

How John Wesley Fought Hypocrisy through Church Discipline
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"The church is full of hypocrites," "Show me a real Christian, and I'll become one," "The last real Christian died on the cross," are three of the taunts that non-Christians have long hurled at the church. Because there are so many fake Christians today many people believe there are no real ones. The problem was the same when God used Methodism to spread real Christianity through eighteenth-century England. The Methodists claimed to be saved by God, but some of them lived like the Devil. The problem was especially obvious because many Methodists came from the lowest social classes where nothing in their background or environment helped them live the "sober, quiet, godly lives" John Wesley, Methodism's founder, preached about. This lack of visible change in people's lives discouraged others who were trying to follow Christ and gave Methodism's detractors ammunition to use against it. Those who opposed Wesley's gospel preaching argued that the message must be false if not all of its followers could not stay true. One man protested after hearing Wesley say Methodism was true Christianity. Wesley had said that what he preached was good sense, good nature, and good manners put together by the help of God. Sir, if that be true Christianity, said the opponent, I never saw a Christian in my life. ¹

John Wesley discovered the solution to the problem of hypocrisy in a surprising way. His Methodists got over their heads in debt while they were building a chapel for preaching. In an effort to pay off the debt the leaders volunteered to visit every Methodist each week and collect a penny. When they found that it was easier if the people came to the leader, the Methodist class-meeting was born. The people still paid the penny, but the meetings quickly became more pastoral than financial. Through this weekly meeting, the class leaders could keep track of how their people were doing spiritually. Victorious members were encouraged, defeated members were helped, stubborn members were disciplined, and hypocritical members were removed. Seeing how effective this practice was convinced Wesley that the work of God would prosper if it used church discipline to fight hypocrisy. Over the next fifty years John Wesley used church discipline to purify the church. Fighting hypocrisy by church discipline helped early Methodism grow, until it reached almost a million people before Wesley's death.²

John Wesley fought hypocrisy through church discipline in three main ways. First, he preached and practiced it in his own ministry. Then he showed his leaders how to administer it honestly and lovingly. Next, he organized his people into small groups where they could look out for each other, and finally, he publicized the benefits of obeying the Lord in this manner.

¹ An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, The Works of John Wesley, Thomas Jackson, ed., 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 8:11. [Hereafter Works.]

²At Wesley's death there were about 72,000 members of the Methodist movement in Britain, and about 64,000 in America. Generally only adults were reckoned as members, and many people attended Methodist meetings without officially joining the movement, so that when trying to estimate the number of followers, one should multiply the number of members by five or six. Townsend thus calculates the number of followers in 1791 to be more than 800,000. See W. J. Townsend, H. B. Workman, and G. Eayrs, A New History of Methodism (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), vol. 1, pp. 368-369. In vol. 2, p. 532, n. 4, Eayrs reports the number of Methodists in 1791 to have been 120,233. The discrepancy is not important.

Preaching and Practicing Church Discipline in His Own Ministry

Preaching Church Discipline

John Wesley's strategy of fighting hypocrisy by practicing church discipline began when he preached about it from the Bible and from church history. One of his most preached sermons deals with Matthew 18, the passage in which Jesus gave the steps to take when we discover a brother's sin. Wesley said that the admonition to begin the process of church discipline was not just a suggestion, but "a plain command of God." He said, "No alternative is allowed, no choice of anything else: this is the way; walk thou in it."³ In commenting on this passage Wesley asked, "Can anything be plainer? Christ does here as expressly command all Christians, who see a brother do evil, to take this way, not another, and to take these steps in this order, as he does to honor their father and mother."⁴ For Wesley the obligation to reprove the sinful brother was as pressing as the fifth commandment. Later, when teaching 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul told the congregation to cast out the incestuous man, Wesley commented that the congregation had the responsibility to rid itself of the impenitent man because "one sin, or one sinner . . . diffuses guilt and infection through the whole congregation."⁵

Besides teaching church discipline from the Bible, Wesley also reminded his followers that the early church practiced it. In another oft-preached sermon, he informed his followers: "It was a common saying among the Christians in the primitive Church, 'The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian,' implying, that none could be real Christians, without the help of Church discipline."⁶ Wesley thought that where there was no church discipline, there would be no real Christianity. He continued the statement, saying that in the church the Holy Spirit and discipline are like the soul and body in a person,

But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians; for where is Christian discipline? In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now, wherever doctrine is preached, where there is no discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers.⁷

In this sermon Wesley tried to explain why if the Christian religion really comes from God, it makes so little difference in the world. One of his answers was that the kind of Christianity practiced in England was not real Christianity at all because it neglected church discipline.

Practicing Church Discipline

Wesley put his conviction that church discipline is essential to real Christianity into practice as he directed the Methodist movement. He exercised it himself, and gave his followers instruction in how to carry it out. Reading certain sections of his journal gives the impression that he spent as much time throwing people out of the Methodist societies as he did persuading them to come in. Early in his

³ The Cure of Evil Speaking, Wesley's Standard Sermons, Edward H. Sugden, ed., 2 vols. (London: Epworth, 1951), 2:299-300. [Hereafter Sermons.]

⁴ Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (London: Epworth, 1966), p. 90.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 599-600.

⁶ On the Inefficacy of Christianity, Works 7:285.

⁷ Ibid.

ministry he returned to Bristol to find that things were not going well. He reported that he needed to put more than thirty members out of the society:

God humbled us in the evening by the loss of more than thirty of our little company whom I was obliged to exclude, as no longer adorning the gospel of Christ. I believed it best openly to declare both their names and the reasons why they were excluded.⁸

Three weeks later he was in London where things were not much better:

After diligent inquiry made, I removed all those from the congregation of the faithful whose behavior or spirit was not agreeable to the gospel of Christ: openly declaring the objections I had to each, that others might fear, and cry to God for them.⁹

Later visits to Bristol showed the situation had improved, but seven years later he again was forced to purify the church, this time putting out almost 20% of the society. He recorded what he had to do:

I examined the society the following week, leaving out every careless person, and every one who wilfully and obstinately refused to meet his brethren weekly. By this means their number was reduced from nine hundred to about seven hundred and thirty.¹⁰

His actions were not always so drastic. From Bristol he moved on to Kingswood where it was reported that the society was filled with tale-bearers, evil-speakers, and drunkards. Wesley met with each of the class leaders and discussed the state of each person in the classes. He found that in three months' time only two believers had relapsed into drunkenness and one other had repeated a vicious story.¹¹

Near the end of his ministry Methodism had grown so large that Wesley found it difficult to supervise everything everywhere, but still he tried. Once again Bristol presented him with problems. On a visit in 1784 he recorded, "I met the classes; but found no increase in the society. No wonder, for discipline had been quite neglected; and, without this, little good can be done among the Methodists."¹²

Wesley vividly recorded how the hypocrisy of talking one way and living another drove the Spirit of God from the Methodists. In Dover the people had long supplemented their incomes by smuggling goods in from France. Even after getting saved and joining the Methodists, some continued to rob the King in this way. The leaders of the group tolerated this sinful behavior. As a result the group suffered disunity and, as Wesley commented, "We seemed to be ploughing upon the sand. When the church was purified, however, things were very different. Wesley noted, "The word of God sinks deep into their hearts."¹³ In addition to making people more receptive to preaching, fighting hypocrisy through

⁸The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., Nehemiah Curnock, ed. 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1938), 9 December 1741, 2:517. [Hereafter Journal.]

⁹Ibid., 27 December 1741, 2:518-9.

¹⁰Ibid., 1 October 1748, 3:380.

¹¹Ibid., 9 October 1748, 3:380.

¹²Ibid., 20 September 1784, 7:21.

¹³Ibid., 3 December 1765, 5:151.

church discipline also helped the Methodist societies church grow. In Sunderland, Wesley reported, the Methodists lost many members who would not give up smuggling. But for every one they lost, the society had more than two new members to take his place. Thus John Wesley learned that even if he had to subtract members through church discipline, the Lord added to their number more who were being saved.¹⁴

Showing Leaders How to Practice Church Discipline through Honesty and Love

John Wesley knew that hypocrisy in the church gave the devil some of his most powerful ammunition for his fight against the Lord. Sin in the lives of Methodists drove the Spirit of God from their meetings and gave unbelievers excuses for disregarding the Gospel. In order to fight hypocrisy in Methodism Wesley preached and practiced church discipline, but he knew that unless this powerful weapon against hypocrisy was used correctly, it could backfire. To make sure church discipline worked the way God designed, Wesley emphasized that honesty and love must control the process.

Because he traveled all through England meeting the Methodist societies and talking with their individual members, John Wesley knew that fighting hypocrisy through church discipline could have unintended casualties. One of the veteran female small group leaders in Norwich had been accused of falling down in public because she was drunk and of breaking a confidence. Obviously no Methodist leader could be trusted if she revealed what she was told in a counseling session or if she got drunk, so she was removed from leadership. Later, when Wesley himself made a careful investigation of the case, he discovered that the woman being counseled told her secret to more than twenty people, and that the fall from drunkenness was actually caused by a disease. By the time he found out the truth, Wesley wrote, the damage was done and nothing he could do would remedy it.¹⁵

Honesty in Church Discipline

Seeing the damage that false accusations could do underlined for John Wesley the necessity of total honesty and truth in the practice of church discipline. So committed was he to the integrity of the process that he often took it upon himself, rather than delegating it to his assistants. In 1765 he heard reports that all the Methodists in Canterbury were hypocrites. People said that every one of them had backslidden and expressed doubt that some of them had ever been saved at all. Wesley's response to this disturbing rumor was to journey to Canterbury and interview each of the Methodists there individually. He was surprised to find the rumors completely untrue, and each of the members living an upright and blameless life.¹⁶

In other cases, however, Wesley discovered that the rumors were founded in fact. In these cases, too, his approach was grounded in honesty. His honesty led him to a frankness with his friends that seems harsh today. Wesley was too busy in the Lord's service to waste time in idle pleasantries. The weight of the responsibility for souls drove him to ruthless honesty. He reports telling one group of Methodists that they were the most ignorant, self-conceited, self-willed, fickle, untractable, disorderly, disjointed

¹⁴Ibid., 23 June 1759, 4:325

¹⁵Ibid., 27 October 1783, 6:457

¹⁶Ibid., 3 December 1765, 6:151

society that [he] knew in the three kingdoms.¹⁷ When his first lieutenant, John Maxfield, threatened to divide the movement, Wesley wrote to him telling him what he liked and disliked about his ministry:

Without any preface or ceremony, which is needless between you and me, I will simply and plainly tell you what I dislike in your doctrine, spirit, or outward behavior As to your spirit, I like your confidence in God and your zeal for the salvation of souls. But I dislike something which has the appearance of pride, of overvaluing yourself and undervaluing others, particularly the (other) preachers.¹⁸

The letter continues in this vein for several pages, listing what Wesley thought were Maxfield's positive and negative points.

Wesley expected all his assistants to speak as plainly to him as he did to them. In addition, they must give every one to whom they speak as much of the truth as he or she can bear: "Tell everyone what you think wrong in him, and that plainly, as soon as may be; else it will fester in your heart. Make all haste to cast the fire out of your bosom."¹⁹ Quickly speaking the truth in love called the sinner to repent and delivered the one who reproved from the possibility of harboring a bad attitude.

Love in Church Discipline

John Wesley knew from Scripture and from personal experience that a bad attitude, or a lack of love, could cause God's good tool of church discipline to produce a bad result. He distilled what he learned from Scripture and experience into two sermons. "The Duty of Reproving Our Neighbor" and "The Cure of Evil-Speaking." The first explains the Christian's duty to warn non-Christians about their condition and the second deals with reproving those within the church. The key to success in a case of church discipline, Wesley said, often is the spirit of one who points out the sin.

Because so much depends on a right spirit, the one who goes to reprove should spend much time in earnest prayer asking that the Lord would "guard (his) heart, enlighten (his) mind, and direct (his) tongue." The Lord's servant must "avoid everything in look, gesture, word, and tone of voice that savors of pride or self-sufficiency." Above all, love must be the motive. Quoting his brother's hymn, John Wesley wrote,

Love can bow down the stubborn neck,
The stone to flesh convert;
Softens, and melt, and pierce, and break
An adamant heart.²⁰

After preparing his heart and planning his words, the one who knows of the sin goes to the brother in private and seeks to restore him in the spirit of meekness.

The loving approach may carry the day; when it does not, the second step is necessary. Sometimes the "mildest and tenderest reproof will have no effect." In these cases one or two others must go with the one who has already gone. The first words in this second meeting should be a declaration of their love

¹⁷Ibid., 9 September 1759, 4:351.

¹⁸John Wesley to Thomas Maxfield, 2 November 1762, Letters 4:192-3.

¹⁹Minutes of Several Conversations, Works 8:310.

²⁰The Cure of Evil-Speaking, Sermons 2:299-300.

for the one who has sinned, and then they should establish the facts. Only then should they add their voices to the first reproof, and attempt to persuade the brother to repent.²¹

If this second attempt fails, it is then necessary to take the matter to the church. At this stage, Wesley said, it properly belongs to the office of a minister to rebuke with all authority and, if necessary, to put the person out of the church. Wesley told his hearers that the matter was now out of their hands: "When, therefore you have done this, you have done all which the Word of God, or the law of love, requireth of you: you are not now partaker of his sin: but if he perish, his blood is on his own head."²²

Even after the impenitent wrong-doer has been put out, however, the believers' obligation to her or him is not really ended. Love has one additional requirement: We then all cried to God, that this might be for their edification, and not for destruction, says Wesley after reporting how some Methodists were thrown out.²³ The purpose of church discipline is the restoration of the sinner. Putting sinners out of the church is designed to get their attention and show them their danger. The hope is that they will come to their senses and repent. The goal of church discipline is not separation, but restoration.

John Wesley knew that the love that underlay church discipline could bring sinners back to their senses. A villager named David experienced the benefits of Methodist church discipline first hand. He and his drinking buddy, Sam, used to stand outside the Methodist meeting house and swear at the preacher. One night David went in and listened. He was so convicted of sin that he could not sleep that night. In the morning he found Sam and asked him what to do. Do! Sam replied. Go and join the society. I will; for I was never so uneasy in my life. After they both joined, David had second thoughts. He was frightened by the Methodist reputation for church discipline. I am sorry I joined, he said, for I shall get drunk again and they will turn me out. He managed to stay sober for four long days. Then on the fifth a drinking buddy persuaded him to take just a pint. One pint led to another and soon they were mocking him, See, here is a Methodist drunk. This jest made David so mad that he threw his companions out of the barroom, picked up the barmaid and threw her into a kennel, tore off the door of the pub, and threw it into the street. Overcome with shame, he ran to a field where he tore his hair and rolled on the ground in grief. A day or two later David sneaked into the back of a Methodist meeting, and during the prayer began to cry out and jump around because of his guilt. The meeting came to a halt, and the Methodists began to pray for him. Sam was there. When David felt the Lord's deliverance, he rushed over to Sam and caught him in his arms. Together they danced around the room singing the Lord's praise. At last they both were delivered from their sins, and beginning that day lived a sober life.²⁴

John Wesley understood that church discipline could hurt people if applied without honesty and love, but he also realized that when practiced the way the Bible directs, it was a powerful weapon for reclaiming souls and for fighting hypocrisy. He made investigating cases of alleged wrong-doing a high priority in his busy schedule, and taught his assistants to follow his example. Under Wesley's supervision, Methodism remained pure and reached one million people in England and America.

²¹Ibid., pp. 303-4.

²²Ibid., p. 305.

²³Journal, 9 December 1741, 2:517.

²⁴Ibid., 16 June 1763, 5:20-1.

Organizing for Church Discipline and Publicizing the Benefits

In 1747 the Bishop of London, who was no friend to heart religion, attacked the Methodists for hypocrisy.²⁵ Surely this was a case of the pot calling the waterglass black. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodists, devoted his life to two activities. One was riding all over the kingdom to persuade sinners to become Methodists, and the other was riding all over the kingdom to investigate Methodists who had become sinners. John Wesley was so committed to the honor of the name of Jesus his Methodists bore that he wanted none of them to be guilty of hypocrisy. He preached and practiced church discipline to fight it, and he trained his leaders to exercise it with honesty and love. One of the reasons Wesley was able to practice what he preached about church discipline was that he organized his followers into small groups. Another was that he widely publicized the benefits of obeying the Lord by keeping the church pure.

Organizing for Church Discipline

Wesley organized the people who were converted through his ministry into societies. The local society included all the Wesleyans in a given area. It was divided into groups, or classes, of twelve. The people in the classes met each week to study the Bible, pray, and report on the state of their souls. Each class had a leader who reported to the preacher in charge of the society. Wesley published a list of questions for the class leaders to use at the meetings to help the members examine themselves. He commented that in these groups "advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels made up, (and) misunderstandings removed." Sometimes the examinations revealed carelessness or even open sin. In these cases, Wesley tells us,

Evil men were detected, and reprov'd. They were borne with a season. If they forsook their sins, we received them gladly; if they obstinately persisted therein, it was openly declared that they were not of us. The rest mourned and prayed for them, and yet rejoiced, that, as far as in us lay, the scandal was rolled away from the society.²⁶

In this passage Wesley mentioned two benefits accruing from church discipline: first, there is the proper result when the sinner repents. He then is restored with gladness. In this case everyone wins. Second, there may be a different outcome when the sinful one is stubborn and refuses to repent. He must then be excluded, but at least in this case, God's honor is preserved because this church is no longer shamed by bad behavior.

By organizing his people in small groups and training his leaders in lay ministry Wesley was able to administer church discipline. All the people in the society knew its rules and practices. They understood they were expected to grow spiritually, and realized they were accountable to each other. As the class met each week, the members developed a deep love for each other. They received encouragement when they were sad and heard loving reproof if they strayed from the path. Because the leaders knew each class member intimately, they could tailor their words to each individual need. The frequent meetings meant that wrong attitudes could be stopped before they developed into sinful actions, and questionable practices halted before they grew into evil habits. In the context of frequent, personal, and loving contact, church discipline became a powerful redemptive force.

Publicizing The Benefits of Church Discipline

²⁵John Wesley to Dr. Gibson, Bishop of London, 11 June 1747, Letters 2:277-91.

²⁶A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist, Works 8:253.

Although church discipline yielded so many positive results, it never became easy for the Methodists. No one likes the disagreements that inevitably arise, nor does anyone enjoy taking the final step of breaking a relationship. Throughout his career Wesley had to admonish the other leaders of the Methodist movement to examine the societies and put out all who disobeyed the rules. Writing to Adam Clarke he said, "Be exact in every point of discipline," giving him exactly the same advice he had earlier given to John Mason.²⁷ To Francis Asbury in America, Wesley wrote requiring "a strict attention to discipline."²⁸ To Mrs. Savage he noted "[without discipline] the best preaching is of little use."²⁹ Finally, to William Holmes, who perhaps was fearful of losing his congregation, Wesley sent this order: "Do right and fear nothing. Exclude every person that will not promise to meet (with) his or her class, the steward in particular. I require you to do this. You have no choice. Leave the consequences to God."³⁰

Wesley knew that church discipline could fail and cause a split in the church. He nevertheless ordered one of his assistants to enforce it:

I cannot allow John Sellars to be any longer a leader; but if he will lead the class, whether I will or no, I require you to put him out of the Society. If twenty of his class will leave the Society too, they must. The first loss is the best. Better forty member should be lost than our discipline lost. They are no Methodists that will bear no restraints. Explain this at large to the Society.³¹

Here he reasoned that the best way to cut the losses when society members were disobedient was to put them out. Even if a large number left with them, it will not hurt the society as much as tolerating sin. If Methodists have to choose between numbers and discipline, Wesley chose to part with numbers. Along with commending church discipline to his helpers, Wesley was also quick to point out the bad results of neglecting it. He said that at the beginning of Methodism the lack of discipline encouraged laxness and caused people to question whether God was behind the movement:

We quickly perceived there were many ill consequences of suffering these to remain among us. It was dangerous to others; inasmuch as all sin is of an infectious nature. It brought such a scandal on their brethren as exposed them to what was not properly the reproach of Christ. It laid a stumbling-block in the way of others, and caused the truth to be evil spoken of.³²

Later in his ministry, Wesley saw the danger of preaching without enforcing church discipline. In August, 1763 he rode over to Wales to preach. He was glad for the enthusiastic response to his message, but dismayed at the state of the societies:

I was more convinced than ever, that the preaching like an Apostle, without joining together those that are awakened, and training them up in the ways of God is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these

²⁷John Wesley to Adam Clarke, November 9 1787, Letters 8:22, and John Wesley to John Mason, November 3, 1784, Letters 7:247.

²⁸10 October 1772, Asbury's Journal, quoted in Letters 5:341.

²⁹John Wesley to Mrs. Savage, September 19, 1771, Letters 5:279.

³⁰John Wesley to William Holmes, February, 18, 1788, Letters 8:36-7.

³¹John Wesley to John Valton, January 18, 1782, Letters 7:101.

³²A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists, Works 8:252.

twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connection; and the consequence is, that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.³³

All of his efforts and the efforts of his assistants seem to have been for naught because they did not form the converts into societies where the newborns could grow in Christ. Without the societies there was no follow-up, no encouragement, no accountability, and no discipline. Consequently, there were no lasting results.

Wesley not only urged his assistants to administer church discipline and showed them the ill effects that grow in its absence, he also argued from Scripture that the proper exercise of church discipline will help convert the world. Referring to John 17 he said that if believers loved each other enough to refrain from saying anything negative about another Christian except in the context of loving church discipline, God would richly bless them. He exclaimed,

How would the love of God abound in our own souls, while we thus confirmed our love to our brethren! And what an effect would it have on all that were united together in the name of the Lord Jesus! How would brotherly love continually increase! By this chiefly would God convince the world, and prepare them also for His kingdom.³⁴

Perhaps Wesley exaggerated when he said that if only Christians would exercise proper church discipline the world would be converted. But then again, perhaps not.

³³Journal, August 25, 1763, 5:26.

³⁴The Cure of Evil-Speaking, Sermons 2:307-8.