

The Rise and Decline of the Class Meeting
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Looking back over the 170 years of existence of the Methodist Church in 1909, historian Waddy Moss wrote: Methodism has been faithful to its mission. That was defined by John Wesley as the spread of Scriptural holiness; and amongst the most characteristic means he employed was the gathering together of seriously minded people into classes for mutual help and edification.¹

He went on to predict:

Methodism will either retain her peculiarities (especially the class meetings)... or, ceasing to have a character of her own, she will range herself with the colourless churches that are Christian institutions and answer a Christian purpose, but the co-existence of which side by side can be defended on no sound principle of economy, efficiency, or need.²

Evidently Moss was in the minority, for in 1912 the British Methodist Church abolished attendance at class meeting as a requirement for membership. The class meeting had risen due to a combination of historical and theological factors; it declined when the growth of Methodism, the institution of the settled pastor, and increased prosperity among Methodists transformed the historical environment, and a new theory of the Christian life, the transition of Methodism from a society to a church, and the rise of liberalism altered the theological climate.³

THE RISE OF THE CLASS MEETING

Historical Factors:

The Religious Societies

The Wesleyan class meeting is a direct descendant of the Anglican Religious Society. These societies were first organized in England by Anthony Horneck, an Anglican clergyman who had been influenced by Philip Spener, founder of the Pietist movement in Germany. By the beginning of the eighteenth century there were at least forty of these societies meeting in London. Their purpose was to encourage strict devotional practice and social concern. Samuel Wesley organized one at Epworth in 1702, but it appears to have languished until reincarnated under Susannah Wesley's leadership while Samuel was away on prolonged business. John was nine at the time of this introduction to small group fellowship.⁴

The Holy Club

The society which Charles Wesley organized and John Wesley headed at Oxford is a second precedent for the Methodist class meeting. Its purposes were similar to other religious societies, and later came to include a joint missionary venture to the Indians in Georgia.⁵ While in Georgia, John did very little to convert the Indians, but he did form several more religious societies. Influenced by the Moravians, he divided his societies into intimate homogeneous "bands," and even encouraged mutual confession of sin.⁶

¹ Waddy Moss, "Wesleyan Methodism in the Last Fifty Years," in Townsend, W. J., Workman, H. B., and Eayrs, G., eds., *A New History of Methodism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), p. 480. (Hereafter *NHM*.)

² *Ibid.*

³ I will treat the band as a subset of the class. As I will show below, it began earlier, but it did not last as long. It seems never to have been widespread in America, and it died out in England by 1880. When both institutions existed the band was a smaller group composed of the more spiritually advanced. An even smaller subset of the class was the select society, which I will ignore altogether. For an excellent treatment of the relation of the three groups see Howard Snyder, *The Radical Wesley* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), pp. 52-64. Wesley mentions at least one other group, the penitents, and there may have been others that I have not yet discovered. In this paper I will refer to the whole system of small groups as classes, unless one particular subset needs to be singled out. In an attempt to keep this paper to a reasonable length, I will not describe the rules for the various groups, or how those rules worked out in practice. For such a discussion see "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," in John Wesley, *Works*, edited by Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 8:259-60. Hereafter citations from Wesley's works will state the title of the work, show that it is from the *Works*, and give volume and page numbers. Also see "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, &c.," *Works*, 8:269-71; "Rules of the Band-Societies," *Works*, 8:272-73; "Directions given to the Band-Societies," *Works*, 8:273-74; "Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others, from the year 1744 to the year 1789," *Works*, 8:299-307; John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Methodist Societies* (London: The Epworth Press, 1923), pp. 97-112, and Leslie F. Church, *The Early Methodist People* (London: The Epworth Press, 1948), pp. 149-183.

⁴ Snyder, pp. 14-16. However, the group was not really small. At first thirty came, and it gradually grew to two hundred.

⁵ Since the Holy Club is so well known I will not discuss it here. An extensive treatment may be found in John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Religious Societies* (London: The Epworth Press, 1921), pp. 75-105.

⁶ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), pp. 51-52.

Fetter Lane and the Bands

After his return from Georgia, Wesley continued to meet with the Moravians. On 1 May 1738 he helped to organize another Anglican religious society which would meet in Fetter Lane. The Moravian influence on this society was strong; so strong that Peter Bohler's name is linked with that of God and St. James in the printed rules of the society.⁷ Three weeks later at another society meeting in Aldersgate Street, Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed," and now, having faith, he continued the preaching of salvation by faith alone which he had begun on 6 March 1738.⁸ At Whitefield's insistence Wesley traveled to Bristol where on 2 April 1739 he began to preach in the open air. This preaching was marked by extraordinary conversions, and Wesley lost no time in organizing the converts into religious societies. Two days after his first field preaching he began the first Bristol society.⁹ Later that year Wesley formed another group in London, and in July, he led a secession from the Fetter Lane group because he felt it had become too quietistic. These groups Wesley later called "united societies."¹⁰ They were divided into homogenous bands which met weekly to tell each other of their temptations, triumphs, and faults, and to pray for one another.¹¹

Bristol and the Classes

By 1742 there were more than 1,100 members of Wesley's religious societies. They had built a preaching house and had a large debt to pay. One leader suggested that each society member contribute a penny a week until the debt was discharged. When it was objected that many were poor and could not pay, this leader volunteered to take eleven of the poorest, to call upon them each week, and if they could not pay, give the penny for them. The other leaders agreed to do likewise. As they visited the people they discovered many problems. So, in addition to collecting the penny, these leaders became religious counselors. When the leaders discovered that the weekly visitation was using too much time, the society decided that the classes would meet together with the leader each week. The penny was still collected, but the purpose of the meeting had become largely pastoral. These groups of twelve were the beginning of the classes. They were quickly introduced into the London society where Wesley had been trying to visit each member personally.¹²

Theological Factors:

In Wesley's Writings

Wesley's most complete defense of the various societies he organized for his converts appears in *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, published in 1748.¹³ In this work he admits that when he began he had "no previous design or plan at all," but he adopted whatever means seemed to benefit the people, being guided only by "common sense and Scripture."¹⁴ Therefore he claims no divine authority for the particular structures he has adopted: "By this means we declare them all to be merely prudential, not essential, not of divine institution."¹⁵ His groups are merely "methods which men have found, by reason and common sense, for the more effectually applying several Scripture rules, couched in general terms, to particular occasions."¹⁶

The Prevention of Backsliding

The benefits which came from the classes were numerous. The first that Wesley mentions is the prevention of backsliding. He notes that those who joined the classes usually continued in the Christian way, while those who did not often fell away:

In a few months, the far greater part of those who had begun to "fear God, and work righteousness," but were not united together, grew faint in their minds, and fell back into what they were before. Meanwhile the far greater part of those who were thus united together continued "striving to enter in at the strait gate," and to "lay hold on eternal life."¹⁷

This experience convinced him of the futility, and even the sin, of preaching without organizing classes. In 1763 he noted:

I was more convinced than ever that 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

⁷ Simon, *Religious Societies*, p. 196.

⁸ "Journal, 6 March and 24 May 1738," *Works*, 1:86 and 1:103.

⁹ "Journal, 2 and 4 April 1739," *Works*, 1:185; C.E. Villiamy, *John Wesley* (London: The Epworth Press, 1954), pp. 93-06; George Eays, "Developments, Institutions, Helpers, [and] Opposition" in *NHM*, 1:284.

¹⁰ "People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:269.

¹¹ Eays, 1:285.

¹² Eays, 1:287; "People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:252-53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 248-268.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connexion: and the consequence is that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.¹⁸

George Whitefield came to concur in this opinion. While most admitted that he was a better preacher than Wesley, his ministry seemed to have less lasting effect. He once commented: "My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined into societies, and thus preserved the fruit of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand."¹⁹

Discipline

Closely related to the prevention of backsliding was the opportunity for church discipline afforded by the classes. Wesley believed that discipline was essential to the church. In his sermon "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity" he says, "[The early church believed] that none could be real Christians without the help of discipline. But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians; for where is Christian discipline?"²⁰ But through the classes real discipline could be exercised. As the class leaders met with the people each week, they quickly discovered any incipient outward sin. Wesley comments: "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."²¹ This discipline was neither arbitrary nor harsh. It involved clear reproof, and gave the sinner time to reconsider. Wesley describes the process this way:

Evil men were detected, and reprov'd. They were borne with for 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.²²

Wesley's journal reveals that church discipline was no idle threat. Upon visiting a society he would often meet with the leaders to inquire about the state of each member, and then meet with the classes themselves. Sometimes he literally decimated the society as a result of this investigation, but at other times he found reports of scandals to be false.²³

Instruction

Besides serving as a useful means of detecting and reprovng sin, the classes were also valuable as a means of instruction. Wesley illustrated the inadequacy of the sermon as the sole means of religious instruction with the following story:

I hear Dr. Lupton say, "My father, visiting one of his parishioners who had never missed going to church for forty years, then lying on his death bed asked him: 'Thomas, where do you think your soul will go?' 'Soul! Soul!' said Thomas. 'Yes: do you not know what your soul is?' 'Aye, surely,' said he. 'Why, it is a little bone in the back, that lives longer than the rest of the body.' " So much Thomas had learned by constantly hearing sermons, yea, and exceedingly good sermons, for forty years!²⁴

In the classes the leader carefully inquired about the member's understanding, as well as the state of his soul. Any misunderstandings could be set right immediately. Wesley admonished his assistants to meet with their people individually, saying: "I have found by experience, that one of these has learned more from one hour's close discourse, than from ten years' public preaching."²⁵

Fulfilling the Scripture

Perhaps the greatest advantage of the class was that it enabled the Methodists to reproduce much of the practice of the early Christians, and to fulfill many biblical admonitions. After seeing the class system in action Wesley commented:

This is the very thing which was from the beginning of Christianity. In the earliest times . . . as soon as any of these were so convinced of the truth, as to forsake sin and seek the gospel salvation, they immediately joined them together, took an account of their names, advised them to

¹⁸ "Journal, 25 August 1763," *Works*, 3:144.

¹⁹ Basil Miller, *John Wesley* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1943), p. 97.

²⁰ "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," *Works*, 7:285.

²¹ "People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:253.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ In October of 1748 he more than decimated the society at Bristol, reducing it from 900 to 730. The next week at Kingswood he found, despite awful rumors, only three who needed to be put out. See "Journal, 9 October 1748," *Works*, 2:118-19.

²⁴ John Wesley, *Works*, Joseph Benson, ed. (London: Methodist Conference Office, 1816), 6:339-40 cited in William B. Lewis, "The Conduct and Nature of the Methodist Class Meeting," in Samuel Emerick, ed., *Spiritual Renewal for Methodism* (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, 1958), p. 30.

²⁵ "Minutes," *Works*, 8:303.

watch over each other, and met these . . . apart from the great congregation, that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them, and for them, according to their several necessities.²⁶ This was exactly what the class members were doing for each other, under the supervision of Wesley and his appointed class leaders. The effect of the class meeting was to enable its members to live out many scriptural commands. Wesley reports:

It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to "bear one another's burden," and naturally to "care for each other." As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other. And "speaking the truth in love, they grew up into him in all things who is the Head, even Christ;"²⁷

Wesley summed up the benefits of the classes when he wrote in his Journal, "There is something not easily explained in the fellowship of the Spirit, which we enjoy in a society of living Christians."²⁸

In Early Methodist Writers

After Wesley's death Methodist writers continued to extol the benefits of the class meeting, but there was a subtle shift in their emphasis and tone. They removed the negative and strengthened the positive. No longer did they maintain the Wesleyan stress on examining the classes rigorously and putting people out. Instead, they claimed that class membership is beneficial, and even hinted that God required it of all Christians.

The Benefits of Class Meeting

Typical of this new, positive emphasis on the benefits of the class meeting is the summary presented by Joseph Sutcliffe:

Thus it is that Christian fellowship is productive of good in every form, and to Christians in every state. It opens the work of regeneration and holiness on the largest scale; it exposes the beguiling snares of Satan, and arms the weak with divine defense; it enriches the mind with a vast treasure of sacred knowledge, with regard to the deep things of God; it refines our sympathy, and augments our mutual regard. Above all, it enlarges our views of the social happiness of heaven, and increases our communion with the Father of spirits, which is the highest human felicity, and the consummation of every wish.²⁹

Here, as in Wesley, one finds a strong sense of the value of the class. But in Wesley the benefits to the member involved sanctions as well as blessings. The whole group benefited because its purity was carefully maintained, and every person could be helped in godly living by the fear of losing his admission ticket. In Sutcliffe the emphasis is on the believer's happiness and "the consummation of every wish." There is hardly a hint that the class is a place of examination, and not a word about the possibility of putting someone out of a class.

The Divine Mandate for Class Meeting

The second shift in emphasis appears most strongly in the work of Keys. Like Wesley he is careful to emphasize that the class meeting is merely prudential, and is not divinely ordained, but toward the end of his pamphlet he quotes from two other sources which go beyond this assertion.³⁰ First he quotes a manual by Henry Fish which piles Scripture upon Scripture challenging those churches that do not provide the same kind of Christian communion which occurs in the class meeting:

It is clear as daylight that that kind of communion [experienced in the class meetings] has the express warrant of Holy Scripture; and that something more than Church communion in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was enjoyed by the primitive Christians. They had "fellowship," as well as "breaking of bread." How, for instance, could they exhort one another daily? How could

²⁶ "People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:250-1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

²⁸ "Journal, 11 July 1764," *Works*, 3:189.

²⁹ Joseph Sutcliffe, *The Communion of Saints*, (London: The Conference Office, 1815), p. 32. Similar statements may be found in Charles C. Keys, *The Class Leader's Manual* (New York: Lane and Scott, 1851), pp. 39-40, E.S. Janes, *Advice to Class Leaders* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1862), p. 15, and C.L. Goodell, *The Drillmaster of Methodism*, (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1902), pp. 11-27. All of these works also omit reference to expulsion. Indeed Goodell devotes an entire chapter to making excuses for those who do not come! See pp. 82-85. One discordant note in this generally positive emphasis comes from Humphrey Sandwich, writing in 1830, who said: "The primary object of class meetings was to mark disorderly walkers." (Quoted in Robert Currie, *Methodist Divided*, (London: Faber and Faver, 1968), p. 125.) Since I have not been able to check this quote in the original context, I am not sure whether the use of the past tense is significant. If not, then Sandwich is saying that the class meeting is still a means of discipline. This view of the role of the class then differs from that of the other writers cited. If, however, his use of the past tense were significant, then he is saying that while the class used to be a means of discipline, it is no longer such in 1830. If this is his meaning, it perfectly accords with that of the others.

³⁰ Keys, pp. 21-24.

they comfort and edify one another? How could they provoke one another to love and good works? How could they confess their faults to one another, and pray for one another? How teach and admonish one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs? How bear one another's burdens? How weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice, if they never meet together for the purpose of conversing on experimental religion, and the state of each other's souls? Whatever persons may say to the contrary, those churches, the members of which do not observe, or in which they do not have the opportunity of observing, the foregoing precepts which are enjoined in the New Testament Scriptures, are not based on the model of the apostolic Churches.³¹

Then he quotes from the *Notes to the Discipline*, written by the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church around 1820: "[Those who neglect this] divinely instituted ordinance manifest that they are either ashamed to acknowledge as their brethren the true children of God, or are enemies of the cross of Christ."³²

These two quotes move beyond the idea that the class meeting is merely one means of obeying the Scripture. The first quote questions the integrity of any church which does not provide similar opportunities, and the second questions the salvation of those who neglect the meeting. The bishops go far beyond Wesley in calling the class meeting a "divinely instituted ordinance."

One other major difference separates Wesley's theological treatment of the classes from that of his successors. Although the classes are extremely important to his organization, he rarely spells out their value, or urges people to attend them. In the few instances when he does mention the classes, he usually does not speak of their advantages. Instead he lays out rules for admission, or tells his assistants how to run them. Indeed, it seems strange that an institution which was so central to Methodism should receive less notice in Wesley's preaching and writing than does the subject of clothing.³³

In contrast to Wesley's writings, the nineteenth-century class leaders' manuals devote many of their pages to proving the benefits of the class meeting. Some cite detailed evidence for similar groups in ancient and recent church history, and others argue from Scripture, reason, and experience that the class is valuable. Of the five such books available for consultation, only the brief chapter from Miley omits this kind of apologetic.³⁴ Evidently Wesley and his successors were facing different situations.

THE DECLINE OF THE CLASS MEETING

That Wesley and his successors were facing different situations with regard to the class meeting seems apparent from the different ways in which they speak of the institution. Wesley's problem seems to be keeping the classes pure, while his successors' problem seems to be keeping the classes going. Evidently Wesley perennially had more people wishing to join the classes than he or his assistants could care for adequately. They had to give these people tickets so they could keep straight who was in the class and who was not. The lack of reluctance Wesley displayed to purge the societies points not only to a desire for a pure fellowship, but also to a confidence that others would soon take the place of those expelled.

This confidence is not apparent in Wesley's successors. Instead their goal seems to be to urge people to attend the class by showing them its many advantages. Even the way in which they discuss the value of the class is different from Wesley's handling of the same subject. Not only do they stress different benefits, omitting any mention of the sanctions involved in the class, but they also envision a different audience and take a different approach. Wesley's approach is historical, and his audience is universal. He explains to Methodists and to the outside world how these measures were adopted, and what good he saw coming from them. His successors have much less of an eye to the non-Methodist world. Instead of defending a past "innovation," they are advocating a present institution. Their concern is not to support a previous action, but to convince Methodists to take advantage of a means of grace.

Another indication of the decreased confidence in the popularity of the class is the bishops' insistence that the class meeting is "divinely ordained," noted above. In going beyond Wesley to assert that God's authority lies behind the class, they reveal a lack of assurance that their people will value a merely prudential, *ad hoc* institution. Wesley felt no need to appeal to God's sanction for his classes. Apparently the bishops did.

This increased attention to the benefits of the class, as well as the escalation of the authority behind it, reveals that it is now a "buyer's market" that Wesley's successors are trying to persuade. Gone are the past days when people flocked to the classes.³⁵

³¹ Henry Fish, *Manual for Class Leaders* (no publication data provided), quoted in Keys, pp. 43-44.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 45. Once again, Keys provides no further publication data.

³³ See "On Dress," *Works*, 7:15-24 for a whole sermon on this topic.

³⁴ [John Miley], *A Help to Class Leaders* (Boston: J.P. Magee, 1864).

³⁵ The firm numerical evidence for the decline of the class meeting is sparse. From the strictness with which Wesley enforced attendance, we may surmise that in his day it was close to 100% (at least right after his periodic visits to examine the society!) By 1900, attendance in some areas had fallen to 40%. See Currie, p. 128.

Despite the strength of the class meeting in Wesley's day, there is some evidence that, after the first flush of revival, people's enthusiasm for the institution cooled. Wesley's preachers once objected that "The people will not submit to [close examination.]" Wesley's answer revealed his confidence that the class was still strong: "If some will not, others will. And the success with them will repay all your labour."³⁶ Although he was sure of the fundamental soundness of the system, in one of his later sermons he noticed the decline of Methodist piety, and tied it to a neglect of the class:

Was not another cause of [this decline] your despising that excellent help, union with Christian society? Have you not read, "How can one be warm alone?" and, "Woe, be unto him that is alone when he falleth?" But you have companions enough. Perhaps more than enough; more than are helpful for your soul. But have you enough that are athirst for God and that labor to make *you* so? Have you companions that watch over your soul, as they that must give an account; and that freely and faithfully warn you, if you take any false step, or are in danger of doing so? I fear you have few of these companions, or else you would bring forth better fruit!³⁷

He then goes on to urge class members never to miss a class, and never to go to class merely as a matter of form, but to expect to meet with God each week. Such exhortation, though very rare in Wesley's works, is nevertheless a symptom of weakness in the class.

These symptoms of weakness became outright attacks on the class in Keys' time, a half-century after Wesley's death. Within Methodism itself arose questions about the Scriptural precedent for the classes. These questions were accompanied by a move to abolish the requirement of class attendance as a condition of Methodist membership. Keys therefore concludes his long appeal for the class meeting by stating the reason such a defense is necessary:

The foregoing arguments in vindication of the scriptural character of the class meeting have been deemed necessary, from the fact not only of a careless observance and disesteem of this means of grace, prevailing to a considerable extent in some parts of our work, but because of the skepticism which, in some cases, has been expressed as to their scriptural authority, and especially in reference to the rule concerning them, by which attendance is made a condition of church membership.³⁸

Keys' plea, like Moss's, was not heeded. The attendance requirement was dropped in the Methodist Church in the South in 1866, in the North in 1872, and in Britain in 1912.³⁹

Historical Factors

The Growth of Methodism

One of the factors which contributed to the decline of the class meeting is, paradoxically, the success of Methodism.⁴⁰ As more and more people joined the societies, it became harder and harder to maintain discipline. Wesley kept a tight hand on all aspects of the movement, but as it grew into the thousands and tens of thousands, he naturally had to appoint assistants to help him in the preaching and pastoral oversight. At first he personally appointed each class leader, and checked up on his performance. While he continued to appoint and remove class leaders (not to mention interviewing the class members) all his life, as the classes multiplied he had to delegate this authority many times. Both he and his assistants made errors in judgment, and sometimes inadequate leaders were appointed. As early as 1748 there were complaints that "the Leaders are insufficient for the work: They have neither gifts nor graces for such an employment." Wesley admitted the justice of this charge, and replied, "If you know any such, tell it to me, not to others, and I will endeavor to exchange him for a better."⁴¹ With the number of Methodists growing to 100,000 by the end of his life, obviously neither Wesley nor his assistants could remove every poor leader quickly. In addition to this problem of incompetence, Wesley also had to deal with social tensions among the Methodist leaders. After his strong hand was removed these tensions helped to splinter nineteenth-century Methodism, but during his lifetime he was able to control them. Nevertheless, conflicts among the leaders took their toll on the classes. It is difficult to inculcate perfect love in one's class when one is engaged in a power struggle with the other leaders. One such conflict "stumbled the people, weakened the hands of the Preachers, and greatly hindered the [work of God]," It lasted for two years and caused the loss of a hundred class members.⁴² Besides the problems of inadequate leaders, and of social

³⁶ "Minutes," *Works*, 8:304.

³⁷ "On God's Vineyard," *Works*, 7:213.

³⁸ Key, p. 46.

³⁹ Snyder, p. 62, and Frederick a. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), p. 132.

⁴⁰ Since the decline of the class meeting was a gradual process compared to its rise, it is problematic to list various facts and forces as elements in its elimination. One may safely say, "Wesley started the classes for the following reasons" One is, however, on much thinner ice when he declares, "People stopped going to the class meetings for the following reasons" With a phenomenon that occurs because a large group of people make certain choices for unrecorded reasons, the best the historian can do is to show that the factors he isolates as "causes" of that phenomenon are logical causes of the perceived behavior. Only an interview with the people involved could reveal which factor or factors motivated each individual to act as he did. Thus I will not attempt to weigh or compare the factors' relative strengths. I will merely show that they were present, and that each could provide a logical reason for the decline of the class meeting.

⁴¹ "People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:255.

⁴² "Journal, 16 March 1771," *Works* 3:426-429, and Lewis, p. 42.

tensions among the leaders, another problem caused by the rapid growth of Methodism was an increase in the average size of the class. In Wesley's day the class was about a dozen people. In 1816 the classes in one locality averaged eighteen. Surprisingly, between 1886 and 1905 a model class averaged seventy-three members.⁴³

The Settled Pastor

In addition to the problem caused by growth, another factor in the decline of the class meeting was the coming of the settled preacher. This factor was probably more operative in America than in Britain, because on the American frontier the visits of the circuit-riding preacher could be as long as a year apart. During these long absences, the class leader held the society together. Without any sacraments, the class meeting, along with the preaching of the local exhorter (who was usually also a class leader), was the only expression of community life. After settled preachers became common the worship service tended to displace the class meeting. Somehow after the sermon the Sunday afternoon class meeting seemed anti-climatic. Norwood observes:

The high point of the class meeting coincides with the heyday of the circuit rider. Its decline dates from his dismounting. [Previously] the class leader was needed to perform those pastoral functions which are part of a balanced ministry. But when the preacher settled down . . . the class leader . . . became an unnecessary wheel.⁴⁴

This analysis is convincing when seen from an American perspective. But it does not explain the persistence of the class meeting in Britain long after the arrival of the stationed pastor. It may be one factor, but it does not alone explain the phenomenon.

Prosperity

The final historical factor in the decline of the class meeting is the increasing wealth and social status of many Methodists. Wesley's movement originally drew its strength from the lower classes. Its effect was to "cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches."⁴⁵ These riches meant upward mobility for many Methodists, but the society still continued to attract the poor. When the different social classes were mixed together in the class meetings, sometimes trouble resulted. This trouble could be exacerbated when the leaders, who were chosen for their spiritual gifts, rather than their social status, were lower class and the members were middle class. One preacher was given charge over his former employer, and a "stuff maker" once led a class containing a "gentleman."⁴⁶ These mixed groups proved difficult to lead, and one writer reported that "a dislike to class meetings is spreading among the families of our more wealthy people." One of the better sort complained, "Class-leaders now consist mostly of poor, illiterate men; how unseemly for a person of respectability and education to be taught by a humble artisan."⁴⁷

Theological Factors

A New Theory of the Christian Life

Differences in class status may be overcome when there are strong forces binding people together. Such a force existed in early Methodism; it was the unitive force of a common intense experience of God's love and pardon. Wesley created a scandal when he preached that one could, no, ought to experience them, and his hearers created a greater scandal by claiming to do so.⁴⁸ But such an experience was not the goal of the Christian life; it was only the beginning. One is called by God to "go on to perfection." Such a state is achieved

Not in careless indifference, or in indolent inactivity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up the cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God.⁴⁹

Those who are working out their own salvation find a deep kinship with others engaged in the same quest. It can transcend class barriers, and make the company of another pilgrim sweet, no matter what his status. Wesley records such an instance: "I was particularly pleased with a poor Negro. She seemed to be fuller of love than any of the rest.

⁴³ Currie, p. 128. It is not clear whether this increase in size is a cause or an effect. One could argue that when the classes ceased to serve a vital function, they were consolidated to preserve their existence. Figures from the years between 1816 and 1886 could help to tell whether this change is more cause or effect. Most likely it was a "feed-back" situation in which the nominal size increased as the frequency of attendance went down, causing a lessening of intensity, causing another decrease in frequency of attendance, causing another rise in nominal size, and so on.

⁴⁴ Norwood, p. 132.

⁴⁵ "Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," *Works*, 7:290.

⁴⁶ Henry D. Rack, "The Decline of the Class Meeting," *Proceedings of The Wesleyan Historical Society* 39/1, (February 1973):15, n.13.

⁴⁷ Currie, p. 126.

⁴⁸ "People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:276.

⁴⁹ "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as Believed and Taught by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, from the Year 1725, to the Year 1777," *Works*, 11:402.

And not only her voice had an unusual sweetness, but her words were chosen and uttered with a peculiar propriety.⁵⁰ Another instance of the power of Christian experience to cross class lines was the participation of the Countess of Huntington in the Bristol society.⁵¹

Thus when the bonds of Christian experience and the sense of common need are strong enough, they can hold together people of different social classes. That complaints began to surface about the mixed composition of the classes is evidence that these ties of experience and need were loosening. No longer did the world seem so hostile, and the class so necessary. Besides this circumstantial evidence that the intensity of the Methodists' spiritual experience was fading, there is also direct testimony to that fact. In 1871 one writer noted that "such spiritual reunions [as the class meeting] must be dreary and dismal to all who do not feel the necessity of intense personal earnestness in religion."⁵² But such a lack of interest was not just the fault of those who were not earnest in religion. Often those who were zealous were content to rehash old experiences, unmindful that the Christian life ever requires fresh growth. Dr. Eric Baker wrote in 1959: "I can remember as a boy sitting in such a [class] meeting while one after another ...described what God had done for him, usually forty years before. As they appeared to be unaware that he had done anything since, it is not surprising that people soon got tired of that."⁵³ Such complaints were nothing new. Rack reports them from as early as 1865.⁵⁴

These social tensions and sense of boredom in the class meeting stem from a new, non-Wesleyan view of the nature of the Christian life. Perhaps growing out of a misunderstood Calvinism and the exigencies of preaching the Gospel to uneducated English coal miners and American pioneers, came a simplified and debased idea of conversion and growth. The most important part of Christianity was getting saved, and this experience was the greatest gift God gave to people in this life. Once they received it, it was their inalienable possession. No matter how they subsequently acted, bliss was to be theirs for eternity.

It is easy to see how this misunderstanding of the Christian life devalues the importance of the Christian community, and its institution, the class meeting. If the experience of conversion is indeed the most important part of the Christian life, then it makes sense to remember how it happened, and to share the story with others. If it is truly God's greatest gift on earth, then people need not "wrestle, and fight, and pray" seeking to go on from strength to strength, because they already possess all that God plans to give them in life. A Christian group, then, is not a company of seekers, questing after God, but the fellowship of those who have arrived. If this salvation is really a permanent possession, unaffected by one's way of living, what need is there of carefully guarding one's heart, and of allowing others to keep watch over one's soul? Of course Christian fellowship is good, even enjoyable, but one may live without it. How different this view of the Christian life is from that of Wesley! For him conversion was important, but it certainly was not the ultimate gift of God to the living Christian. Rather conversion was only a birth, the beginning of a life-long process. "This is a part of sanctification, not the whole, it is the gate to it, the entrance unto it. When we are born again, then our sanctification, our inward and outward holiness, begins; and thence forth we are gradually to 'grow up unto Him who is the Head.'⁵⁵ After Christians have been born again, they must continue to grow. Wesley urges Christians to remember that:

although we are renewed, cleansed, purified, sanctified, the moment we truly believe in Christ, yet we are not then renewed, cleansed, and purified altogether; but the flesh, the evil nature, still *remains* (though subdued). So much the more let us use all diligence in "fighting the good fight of faith." So much the more earnestly let us "watch and pray" against the enemy within.⁵⁶

In this struggle believers have the assurance of God's omnipotent help, but they must contribute their part. This is the nature of Christian assurance, that "I know God loveth *me*, and has forgiven *my* sins. And sin shall not have dominion over me; for Christ hath set me free." This is an assurance of present pardon, but not of final perseverance.⁵⁷

Given such an understanding of the Christian life it is easy to see why Wesley formed his hearers into classes. If the Christian walk is really so perilous, then it is obvious that those on the road need all the help they can get. If "it is only when we are knit together that we 'have nourishment from Him, and increase with the increase from God,' " then he is a fool who does not make use of this means of grace.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ "Journal, 7 May 1780," *Works*, 4:180.

⁵¹ Snyder, p. 43.

⁵² Currie, p. 127.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-7.

⁵⁴ Rack, p. 13.

⁵⁵ "The New Birth," *Works*, 6:74.

⁵⁶ "Sin in Believers," *Works*, 5:156.

⁵⁷ "Journal, 30 September 1738," *Works*, 1:160.

⁵⁸ Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), on pp. 150-1, cites this Wesley quotation, giving *Works*, 14:333-34 as its source. There must be some mistake in Williams' work because this obviously genuine statement does not appear in the place Williams says it does. I have not been able to find its correct location in Wesley's *Works*.

Transition from Society to Church

The second major theological factor in the decline of the class meeting is the transition of Methodism from a society within Anglicanism to a church in its own right.⁵⁹ Despite many pressures to do so, Wesley steadfastly refused to separate Methodism from the established church.⁶⁰ Far from seeing the Methodists as a separate church, Wesley argued that God had raised them up within the Church of England to be a "witnessing order." He says:

We look upon the *Methodists* in general, not as any particular party (this would exceedingly obstruct the Grand Design for which we conceive God has raised them up) but as living witnesses in and to every party of that Christianity which we preach, which is hereby demonstrated to be the real thing, and visibly held out to all the world.⁶¹

While Wesley does not seem to have used the term, the idea he had of the relationship between Methodism and the church was that of *ecclesiolae* within the *ecclesia*. Because he refused to identify Methodism as a church, he was not forced to develop the new theory of the church which his practice, and some of his writings, suggested.⁶²

Wesley's understanding of the Methodist societies as little churches within the larger Church permitted him to maintain strict discipline in the movement. Because the Methodists were members of a voluntary society organized to help them save their souls by meeting together, those who neglected the special meeting of this society, the class, could properly be excluded from the group. Such an action was not an excommunication. It did not exclude people from the only visible community of the faithful, nor did it cut them off from the sacraments.⁶³

In America from the very beginning of organized Methodism, and in Britain from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the organizations deviated from Wesley's wishes and called themselves churches. Many advantages doubtless resulted, but the result was harmful to the class meeting. Now that Methodism had become a church, discipline, at least the enforcement of class attendance, became much more difficult. In the old days if one neglected the class, he was merely expelled from the society; but now, if the same penalty were to be enforced, the individual would have to be excommunicated, cut off from the community of the faithful and from the sacraments. Such a penalty seemed unduly harsh, especially for those who came regularly to the other meetings of the church.

Related to the idea of discipline is the idea of the nature of the church. Wesley was quick to admit that his rules for the societies were merely human applications of divine rules. When Methodists came to regard themselves as a church, they naturally felt that only expressly scriptural norms should be operative. Their article of religion concerning the sufficiency of the Scripture declared that only what was stated in the Scripture or could be proved thereby was necessary for faith and salvation. Thus some felt that the Church had exceeded its mandate when it insisted on attendance at class meeting as a condition of membership. This necessity to ground all the Church's regulations in the express commands of Scripture may be behind the bishops' insistence that the class meeting was divinely ordained.⁶⁴ Thus as Methodism came to think of itself as a church rather than as a society, it had to define itself more broadly, and to base those definitions in Scripture rather than in human prudence. This transformation from a sodality to a modality necessarily weakened discipline, paradoxically by making the sanctions more serious, and therefore more reluctantly applied.

Liberalism

A final theological factor in the decline of the class is liberalism. In both British and American Methodism during the nineteenth century there were changes in the doctrines of the Bible, hell, original sin, and Christian perfection. These changes moved the Churches away from the Wesleyan positions and toward a more liberal theology. The effect of these changes was to relax the rigor of the standards expected of Methodists, give them greater confidence in their ability to attain these norms, and make them less fearful of any failure to attain even these lowered requirements.

The Bible

Wesley's view of the Bible is that of "pre-critical" Protestantism, that is, "We believe the written word of God to be the only sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice."⁶⁵ He believed that there were no mistakes in the Bible, and that "the language of [God's] messengers, also, is exact in the highest degree: for the words which were given them accurately answered the impression made upon their minds."⁶⁶ In the nineteenth century, however, the Bible came under the twin attacks of the evolutionists and the critical scholars. Such attacks lessened the confidence of Methodists that every word in the Bible revealed God's absolute will. By 1889 the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*

⁵⁹ For the literature on this change see Rack, p. 16, n. 20.

⁶⁰ Note especially his "Ought We to Separate from the Church of England?" in Baker, pp. 326-340, particularly p. 327.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁶² Snyder, pp. 127-129; Rack, p. 17; and "People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:251-52.

⁶³ Rack, p. 17.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ "The Character of a Methodist," *Works*, 8:340.

⁶⁶ "Journal, 24 July 1776," *Works*, 4:82; John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, n.d.), p. 9.

declared: "The attitude of the Christian towards scientific and historical criticism is not necessarily hostile . . . If criticism can assist us to apprehend the human element in the Bible, we welcome it with thankfulness."⁶⁷ If the Bible is the infallible revelation of God, accurate in every word, then it may be used as Wesley did to define a rigorous morality. But if it is merely inspired in a more general sense, obviously inaccurate at least in part, containing human elements mixed with the divine, then its morality becomes both less well-defined and less urgent.⁶⁸ Since the class was the main means of striving for this old-fashioned rigorous morality, the relaxation of the rigor weakened the institution of its enforcement.

Hell

Wesley believed that a literal hell existed as a place of eternal torment, and he was not afraid to threaten lax Methodists with its terrors.⁶⁹ But in theological circles the doctrine was softened in the nineteenth century, and on a popular level the writings of Frank Ballard convinced many that to believe in hell was to accept a picture of God "as a merciless Shylock, exacting the last throb of agony from an innocent and helpless victim."⁷⁰ "If there is no real hell," many Methodists might have thought, "why should I struggle so hard to avoid it?" Currie comments, "The abolition of hell released Methodism from the coercive element in the Methodist ethic, and from the meticulous observances which it had inherited from Wesley."⁷¹ This release further weakened one of the chief guards against hell, the supervision of life exercised in the class meeting.

Original Sin

The longest single work in the Wesley corpus is his treatise on original sin. In it Wesley articulates the classical view of the nature and consequences of sin.⁷² But by the middle of nineteenth century in American Methodism at least, the doctrine had been softened, and a more optimistic view of humanity was presented. Reviewing the work of John Miley, a nineteenth-century American Methodist theologian, Chiles comments: "In his defense of depravity, Miley has retreated to the last outpost. What he defends is only a pale image of the mass of corruption, the body of death, that is central to the orthodox doctrine."⁷³ The effect of this change in the doctrine of sin was to make Methodists more sanguine about their abilities to please God. If by nature they were not guilty, depraved, wretched sinners, then maybe such means as the class meeting were not really necessary to guard against indwelling sin. If the disease were not really that serious, then the cure need not be too harsh.

Christian Perfection

Wesley believed that God had raised up the Methodists to preach this doctrine.⁷⁴ But by the middle of the nineteenth century the doctrine was almost unknown in England and regarded as a special interest in America.⁷⁵ Perfection ceased to be the driving force behind Methodist piety. Rack states:

The Wesleyan standards themselves were lowered both by changing the character of the "holiness" required by making it more social and less narrowly a matter of "religious experience," and by allowing the organ through which the holiness society had operated—the class meeting—to cease to be the central means of church-fellowship or the effective basis of church-membership.⁷⁶

Hence liberalism, by questioning and lowering the standards, lessening the penalties for failure, and raising the chances of success, removed most of the theological impetus for the class meeting. With its reason for being gone, the class meeting could not long endure.

JOHN WESLEY'S THEOLOGY TODAY

With the revival of small groups in the Methodist tradition today, it seems that their life depends on a strict adherence to John Wesley's theology. Without it they will probably go the way of the class meeting. If they do stick close to the theology of the Founder, perhaps such groups could become *ecclesiolae* within the larger Methodist *ecclesia*.

⁶⁷ *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, April, 1889, p. 314, quoted in Currie, p. 114.

⁶⁸ Currie, p. 112.

⁶⁹ "Free Grace," *Works*, 6:383 and "The New Creation," *Works*, 7:290.

⁷⁰ Frank Ballard, *Is Amusement Devilish?* (London: n.p., 1889), p. 8, quoted in Currie, p. 120.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² "The Doctrine of Original Sin According to Scripture, Reason and Experience," *Works*, 9:191-465; Robert Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon, 1965), p. 186.

⁷³ Chiles, p. 134.

⁷⁴ "Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, 15 September 1790," *Works*, 13:9.

⁷⁵ John Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), p. 121.

⁷⁶ Rack, p. 18.