is an illuminating example of a redemptive society used by God to transform a secularized Church."⁴

Small Groups in the Church

The small group approach is a very effective means of helping Christians reflect on and become empowered to live out their lives as Christians. Robert Leslie recognizes the fundamental place small groups can have in the life of Christians. He concludes that, although small groups are not the main structure of the Church, to not take advantage of them can prove detrimental to the ministry of the Church. The framework of small groups allows for individuals to take an active role in their spiritual formation. And this participation on the part of

³ Wallis, 120.

⁴ Emerick, 11.

the laity is vital to the Church. "Significant impact on the secular culture is not guaranteed by small groups, but without the kind of reinforcement found in intimate group life it is doubtful if meaningful activity in the church can be sustained."⁵

Small groups, although not always called such, have existed for as long as there have been people. The Christian Church has made use of our natural tendency to share the important aspects of our lives with others.

Small groups in the church are certainly not new. Jesus gathered a small group of twelve persons with whom he shared his life, feelings, and wisdom. The church that exploded into the Roman world met in small house assemblies. The monastic movement gathered men and women into intentional communities with fixed covenants and responsibilities. Renewal and revival movements have grown through the yeast and leaven of small groups. The Wesleyan and Charismatic movements are two notable examples. In fact, congregations already have small groups - committees, choirs, church school classes, and special organizations. So small groups are not new. But what *is* new, is the deliberate attempt to utilize their full potential as vehicles of congregational life, program, and mission.⁶

There are a number of small groups, with various names and strategies, in use throughout North America. There are self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and therapy groups. Issue-oriented task forces within a community relate to public schools and neighborhood coalitions. As was stated above, there are also a multitude of small groups presently functioning within the church. How is the small group proposed different from what the church already has in place? What are the characteristics of a small groups based on Christian discipleship? The small group based on Christian spiritual growth has particular characteristics.

⁵ Robert C. Leslie, Sharing Groups in the Church (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 7.

⁶ Charles M. Olsen, Cultivating Religious Growth Groups (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 13.

It is a place for disclosure, for confessing: telling how it is with me. It is a community of empathy, being with one another. Gifts are recognized and called forth. Support for ministry and outreach is maintained. Community can be a scary place as well. People live in the paradox of having hunger for intimate community and at the same time fearing it. The [group] is a place of honesty, of teaching, of exhorting, and even rebuking. Here members are held accountable for their lives and witness.⁷

It is important to delineate the characteristics of a group that would be effective in meeting the need for Christians to live their lives centered on God. It is just as important to express some of the characteristics that are *not* a part of such a group. For example, the small group to be utilized by the local church would not be a group therapy situation. "The group is not meant to perform the psychological functions of a trained therapist."⁸ The small group that focuses on the quest for perfection is not a Bible study; but the Bible will be studied. It is not a devotional group; but God will be present. It is not a social club; but fellowship will occur. What is being described can be called a connection group, with the aim toward furthering each member along the quest for perfection. Such a small group is intentional about its function within the lives of its members. Each is expected to support and trust one another. Here, in an atmosphere of mutuality and Christian concern, we can experience challenge for our faith and grace for our shortcomings. In the small group the church can find its source of strength in combatting the pressures of society. The mutual support of one another is integral to the faithfulness of the members of Christ's church.

One of the purposes for which the Church exists is, that its members may give and receive help in their Christian life and warfare. They stand side by side, mutually encouraging and supporting each other. This is not only their privilege, but their imperative duty. They are Divinely enjoined to help one another.

⁷ Leslie, 80.

⁸Leslie, 119.

"Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do."⁹

Christians, as well as non-believers, realize the fact that people are easily influenced by their surroundings. The Church does more than just recognize this fact; the Church capitalizes on it. It takes our tendency to influence one another, positively as well as negatively. The gathering of believers together allows for the opportunity of them to "minister" to one another. Each Christian can support, encourage, lift up, and console another. This is most effective when they meet together on a regular basis.¹⁰

Class Meetings in the Church

This is where the Wesley class meetings can be utilized by the contemporary church, with a few adaptations. The class meeting lends itself to just such meeting together to build up and urge on fellow Christians.

These weekly gatherings were first and foremost designed to equip Christians to be authentically Christian in a world which was largely hostile to their message. The early Methodists believed that they had received a direct commission to go into the world, and to join the risen Christ in the task of proclaiming God's salvation in the power of the Holy Spirit. The class meeting was where they came to share the bumps and bruises of this encounter, to comfort and strengthen one another, and to provide a *mutual accountability* for the task at hand.¹¹ [Emphasis in original.]

The church today is calling out for a time and place to fellowship and grow. In a world where society is diffused and people are living mobile lives, there is a need to believe that someone, somewhere cares. A small, intimate support group would answer this need effectively. A class meeting would also enable people to discuss the Scriptures, the weekly sermon, and how the Word of God relates to

⁹ John Athenson, The Class Leader: His Work and How to Do It (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1874), 83.

¹⁰ Athenson, 85.

¹¹ Watson, 18.

their lives today. It would also be a haven for those who have no contact with other Christians outside of Sunday worship. In a group such as this, they could share their struggles in an atmosphere of encouragement. Although the itinerancy system has been tempered somewhat, the class meeting would still be beneficial to the local pastor: who must not only prepare worship and call upon members of the congregation, but must also manage administrative responsibilities and work within the context of the society of which the church is a part. It has always been a Methodist trademark to involve laity and this would be one more way in which members of the church can minister to one another. New members of the church or those considering membership would find such a group helpful. Not only would they learn more about the Methodist tradition, but they would start their life with the church surrounded by a core of loving friends.

Self-examination is a vital part of life, but it is not often that anyone gets a chance to center in and really consider his or her life. If self-examination was expected in order to participate in the group, time would be found and people would greatly benefit from it. Unlike the need that served as the impetus for the formation of the class meetings, the collection of money for expenses would not be necessary in today's context. We are no longer a Methodist Society, but a group of organized churches that have structures to include a collection of funds within the corporate worship service. The attendance requirement may also have to be reviewed. Not only would it be inadvisable to require class attendance for church membership, but a strict requirement for those attending class may also need to be more flexible. Leeway should be given for family vacations, business trips, etc., since our society is not as homebound as before.

There are groups already functioning within Methodist churches and the class meeting is in no way meant to replace them. The women's groups, men's groups, and youth groups serve their purposes, but perhaps there is also a way to

integrate ages and sexes into small cadres that would be meaningful for all. Churches tend to be program-oriented and tend to forget the individual. There is a need to center upon the individual, the struggles and triumphs inherent in living a spiritual life in the world.

Implementation of the class meeting in today's local church cannot be accomplished through exact duplication. We live in another time, we have given new meanings to old words. Wesley's class meetings cannot be lifted off the page of seasoned annals and reproduced item by item. When we appropriate Wesley's class meetings for use in today's church, we need to focus on the need to recapture the spirit of the meetings without being slavish to the form. We need to be intentional as we "distinguish between form (ritual, liturgy, organization, bigness, etc.) and spirit (reality in prayer, spiritual growth, transformed life, social concern and service, etc.) so as to give flexible expression to the latter."¹²

In keeping with the Wesleyan class meeting, each member must do their part in upholding the standards of the group. Watson finds the covenantal model helpful in achieving this end. At each meeting, the covenant is used as a guide for discussion. He bases the need for the covenant on the lack of a guiding principle with which to govern the groups. The loss of the General Rules to the local church, in his eyes, means the need for formal statement of purpose. I believe that the class meeting lends itself to flexibility. Perhaps, instead of substituting a formal covenant for the General Rules, the Rules and the Social Principles and the Doctrines of Faith found in the Book of Discipline could be revitalized for the local congregation. The areas of preaching, Christian Education, new members' classes, and missions committees could concentrate on one or more of these tenets of the Methodist tradition. Then they would no longer be strangers to us.

¹² Emerick, 48.

The idea of focusing on a written covenant at each meeting could also prove very limiting. If a written covenant is used at all, care needs to be taken. The strict adherence to following the order of the covenant in discussion must not lead to the neglecting of the needs of the individuals in the group. The idea of using a covenant is not foreign to small groups, but often the covenant is implicit rather than explicit.¹³

The structure of the weekly class meeting evolved into a form that was fairly standardized across the board. The one hour class would include: an opening hymn, prayer, a brief song, relevant portion of Scripture, a few opening words from the leader. The leader, then, would share his or her own personal progress in the past week, and make inquiries of each member as to their spiritual journey.¹⁴ This structure can be retained in its entirety. Robert C. Leslie provides some guidelines that should prove useful when laying the groundwork of a class meeting. These guidelines can be presented as a part of the opening remarks at the first class meeting. Leslie suggests that the following be understood as vital elements of an effective small group:

1. The responsibility of taking into account another's need as well as one's own needs.
2. The implementation of effective communication rather than social "chit chat."
3. The focus of attention on the present without ignoring the past.
4. The atmosphere for personal sharing rather than inquisitive probing.
5. The encouragement of reflections and observations and the discouragement of "attacks."

¹³ Olsen, 49.

¹⁴ Athenson, 180ff.

6. The involvement of the leader.

7. The opportunity for and encouragement of change, without the requirement of change.¹⁵

The Experience of a Class Meeting

The structure of the class meeting can be retained in a form similar to the original. The particular content of the class meeting will vary from group to group, since each group will consist of unique individuals with various needs. I had the experience of designing and leading a short-term class meeting in a local United Methodist church. The class was made available to anyone interested in learning more about this part of our heritage as well as anyone interested in sharing the struggles and successes of the Christian life. The class met for one hour on a Wednesday evening. The order of the class closely resembled that of the original meetings: hymns, prayer, scripture, sharing of testimony, and closing songs. The class began with 10 members and at the end of the eight week period there were 15 members. The evaluation by the members at the end of the eight weeks was very favorable. A majority of them felt the benefit of having a group of people who cared about them and their Christian journey.

I selected an aspect of holiness as the subject for each meeting, and planned discussion starters accordingly. I found that it works best if choices of hymns to be sung and Scripture to be read are relevant to the issues at hand for each class meeting. Hymns by the Wesleys are not only enjoyable to sing, but helped to ground the group in its historical tradition. Other hymns and contemporary songs that deal with spiritual progress or the liturgical season of the year were also sung. Scripture passages, either chosen by myself, or by a class member, related to the quest for holiness. We found it helpful to read an entire

¹⁵ Leslie, 139-159.

chapter of Scripture, with each person in the class reading a portion. At this point, discussion starters proved extremely useful in directing class members' thoughts toward the subject of living a holy life. For example, the class had a brainstorm about the messages we get from the media about perfection and the perfect life. A list was made of the contemporary meanings of perfection and what the characteristics of a perfect person would be. Alongside that list, the Biblical meaning(s) of perfection were listed. The perfection that God requires was then discussed. Class members shared their feelings about these two lists and stated in what ways they were aware of the impact of these two meanings of perfection in their lives. Each person then chose one or two items from the list which describes God's expectations of the perfect person, and promised to integrate those characteristics into their life in the next week. The subject for the meeting the following week was to share how faithful the class members were in living out the perfect life.

Other possible springboards for discussion that have proven effective in our class meeting are guided meditation on the scripture, having class members write down key words, or drawing symbols that represent different encounters they have had with God. Also, visual images such as a picture of a house (complete with walkway, porch and front door) can be used just as Wesley used to help define prevenient grace, justification, and sanctification. There are a variety of resources available that specialize in just this kind of thought-provoking exercise. In planning for each meeting I found it necessary to remind myself that caution must be used so the exercise does not become the content for the meeting. The time allotted for the springboard experiences must not take up so much time that members do not have a chance to share. The purpose of these topical discussion starters is to allow for a focusing upon each individual's journey. I suggest a

variety of experiences, since different people respond to different styles of guidance.

After everyone who wished had the opportunity to share, more hymns were sung and a benediction or prayer said. Members were encouraged to be responsible to choose an appropriate Scripture for the next meeting. The members not able to attend the meeting were called or visited that same day or no later than twenty-four hours after the meeting by the class leader. I must admit that this was not an easy task for me as a class leader and a minister. I experienced first hand the advantage of having a lay person lead the class meeting! Telephone calls and cards from other class members were quite helpful, but the ultimate responsibility rests with the leader. Inquiries should be made into their inability to attend the meeting. Sickness, vacations, family problems, or any number of reasons for not attending should be passed on to the pastor for further follow-up if needed. By acknowledging of the absence of a class member the support promised in the meeting can actually be felt. Also, if there had been any misunderstandings or offences, they can be acknowledged. Frequently absent members should be reminded the the "group meeting is not something that is tucked in 'if there is time.'" Only serious illness or a death in the family prevents attendance. People who care enough to want to grow in their spiritual life know that there is a price to be paid."¹⁶

There are expectations of each class member and these were presented at our first class meeting: confidentiality, faithful attendance, honesty, continuous striving for perfection. The class leader must be aware of each person's progress. The leader must also be alert for danger signals such as the possible laxity of members in their daily devotions, the breaking of confidentiality, the presence of

¹⁶ Emerick, 74.

destructive critics, or a feeling of elitism that may lead to a growing away from the church.¹⁷ The presence of any one of these signals calls for serious work on the part of the leader. The leader may need to talk privately with a member using firm encouragement, pointed reminders as to what the class is about, or perhaps even counseling with the pastor may be necessary.

Relation to the Local Church

There has always been a direct link between the class meeting and the local church. From their inception, the class meetings have been a means of revitalizing the church at large. The current Book of Discipline for the United Methodist Church makes provision for the formation of small groups, namely the class meeting, to take place in the local church.¹⁸ Members of the class meetings were, and are, fully expected to attend Sunday church services and to partake of Communion whenever offered. Wesley believed that the "evangelical faith should manifest itself in evangelical living. He spelled out this expectation in the three-part formula of the [General] Rules:

It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation. *First* : By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind. . . ; *Secondly* : By doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all. . . ; *Thirdly* : By attending upon all the ordinances of God.¹⁹

The ordinances of God are also known as the Means of Grace. Wesley fully expected those who attend the class meetings to also avail themselves of:

¹⁷ Emerick, 75-76.

¹⁸ United Methodist Church, The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (Nashville: United Methodist Publ. House, 1988), 172.

¹⁹ UMC, 48.

The public worship of God.

The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.

The Supper of the Lord.

Family and private prayer.

Searching the Scriptures.

Fasting or abstinence.²⁰

Thus the class meeting is not an entity unto itself. It is a part of the Church, made up of people of the Church. Those who attend the class meetings will see each other at potlucks, at choir rehearsal, in worship on Sunday mornings, at the grocery store and at PTA meetings. The class does not exist in isolation, but is made up of people who live their lives in contact with one another.²¹ The support found in this small group is reinforced when the class members can support one another in daily settings.

Providing for the meeting of a class in the local church can prove to be an asset to the pastor. Due to the diverse responsibilities of a pastor the class meeting can help fill in the gaps. The class meeting can be a way of shepherding the congregation. The leaders can act as surrogates for the pastor and can relay to the pastor the needs and cares of the parishioners.²² The pastor, on the other hand, is encouraged to visit the classes occasionally.²³ Providing opportunities for training leaders and for dialogue with each leader are also tasks of the pastor.

²⁰ UMC, 77.

²² Athenson, 16.

²³ Athenson, 244.

The quest for holiness can provide plenty of grist for the mill when it comes to preaching. The intimacy of the class meeting and the expounding of the Scriptural basis for holiness are interdependent.

That part of our economy, the private meetings for prayer, examination, and particular exhortation, has been the greatest means of deepening and confirming every blessing that was received by the word preached, and of diffusing it to others who could not attend the public ministry; whereas, without this religious connection and intercourse, the most ardent attempts by mere preaching have proved of no lasting use.²⁴

Another benefit of the class meeting within the local church is the cultivation of lay leadership. Some suggest that the leadership with such a small group be on a rotating basis where the leader for the next meeting is chosen at the close of each meeting. However, the strength of a class meeting can be made or broken by the leader. As Leslie points out, the leader is a "strategic person."

[The leader] sets the tone for the life of the group. [The leader] creates the climate for group activity. [The leader] provides a focus for discussion initiated by others, and [the leader] introduces topics that need to be discussed but have been avoided. [The leader] initiates observations about individual patterns and group functioning, and [the leader] provides a model for participation in the group. [The leader] serves as a resource when additional help is needed.²⁵

The role of leader, then, is extremely important and requires training and spiritual insight. It is assumed that the leadership of the classes would come from the laity. The Book of Discipline states that the leaders shall be chosen by the Charge Conference and are to be under the "direct supervision of the pastor."²⁶ A good resource for the training of class leaders is the Training Manual for Small Group Leaders, by Lyman Coleman. This easy to follow book

²⁴ Wesley, 95.

²⁵ Leslie, 163.

²⁶ UMC, 173.

is clearly written and contains helpful diagrams. A short history of the class meeting would also prove useful in the training of leaders.

Wesley and his followers soon found that the class meetings were an effective way to incorporate new members into the church family. New members can be introduced to caring people as well as to some Methodist tradition.

The churchly gatherings are the natural place for disciples to find each other to arrange for mutual support. They are the natural nests for fledgling disciples. New disciples need somewhere to go for the nourishment they so desperately require to mature and fly. The great failing of evangelism in the churches has been lack of a covenanted, committed band of disciples for fresh converts to join. One model is the class meeting of Methodism. Another was the Wednesday night prayer meeting of a generation ago. What is needed is a community of trust where the canons of discipleship are being openly and joyfully applied to every aspect of personal life.²⁷

Our transitory society could benefit from the welcoming of new and transferring members to the local church. The class meeting is a good place to integrate the new member into the life of the Church. Of great help to the pastor is the passing on of information about members preparing to move. Then the pastor can contact the local pastor of the members' new location who can then provide them with a personal welcome.

The World

Another vital tenet of Methodism is that the whole world is of importance to God and should be to us as well. The world was created inherently good and is to be celebrated and nurtured. By the very nature of the Incarnation, God in human form, we are assured of the love God has for the Creation. The fact that God deals with humanity in the *here and now* does honor to the present. We are

²⁷ Neill Q. Hamilton, Recovery of the Protestant Adventure (New York: Seabury, 1981), 206.

not to live our lives only for a promise of the sweet by and by, but rather are to pray for the Reign of God to be realized in time and space.

The Reign of God is both an activity and an area. It denotes not only the Reign of God, but also the way in which God rules over that realm. The Reign of God can be found in the present, as well as be a hope for the future. It may also be found "on earth as it is in heaven." Christ ushers in the reign and has invited all to become citizens of this realm. The Gospels record his attempts to convey the meaning, intent, and urgency of the Reign of God. The parables paint pictures of a process of growth culminating in goodness beyond expectations! It is the fulfillment of Creation. This fulfillment is made possible through the power and grace of God - the one who can make all things new.

How does the Reign of God and God's grace relate to our world today? Where is God, this gracious God when there are children who are without food, clothing, shelter, love? Where is God when we witness acts of violence in our neighborhood, or read about terrorist bombings, or feel the overhanging threat of a nuclear war? Where is this loving, well-intentioned God who deigned it right to come and live as one of us, who deigned it right to die without destroying the evil in the world? Where is grace in the lives of political refugees? Where is grace in the lives of the street people? Where is God's grace in the lives of those who are oppressed by people who count wealth as of more worth than human lives? The Church is the living, breathing incarnation of God's grace in the midst of our troubled world. The Holy Spirit was sent to the disciples and miraculously turned them into apostles. Instead of remaining followers they had become doers. This is the mark of God's grace in the world, that there are those filled by the Holy Spirit who are willing to spread the good news of reconciliation, to share the benefits of experiencing God's grace.

The Church exists in the world and therefore must deal with the needs of that world. It is not called to be of the world, but to work for the realm of God within the context of its surroundings. This means to be aware of what is happening not only in our own backyard but in the lives of people around the globe. It is hard in our society to understand that we are interrelated with everyone and everything else on this planet. What we do affects the lives of people thousands of miles away. What happens to them will have repercussions upon this and future generations. We are all children of God and we share the earth with the rest of Creation. Those of us who have power and are in a position of helping others must do so, and we must do it within a Christian context.

Relation to the World

The Church is a statement of faith that physically as well as spiritually denotes the forgiveness and love of God. God's grace can be seen in the work of those who are lobbying for the rights of all of God's Creation: men, women, children, animals, and the earth. The Church, following the example of Christ, is the advocate for the powerless. It represents God's grace to those often considered unworthy: the mentally disabled, the physically disabled, the poor, the abused, those of other ethnic or racial groups. God's grace can be seen in the actions of those who count the lives of others as more important than their own, who are willing to risk all that they have in the name of peace. God's grace can be seen in the fact that the Church is still here. To be sure, the Church can be misguided in its efforts, but throughout time the Church has been the conduit through which we on earth may experience the joys of heaven.

Being instruments of God's grace is not an easy task. It is hard and laborious. It is often unaided by any sign of result, but the Church labors in love, in the name of the One who first loved us.

The general ministry is also a call to work toward the future, as well as to actively concern itself with living in the present. The general ministry can be instrumental in bringing about the realm of God, and in exposing those things of the future that are present in our world now.

The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church discuss Christian attitudes toward nature, community, society, economics, politics, and our dealings with the world. This brings home the fact that we are a *part* of Creation and have a responsibility to the rest of Creation. It is overwhelming to read through the headings of the Social Principles -- we are to be aware of so much! Our lives are intertwined with the rest of the world and we need to consciously decide how we as Christians are to live in the world today as good and faithful stewards.

Growth in grace includes this realization of our interdependence with one another and the rest of Creation. The class meeting is just the place to work out our life as a disciple in the world. How are we to pray for the Reign of God if we do not strive to see signs of its existence? How can we prepare for the Reign of God, which comes like a thief in the night, if we find ourselves spiritually asleep to the needs of this world? The mutual support of the class meeting does not promise success in dealing with the world, but it does promise support, encouragement, and a challenge as we strive to be faithful in our quest for perfection.

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