

**“TO STIR THEM UP TO BELIEVE, LOVE, OBEY”—
SOTERIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE CLASS MEETING
IN EARLY METHODISM¹**

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As leader of the Methodist movement over half a century, John Wesley viewed the practice of Christians meeting together in small groups as a vital part of their growth in holiness of heart and life. Wesley’s initial field preaching near Bristol in April of 1739 coincided with his assuming leadership of two religious societies in and around the city, which met together regularly for prayer and holy conversation. After further helping to organize two local bands, Wesley reflects in his *Journal*, “How dare any man deny this to be (as to the substance of it) a means of grace, ordained by God?”² He came to see the intimate interaction fostered by such groups as crucial to the very possibility of sanctification, and his leadership of the Methodist movement in subsequent years was characterized by Societies sub-divided into groupings such as classes, bands, select societies, penitential bands, and trial bands.

This essay examines the sub-grouping that became mandatory for all Methodists—the class meeting—and argues that it functioned as a prudential means of grace in early Methodism, best characterized as a Christian practice that facilitated the sanctification of its members through the nurturing process of social holiness. My account of the class meeting builds off of the prevailing interpretation of it, found in the admirable work of David Lowes Watson, while differing from that interpretation in some important respects. Evidence from both Wesley and early class members suggests that the transforming experience of regular participation in a class meeting calls for a fuller description than mutual accountability, Watson’s favored term, by itself allows. While establishing the foundational historical framework in which to understand the class meeting, Watson’s analysis needs to be expanded to account for the soteriological dimensions referenced in Wesley’s writing and other early testimonies. This essay, then, proceeds with a consideration of the current standard interpretation of the early Methodist class meeting, followed by an analysis, using early Methodist source material, of

¹ The author wishes to express thanks to Professor Richard P. Heitzenrater and Professor Randy L. Maddox, both of Duke Divinity School, whose comments on an earlier version of this essay were invaluable to its revision and preparation for publication.

² John Wesley, *Journal* for April 4, 1739, in W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *Journals and Diaries II (1738-1743)*, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 19:47. All subsequent references to the Bicentennial Edition of Wesley’s *Works* will be cited as *Works*.

the class as the paradigmatic historical expression of John Wesley’s practical theology as framed in the soteriological experience of social holiness.

Historical Development and Contemporary Interpretation

John Wesley first mentions a Society being sub-divided into classes in his *Journal* for February 15, 1742:

Many met together to consult on a proper method for discharging the public debt. And it was at length agreed (1) that every member of the society who was able should contribute a penny a week; (2) that the whole society should be divided into little companies or classes, about twelve in each class; and (3) that one person in each class should receive the contribution of the rest and bring it in to the stewards weekly.³

The entry refers to a visit in Bristol, when a means to pay off the debt for the New Room was being explored. Notably, the class system did not begin as a meeting *per se*, but rather as a debt reduction method that ensured participation by all members of the Society. A pastoral function for the new arrangement became quickly evident, however, due particularly to the leader (i.e., the one collecting contributions) having regular interactive contact with eleven other Society members. The following month Wesley reports instituting the class system in London, and he indicates that he was already realizing the potential benefit of pastoral oversight that the classes could provide.⁴

Wesley later puts the class meeting’s beginnings in narrative context in the 1749 apologetic treatise, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*. There, he indicates that those responsible for collecting the weekly contributions in each class were termed “the Leaders of the Classes” and he describes them elsewhere as “those in whom I could most confide.”⁵ Wesley then details the pastoral function performed by the class leaders by that point in time as they discharged the task of receiving monetary offerings. Their pastoral tasks included keeping tabs on the sick and inquiring about the state of class members’ souls. Moreover, with the obvious advantages in time and convenience that meeting as a group could provide (as opposed to leaders going from house to house), a weekly meeting of all class members soon became the standard mode of operation for the class system. Wesley reports, “And by this means a more full inquiry was made into the behaviour of every person . . . Advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels made up,

³ Wesley, *Journal* for February 15, 1742, in *Works* 19:251.

⁴ See Wesley, *Journal* for March 25, 1742, in *Works* 19:258, where he writes, “I appointed several earnest and sensible men to meet me, to whom I showed the great difficulty I had long found of knowing the people who desired to be under my care. After much discourse, they all agreed there could be no better way to come to a sure, thorough knowledge of each person, than to divide them into classes like those at Bristol, under the inspection of those in whom I could most confide. This was the origin of our classes at London, for which I can never sufficiently praise God; the unspeakable usefulness of this institution having ever since been more and more manifest.”

⁵ Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People called Methodists*, ¶II.3, in *Works* 9:261; Wesley, *Journal* for March 25, 1742, in *Works* 19:258.

misunderstandings removed. And after an hour or two spent in this labour of love, they concluded with prayer and thanksgiving.”⁶ With some enthusiasm, Wesley then notes the benefits of meeting in class for the Methodists:

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 burdens,’ and ‘naturally’ to ‘care for each other.’ As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for each other.⁷

The class, quite accidentally, had become a highly-effective prudential aid to the mission of the Methodist movement, increasing the love and deepening the relationship between the members through the experience of common fellowship. In the *General Rules of the United Societies*, Wesley would describe a Methodist Society as “a company of men ‘having the form, and seeking the power of godliness,’” before going on to explain that the forum in which such power was sought was the class.⁸ It became, quite simply, the organizational apparatus around which Methodism grew. And that effective method of organization for the movement proved, happily, to serve equally well as a facilitator of Christian faith.

Besides the *Plain Account*, another narrative history of the class meeting appears in Wesley’s 1786 essay, *Thoughts upon Methodism*.⁹ Here Wesley indicates that the Bristol Society member who suggested the division into classes was named Captain Foy, though nothing else is known about him.¹⁰ Beyond this historical curiosity, though, the description of the class system in *Thoughts upon Methodism* agrees with but adds little to what is described in the earlier *Journal* entries and *Plain Account*. From the accounts offered by Wesley in these sources, it is the twin features of organization and personal discipline that have been most emphasized in contemporary scholarship on the class meeting. So it is to these features that we must turn first to examine the class meeting’s purpose and significance within the early Methodist movement.

The class meeting’s role as an instrument for both organizing the move-

⁶ Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People called Methodists*, ¶11.6, in *Works* 9:262.

⁷ Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People called Methodists*, ¶11.7, in *Works* 9:262.

⁸ Wesley, *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies*, ¶2, in *Works* 9:69. Hereafter cited as *General Rules*. The mention of the form and power of godliness indirectly refers to 2 Timothy 3:5; the distinction it implies is often cited by Wesley to point to the soteriological reality of inward religion or the “religion of the heart.”

⁹ Wesley, *Thoughts upon Methodism*, in *Works* 9:527-530. Originally published in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1787.

¹⁰ Curiously, Captain Foy is only identified by name in the 1780s, more than four decades after the event in question. For speculation about various men named Foy from eighteenth-century Bristol seafaring and government who could have been the Captain Foy mentioned by Wesley, see H. J. Foster, “Who was Captain Foy?,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 3 (1902), 64-65; W. A. Goss, “Early Methodism in Bristol, with Special Reference to John Wesley’s Visits to the City,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 19 (1934-35), 64-65. Leslie F. Church cites these sources in his own speculation about Captain Foy. See, Church, *The Early Methodist People* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 154.

ment and instilling personal discipline can be understood by comparing it with other sub-structures of the Society. Leslie Church approaches panegyric in his mid-twentieth century work, *The Early Methodist People*, when he describes the class meeting as the most important development in the Methodist movement (and indeed, in Methodism’s contributions to the world!). Church writes, “It was only when the idea of the class-meeting was born, in 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 was the ‘crowning glory’ and it has done more than any other Methodist organization to influence the world.”¹¹ The effusiveness of his praise notwithstanding, Church alludes to an important point: there is a significant distinction between the class meeting and other Society sub-groupings, both in relation to the class meeting’s purpose within the movement and its historical significance for early Methodism as a whole.¹²

Bands, which preceded classes chronologically, were reserved for those who had experienced justification by faith and “wanted some means of closer union” so that they might confess their sin and seek to be healed.¹³ The bands—divided by gender, age, and marital status—were more intense, voluntary groupings of people who were willing to make mutual confession of sin and be questioned by a band leader weekly. Those band members who “fell from the faith” through a reversion to sin were gathered into penitential bands in order to address their backsliding.¹⁴ The select society (or select band) resembled the bands in most respects, with the exception that Wesley indicates its members were often reformed backsliders who apparently were able to progress further in sanctification exactly because they had gained humility from the experience of backsliding.¹⁵ The members of the select society were the most earnest seekers of sanctification, those “who . . . continued in the light of God’s countenance, which the rest of their brethren did not want, and probably could not receive.”¹⁶ They were not segregated like

¹¹ Church, *The Early Methodist People*, 153.

¹² As a supplement to my brief description of the distinctions between various Society sub-groupings, see Thomas R. Albin, “‘Inwardly Persuaded’: Religion of the Heart in Early British Methodism,” in Richard B. Steele, ed., “*Heart Religion*” in *the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2001), 33-66. Albin’s survey offers an historical background to the sub-groupings within early Methodism as well as an analysis of the ways in which each nurtured holiness of heart and life.

¹³ Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People called Methodists*, ¶¶VI.1-8 in *Works* 9:266-268. In addition, William W. Dean offers an analysis of the distinctions between class and band, applying the labels “class discipline” and “band fellowship.” See Dean, *Disciplined Fellowship: The Rise and Decline of Cell Groups in British Methodism* (University of Iowa: Ph.D. dissertation, 1985), 177-181.

¹⁴ Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People called Methodists*, ¶¶VII.1-3, in *Works* 9:268-269.

¹⁵ Wesley’s description of the select society can be found in *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, ¶¶VIII.1-4 in *Works* 9:269-270. Wesley intriguingly describes the select society immediately after the penitential band, directly suggesting that select society members were usually reformed penitents. Dean provides a helpful analysis of the select society within early Methodism in *Disciplined Fellowship*, 184-191.

¹⁶ Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, ¶¶VIII.2 in *Works* 9:269.

band meetings, but they too were voluntary.¹⁷ Wesley indicates that he personally met with the select societies as he traveled from place to place, both “to direct them now to *press after perfection*” by engaging in the means of grace and to take part in their more mature fellowship.¹⁸

The class meeting, on the other hand, was a more heterogeneous grouping than either band or select society. It contained people of mixed gender, age, and marital status. The same class might also contain those who—in Church’s words—were both “beginners and veterans” in the faith. While it was necessary for class members to desire Christ (as expressed by Wesley’s stated requirement for incorporation into a Society—a desire “to flee from the wrath to come”), they might not have experienced justification (i.e., pardon or forgiveness of sin). Unlike the band or the select society, the class meeting also quickly became a requirement for membership in a Methodist Society, which is anticipated in its initial formation in Bristol. Eventually a ticket system, originally developed for the Societies as a whole, was attached to the class meetings. Class tickets had to be periodically renewed after personal examination in connection with adherence to the *General Rules* in order for participants to remain members in good standing of their classes.¹⁹ The mandatory quality of class membership, its weekly gatherings for shared confession, and the periodic examinations of class members, together form the basis of the concept of mutual accountability, a concept that points to the class meeting’s purpose and significance within the early Methodist movement in giving disciplined structure to Methodist organization as a whole as well as disciplined accountability for Methodists’ daily lives.²⁰

The concept of mutual accountability thus understood as the class meeting’s purpose can be inferred in Wesley’s retrospective view of Methodism’s development in the late sermon, “On God’s Vineyard” (1787), where he cites the class as a way of emphasizing God’s providence in raising up the Methodist people:

But how should this multitude of people be kept together? And how should it be known whether they walked worthy of their profession? They were providentially led, when they were thinking on another thing (namely, paying the public debt), to

¹⁷ See Dean, *Disciplined Fellowship*, 187-188, and Albin, “Inwardly Persuaded,” 48-51, where demographic characteristics of the select societies are traced from extant membership lists.

¹⁸ Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, ¶VIII.2, in *Works* 9:270.

¹⁹ For descriptions of Wesley’s use of admission tickets and periodic examinations of classes, see Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 122-123, 138-139, and 176.

²⁰ Charles Edward White emphasizes the role of the class meetings in helping Wesley enforce organizational discipline within the Methodist societies in White, “John Wesley’s Use of Church Discipline,” *Methodist History* 29:2 (January 1991), 112-118. The term “mutual accountability” was coined by David Lowes Watson and is further explored below. As a concept, it should be considered inclusive both of the wider organizational discipline of the Societies and the accountability for disciplined living by the class members themselves, though in Watson’s usage it more often focuses on the latter than the former. For a firsthand account of Wesley’s use of the classes and class leaders as disciplinary structures in a way reflective of mutual accountability, see Wesley, *Journal* for March 9-12, 1747, in *Works* 20:162-163, where Wesley recounts a review of the classes in the Newcastle Society.

divide all the people into little companies, or classes, according to their places of abode, and appoint one person in each class to see all the rest weekly. By this means it was quickly discovered if any of them lived in any known sin. If they did, they were first admonished; and, when judged incorrigible, excluded from the Society.²¹

As in the other sources that narrate the class meeting’s beginning, Wesley here affirms the way in which the class meeting was formed for one purpose and then discovered to serve another even better. He goes on to describe the manner in which the class functioned with an allusion to the *General Rules*. Wesley writes,

Any person determined to save his soul may be united (this is the only condition required) with [the Methodists]. But this desire must be evidenced by three marks: avoiding all known sin, doing good after his power, and attending all the ordinances of God. He is then placed in such a class as is convenient for him, where he spends about an hour in a week. And the next quarter, if nothing is objected to him, he is admitted into the Society. And therein he may continue as long as he continues to meet his brethren and walks according to his profession.²²

The commitment expected of a class member, seen here and in the *Plain Account*, is clearly a commitment to a mutually accountable form of discipleship that brought neighbors face-to-face each week. There they held one another responsible for their personal behavior and social life, particularly as those pertained to the mode of Christian living described in the *General Rules*.

Recent scholarly interpretation of the class meeting’s purpose and significance for early Methodism has yielded a degree of consensus around the concept of mutual accountability, even if there are more narrow disagreements, or at least diverging emphases, within that consensus.²³ Among the historical interpreters of the early class meeting, David Lowes Watson has clearly been the most influential.²⁴ The phrase “mutual accountability” is Watson’s own, and he argues that it—over against the idea of its importance lying either in the powerful religious experiences it provoked or in its role as a facilitator for Methodism’s growth—was the singular purpose of the class meeting in early Methodism. Watson admits that there were other by-prod-

²¹ Wesley, “On God’s Vineyard,” ¶II.3, in *Works* 3:509.

²² Wesley, “On God’s Vineyard,” ¶III.1, in *Works* 3:511-512.

²³ An exception is the relatively novel approach to the class meeting of D. Michael Henderson in *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997). Henderson interprets the Methodist Society and its various sub-groupings through the lens of educational psychology.

²⁴ David Lowes Watson, *The Origins and Significance of the Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Duke University: Ph.D. dissertation, 1978). Watson’s scholarly work extended to the practical development of “Covenant Discipleship,” a contemporary expression of the early Methodist class meeting intended for use by local congregations. Watson held numerous academic and ecclesiastical appointments over his career, including work with the General Board of Discipleship of the UMC in the 1980s that led to Covenant Discipleship becoming a lasting part of the UMC’s small group ministry efforts (see, e.g., <http://www.gbod.org/smallgroup/cd/default.asp>). Watson also later published *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985), a lucid and somewhat popularized distillation of his dissertation.

ucts of the class that stand out in retrospect—fellowship, spiritual experience, evangelistic outreach—but he insists that the class’s true relevance was in the underlying context in which these by-products periodically appeared. This context was “the accountability required of all members for works of obedience and for using the means of grace.”²⁵ He goes on:

The significance of the class meeting is not to be found in its efficacy for Methodism as movement or church, nor yet in its impact on society as instrument or obstacle of reform. It was a prudential means of grace whereby Christians in witness to the world could sustain one another in their distinctive tasks assigned by God at a particular time and place in human history.²⁶

In making this statement, Watson is aware of claims past and present about the efficacy of small group settings for subjective religious experience. He argues, though, that such an “inward” focus was not characteristic of the class meeting during Wesley’s lifetime. Within his argument is a claim about chronology that finds resonance in a wider historiographical concern that has marked modern Wesley Studies—namely, the caution of Wesley scholars around making broad statements regarding “Wesley’s view” on a given subject, due to the length of his life and ministerial activity. For example, Wesley’s view on a subject in 1735 might differ significantly from that of 1785.²⁷ This has led some to differentiate between “early,” “middle,” and

²⁵ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 132. It is here that Watson’s emphasis in mutual accountability is clearly on interpersonal accountability rather than the wider accountability of Methodism’s organizing structure. I see a difference between organizational accountability (holding together all the structures that facilitated early Methodism’s existence) and function as an evangelistic tool (the class meeting’s existence and operation spurring numerical growth), though Watson does not seem as interested in making the same distinction.

²⁶ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 145. Cf. Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), where he writes, “[T]he focus of early Methodism was first and foremost accountability in the Christian life. Yes, the society members enjoyed fellowship and community; and yes, they provided one another with significant spiritual nurture. But their priority was not to seek a religious experience. . . . They were concerned first of all to pursue an obedience to Jesus Christ” (40-41).

²⁷ A classic example of such development is in the comment attributed to Wesley in conversation with Melville Horne, concerning his understanding of the doctrine of assurance. In his old age, Wesley reportedly said, “When, fifty years ago, my brother Charles and I, in the simplicity of our hearts, told the good people of England, that unless they *knew* their sins were forgiven, they were under the wrath and curse of God, I marvel, Melville, they did not stone us! The Methodists, I hope, know better now: we preach assurance as we always did, as a common privilege of the children of God; but we do not enforce it under the pain of damnation, denounced on all who enjoy it not.” This reflection was published first in Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley and The Rise and Progress of Methodism*, 2nd edition (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1820), 1:295. The various early editions of Southey’s *Life* do not have standard pagination, so page references will vary depending on the edition used.

“late” periods in interpreting Wesley’s thought.²⁸ In an analogous way, Watson wants to differentiate between the class meeting’s functioning in periods contemporary with Wesley’s life and those in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. According to Watson, earlier accounts revealed that the class meeting had functioned with an intentional mutual accountability. Later accounts revealed that a pre-occupation with subjective religious experience distorted the class meeting’s function and led to its eventual demise.²⁹ The distinction in time periods is crucial for Watson, in that he believes it was exactly at the point that accountability was replaced by a preoccupation with religious experience that the demise of the class meeting was ensured.

On the one hand, it is difficult to argue with Watson’s strong emphasis on the class meeting’s function as a prudential means of grace for mutual accountability (in both its organizational and individual aspects). As I argue above, all of the aforementioned Wesley sources stress themes of organizational discipline and accountable relationships. The class was a place where “full inquiry was made into the behaviour of every person;” it was the forum where “help was speedily administered” to any who found themselves backsliding. And, of course, the class was the context in which those who were recalcitrant “disorderly walkers” could be found out and expelled from the society. All these aspects of the class meeting support Watson’s emphasis on mutual accountability.

On the other hand, however, there is reason to think Watson’s description needs to be significantly expanded. If the class meeting was a means of grace, then the grace it mediated must have aimed at something beyond just accountability for members’ daily actions and personal discipline. “Means of grace” is theological language and calls for a more theological description, particularly around how both Wesley and the class members understood what they were doing as integral to their salvation. If there is a single char-

²⁸ Albert Outler raises this concern in relation to the need to consider the later Wesley in any consideration of his theology in his introductory essay to Wesley’s sermon corpus in *Works* 1:1-100. See esp. the section on “Theological Method and the Problems of Development,” in *Works* 1:55-66. Outler suggests elsewhere that an appreciation of the “whole Wesley” is a prerequisite for any responsible engagement in “Phase III” Wesley Studies, by which he means putting Wesley and Wesleyan theology in larger ecumenical conversations. See Outler, “A New Future for Wesley Studies: An Agenda for ‘Phase III,’” in M. Douglas Meeks, ed., *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 41, 46-49. Randy Maddox suggests a similar need for care in appraising the “whole Wesley” in Maddox, “Celebrating Wesley—When?,” *Methodist History* 29:2 (January 1991), 63-75. Cf. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 20-21, and Maddox, “‘Celebrating the Whole Wesley’: A Legacy for Contemporary Wesleyans,” *Methodist History* 43:2 (January 2005), 74-89.

²⁹ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 145-148. A recent example of the broad use of class meeting testimonies over a long time period as a way to advocate for the class meeting’s restoration is in James B. and Molly Davis Scott, *Restoring the Wesleyan Class-Meeting* (Dallas: Provident Publishing, 2008). The Scotts cite class meeting testimonies from throughout the nineteenth century that argue for both its value and renewal. Watson, on the other hand, sees testimonies from the period reflected in the Scotts’ collection as describing a practice that had changed considerably from its early Methodist beginnings.

acteristic phrase of Wesley's to describe the present reality of salvation, it is "holiness of heart and life," and those two metaphors—heart and life—correspond to what Wesley calls "inward and outward religion."³⁰ Holiness of heart (or inward religion) is subjective in the sense that it develops in an individual subject. But it is not a matter of religious experience as an end in itself. The (inward) heart and (outward) life are always held together in Wesley's thought, such that a real, metaphysical change in a person's soul through grace will always coincide with a real, physical change in the person's life. To separate the two would mean no longer talking about the means of grace at all, for grace received—as the presence and power of God for salvation—aims at the transformation of all aspects of human life.³¹ Thus, it is not a question of whether mutual accountability for discipleship was a highly important aspect of both the class meeting's internal logic and its function within Methodism. That is surely the case. The question, rather, is whether mutual accountability can be considered sufficiently descriptive without including the class meeting's role in moving its members along the way of salvation. The class meeting was not just a means for facilitating mutual accountability; it was also a communal means of grace whereby men and women came to experience the reality of sanctification and the myriad levels of transformation that it entailed.³² This revised understanding of the class will focus on aspects of the class members' subjective experience in ways Watson would want to avoid, but such a focus becomes necessary when the class is viewed with attention to its theological purpose, as a particular type

³⁰ In the early apologetic treatise, *The Character of a Methodist* (1742), Wesley insists that a Methodist is simply the person who practices real Christianity: "he is a Christian, not in *name* only, but in *heart* and in *life*. He is inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God" (§17, in *Works* 9:41; italics original). Cf. Wesley, "The End of Christ's Coming" (1781), ¶III.6, in *Works* 2:483, where he writes, "O do not take anything less than this for the religion of Jesus Christ. . . . Take no less for his religion than the 'faith that worketh by love' all inward and outward holiness. Be not content with any religion which does not imply the destruction of all the works of the devil, that is, of all sin." This latter quote from the sermon points to a fundamental conviction in Wesley's thought that the outward holiness of one's life can never truly obtain until and unless the inward holiness of the heart is present as well, exactly because the problem of sin is the problem of intention as well as action. The issue of continued membership in a class meeting at the time of examination clearly focused on outward conformity to the *General Rules* (see, e.g., the aforementioned entry in the *Journal* for March 2-19, 1747, in *Works* 20:162-163), but the baseline criterion for class membership is a much different issue than the orientation of the class meeting's purpose for its members and for Methodism as a whole, and the two should not be confused.

³¹ For a characterization of grace in Wesley's understanding as the presence and power of God in human life, see Heitzenrater, "God With Us: Grace and the Spiritual Senses in John Wesley's Theology," in Robert K. Johnston, et al., eds., *Grace Upon Grace: Essays in Honor of Thomas A. Langford* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 87-109.

³² Cf. Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1992), 98-100. Knight follows Watson in his explanation of the class meeting as a means of grace, but he also seems to chafe against the limits of the concept of mutual accountability. For instance, even as he is relying on Watson for the framework of the class meeting's purpose, he cannot help but note that large number of experiences of new birth that occurred in class (99) and he points out the way in which "spiritual progress" was a prominent focus (100).

of communal practice and with a decidedly soteriological intent.

The Practical Theology of Wesleyan Sanctification

A revised assessment of the class meeting’s purpose and significance within early Methodism requires that attention be given to the practical theology operative within it—namely, what was happening soteriologically to those who made up its membership. Watson’s objections against the importance of experience in the class seem to be focused on experience *qua* experience, or what he refers to as “a growing self-preoccupation with religious experience” and an “increasing preoccupation with inward piety . . . to the exclusion of practical good works and the means of grace” in the decades following Wesley’s death.³³ It is possible, however, to understand the experience of time spent in class in a different way. The testimonies of both Wesley and early class members about class meetings indicate that experiences of new birth and progressive sanctification were demonstrably occurring. This is not only a form of obedience to discipleship. It is also a prime example of what Wesley called social holiness. That is, the class meetings were not only a means of grace in terms of the daily mechanics of discipleship; they were also the forum in which lives were inwardly and outwardly transformed—where holiness of heart and life was inculcated—by the Holy Spirit over time.³⁴ The experience of meeting in class was important insofar as the social elements of mutual witness, exhortation, and edification were necessary for the possibility of sanctification. Experience in this sense is qualitatively different from the kind of preoccupied sentimentalism Watson identifies in nineteenth-century class meeting accounts. It is, instead, the substance of an interactive communal practice by a people joined together for the mutual benefit of fruits that are both internal to their common activity and impossible to receive outside of that activity.

Understanding the importance of common experience in this way means that the theology embodied and expressed in the class meeting must be framed as a practical theology. This framing, moreover, can be made with reference to John Wesley as a practical theologian who set about pursuing a theology of practice in his leadership of the Methodist movement. Albert Outler famously contended that John Wesley should be taken seriously as a theologian in the folk theologian mode.³⁵ And more recently, Randy Maddox

³³ Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 145-146.

³⁴ See, e.g., Wesley’s note on John 17:17 in the *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (New York: Carlton & Porter), 263. Wesley interprets Jesus’ prayer, “Sanctify them through the truth: thy word is truth,” by stating, “Consecrate them by the anointing of thy Spirit to their office, and perfect them in holiness, by means of thy word.” The connection between the work of the Holy Spirit and the efficacy of the means of grace is an underdeveloped aspect of Wesleyan theology and could be explored further.

³⁵ Outler’s edited volume devoted to John Wesley in Oxford University Press’ Library of Protestant Thought series may be regarded as a significant event in the late-twentieth century revival in Wesley Studies. His description of Wesley as “folk theologian”—whose reflection and writing were aimed at common people—can be found in the preface to that volume. See Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford UP, 1964), iii-v.

has argued that Wesley is best characterized as a practical theologian, understanding that the practical theology he exhibits is akin to “the early Christian approach to theology *per se* as a practical endeavor.”³⁶ Wesley’s status as a practical theologian in this mode rests on his own understanding of the interconnection between theological reflection and the practice of the Christian faith. Wesley was interested in questions of orthodoxy in doctrine, but he did not separate his reflection on such questions from right practice (*orthopraxy*) or right will (*orthopathy*).³⁷ His theological approach indicates that he sees an essential unity of all theological endeavor; indeed, one might say that such unity is the very substance of holiness of heart and life. Wesley’s Methodism was intended to embody the faithful community that God had called into being through Jesus Christ. His preaching and writing, as well as his organizing and regulating of the Societies and their sub-groupings, were all aspects of theological work undertaken for the soteriological significance they held in the lives of real people and communities.³⁸

Besides looking to Wesley’s theological writing for examples of his practical theological activity, we can also look to the life of the Methodist movement itself for his practical theology at work in ministry. This is the practical theology not only of critical reflection in written form but also of the communal practices undertaken by the Methodist people as they strove after salvation. A “practice,” in the description of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, is

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.³⁹

This particular framing of the concept by MacIntyre does not have to be theological in character, but it has nevertheless had a great deal of recent influence on the understanding of practical theology as a dynamic interplay between reflection and activity within Christian communities. In the process, contemporary theologians have attempted to flesh out a description of Christian practice with reference to the role that God plays in determining

³⁶ Maddox, “John Wesley—Practical Theologian?” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988), 130. See also Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 17-19, where Wesley’s status as a practical theologian is articulated with reference to the “orienting concern” that Maddox calls “responsible grace,” a kind of theological compass that shapes Wesley’s doctrinal understanding and guides his doctrinal commitments.

³⁷ Maddox, “John Wesley—Practical Theologian?,” 134.

³⁸ For a description of Wesley as a practical theologian with reference to the genres of his writing, see Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 140-152. Heitzenrater writes that Wesley was “neither a speculative nor a systematic theologian. Theology was for him the ‘handmaid of piety.’ The challenge was to put his learning into the employ of his vocation, so that the truths of the gospel might be understood and appropriated by the poor as well as the rich, the tin miner as well as the university student” (140).

³⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1981, 1984), 187.

and sustaining the “goods” that are (otherwise) internal to the practice itself. Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass have described Christian practices as “things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.”⁴⁰

In Wesleyan terms, we could say that a Christian practice is an activity in which believers engage, in the context of community and sustained over time, which, as a real means of grace, nurtures the sanctification of those who participate in it. MacIntyre’s “standards of excellence,” then, are the way of life called for by the gospel, minimally expressed in the *General Rules*. The goods internal to such a practice are the goods of sanctification—that reality of life lovingly transformed by God’s grace. Importantly, the common pursuit of the standards of excellence, in MacIntyre’s paradigm, results in a greater realization of goods, none of which can be realized apart from the experience of shared activity. This assertion has a close analogue in Wesley’s practical theology: it is called social holiness.

Wesley’s soteriological commitments were grounded in the importance of sanctification-in-community and moved him to shape the early Methodist movement around certain communal practices as facilitative vehicles for the transforming process of inward and outward holiness.⁴¹ In Wesley’s understanding, “growth in grace” is never an individual endeavor. It is a gift of God through faith that is received and nurtured through the communal means that God has provided. These means are “outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”⁴² Wesley understands the means of grace instituted in the New Testament to be prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord’s Supper,

⁴⁰ Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 18.

⁴¹ For the centrality of sanctification in Wesley’s soteriology, see Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1996), 217-218. Originally published 1946. Wesley’s own view is evident when, near the end of his life, he writes to Robert Brackenbury that the doctrine of full sanctification (i.e., Christian perfection) “is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up” (Wesley, “Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury,” September 15, 1790, in John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* [London: Epworth Press, 1931, 1960], 8:238. Hereafter cited as *Letters [Telford]*).

⁴² Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” ¶III.1, in *Works* 1:381.

fasting, and Christian conference.⁴³ Prudential means of grace, on the other hand, are activities that have been found through experience to encourage holiness, and Wesley often speaks of them in terms of the practices in which the Methodists themselves engaged.⁴⁴ All the means are either communal or are dependent on community support for their sustainability; this is the logic of social holiness, and Wesley was therefore adamant that the inward and outward renewal of individual life that comes through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit was a renewal that happened in community.

The first place where Wesley expounds on his understanding of social holiness is the *Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems* published by both Wesley brothers in 1739. There, he criticizes mystic writers past and present who recommend “an entire seclusion from men, (perhaps for months or years,) in order to purify the soul.”⁴⁵ Wesley emphatically rejects this understanding of sanctification, writing, “Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. ‘Holy solitaries’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”⁴⁶ Contemporary accounts sometimes associate the idea of social holiness with concepts like social justice or social outreach ministries, but here it is clear that Wesley un-

⁴³ Of the various lists of the means of grace in Wesley’s writings, the most helpful is in the *Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others, from the year 1744, to the year 1789* (commonly called the *Large Minutes*), in *The Jackson Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 8:322-324, hereafter cited as *Works* (Jackson). In “The Means of Grace,” Wesley asserts that the “chief means of grace” are prayer, searching the Scriptures, and the Lord’s Supper (§II.1 in *Works* 1:381). He adds fasting and Christian conference to the list of instituted means in the *Large Minutes*. In “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §III.4, in *Works* 3:205-206, Wesley connects participation in the means of grace with the possibility of salvation, exactly because they are the “means of drawing near to God.” For possible reasons why baptism is excluded from Wesley’s lists of the instituted means, see Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 244, and Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 178-191.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Wesley, *Large Minutes*, in *Works* (Jackson) 8:323; Wesley, *General Rules*, in *Works* 9:70-73; Wesley, *Rules of the Band Societies* in *Works* 9:77-79; Wesley, “On Visiting the Sick,” §I, in *Works* 3:385 (where Wesley suggests that most of the works of mercy are essentially prudential means of grace); Wesley, “On Zeal,” §II.5, in *Works* 3:313 (where Wesley implicitly identifies prudential means of grace with works of mercy and instituted means of grace with works of piety). Note also the implication that the specific form taken by practices nurturing social holiness are considered prudential, but the content—Christian conference—is an instituted means of grace.

⁴⁵ John and Charles Wesley, *Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), §§3-4, in *Works* (Jackson) 14:320-321.

⁴⁶ John and Charles Wesley, *Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), §5, in *Works* (Jackson) 14:321.

derstands social holiness in terms of the corporate process of sanctification.⁴⁷ That is, we can be made holy only in the context of the life we live—and the faithful practices in which we engage—with other Christians.⁴⁸

The Class Meeting as Forum for Social Holiness

Turning back to the class meeting, we find the paradigmatic Wesleyan practice where sanctification was made possible for the early Methodists—not only through the mechanics of accountable discipleship, but also through the experience of social holiness in an interactive forum.⁴⁹ The evidence for this understanding comes from both Wesley and class member testimonies contemporaneous with Wesley’s life.⁵⁰ In a letter to Thomas Maxfield dated November 2, 1762, Wesley refers to the classes and bands as “the sinews” of the Methodist Societies, underscoring their role in organizational and personal discipline.⁵¹ A *Journal* entry for August 25, 1763, finds him likewise reflecting on the necessity of organizing Societies and their sub-structures to cultivate the fruits borne from preaching. Wesley writes:

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

⁴⁷ The confusion of Wesley’s concept of social holiness with various forms of social justice efforts or outreach ministries is common throughout the United Methodist Church. For a popular-level article arguing for the recovery of the original Wesleyan concept, see Andrew C. Thompson, “Our Language Matters,” *United Methodist Reporter* 155:16 (August 22, 2008). Accessible online at <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=3975>. The argument sometimes made, that social outreach and/or social justice (in our contemporary sense) are natural outgrowths of Wesley’s understanding of social holiness, amounts to advocating for the continued historically inaccurate use of the term. Simply put, social holiness has a significant meaning in the Wesleyan grammar of sanctification that should not be abandoned (esp. when “social justice” already exists and can be used without recourse to anachronism).

⁴⁸ Wesley’s notion of social holiness is further explained out in the 1748 sermon, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount (IV),” where he argues that Christianity is a necessarily “social religion.” He writes, “When I say [Christianity] is essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with other men” (¶1.1, in *Works* 1:533-534). Other sermons fill out the Wesleyan logic of social holiness, even if they do not use the exact phrase. See, e.g., “The Scripture Way of Salvation” (1765), in *Works* 2:153-169; “In What Sense We Are To Leave The World” (1784), *Works* 3:141-155; “On Friendship with the World” (1786), in *Works* 3:126-140; “The Duty of Reproving Our Neighbour” (1787) in *Works* 2:511-520.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Knight, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life*, 97-98, where Knight asserts that the small group structures where social holiness is made possible are “necessary for the Christian life in all times and places” in Wesley’s understanding, even if the exact form they take will be dependent on historical and social context.

⁵⁰ Here I limit myself to sources contemporaneous with Wesley’s own lifetime in order to observe Watson’s caveat about the evolving nature of the class meeting towards inward piety in the decades following Wesley’s death.

⁵¹ Wesley, “Letter to Thomas Maxfield,” November 2, 1762, in Telford, *Letters*, 4:194.

are now faster asleep than ever.⁵²

Note that “training . . . in the ways of God” is explicitly connected with the soteriological experience of awakening (i.e., the realization of the need for salvation). And the “training” to which Wesley refers is not just a reference to accountability for tasks of discipleship; it is training in the “ways of God,” suggesting both inward and outward transformation.

The role of the class and class leader in facilitating sanctification in this way is further shown in the *Large Minutes*, when Wesley instructs the class leader to “inquire how every soul in his class prospers; not only how each person observes the outward Rules, but how he grows in the knowledge and love of God.”⁵³ The discipline of mutual accountability was key to the class meeting’s *raison d’être*, but to Wesley, no less so was the its function in providing the main context in which social holiness could develop—a reality that is as metaphysical (with respect to the inward renewal of the soul) as it is physical (with respect to the outward change of life).

Testimonies from participants in classes echo and elaborate on Wesley’s view. For example, in a manuscript account dated 1784, a long-time class leader in Ditcheat, Somerset, describes his experience in class by writing, “I think this to be the most useful means (excepting preaching) that we (Methodists) enjoy; it is instructive, it unites us together, it stirs us up to press forward; the enemy’s schemes are brought to light and defeated and our souls in general abundantly comforted and strengthened.”⁵⁴ A clear allusion here to the class meeting’s disciplinary element is coupled with a strong indication that sanctification-as-spiritual-transformation was manifestly occurring. This account is echoed in an anonymous letter from 1790, clearly written by someone with a close experience of the class meeting, as he describes the pastoral role of the class leader. Though he does not neglect to comment on the disciplinary function of the classes, he also adds:

Whilst he has all the Bowels of a Father towards his people, every sentence he utters, eether [sic] in prayer or Counsel, Reproof, or Exhortation, should have a tendency to draw his people to a present Sense of the divine Presence—an immediate Application of Soul to the Father thro’ the Son—& an entire dedication of their all to Him.⁵⁵

⁵² Wesley, *Journal* for August 25, 1763, in *Works* 21:424. Cf. Wesley’s advice to Adam Clarke on the necessity of rigorous discipline in order to bring people to maturity in faith, where he writes, “Discipline is the great want in Guernsey; without which the work of God cannot prosper. . . . It is a true saying, ‘The soul and the body make the man, and the spirit and discipline make a Christian’” (Wesley, “Letter to Adam Clarke,” January 3, 1787, in *Letters (Telford)*, 7:362).

⁵³ Wesley, *Large Minutes*, in *Works (Jackson)* 8:301.

⁵⁴ Manuscript account as quoted in Church, *The Early Methodist People*, 164. I am not aware that the account has been published elsewhere. Church characterizes the class leader’s description of the theology of the class meeting as “progressive spiritual fellowship.” A similar, earlier view by a class leader is reported by Wesley in his *Journal* for February 2, 1747, in *Works* 20:154-155, where he reprints a letter from class leader John Hague. Hague’s letter to Wesley indicates that the class members desire “advice that is plain and cutting, awakening and shaking, and hastening us” (*Works* 20:154), all of which points to aspects of soteriological experience.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Watson, *The Origins and Significance of the Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 407. Watson includes the text of this and other previously unpublished letters as Appendix K (“Some Correspondence on Class Meetings”) in his dissertation, making it somewhat surprising that he does not recognize the significance of its language.

This commentary on the role of the class leader amounts to a fairly profound theological statement about the sanctification experienced by class members—more or less analogous to what Wesley would call the recovery of the image of God, or the renewal of our fallen nature.⁵⁶ And the referent to such terms is a salvific experience that transforms one’s whole life.

Beyond these examples by and about class leaders, a further body of evidence illuminating the soteriological dimensions of the early class meeting can be derived from sources published in the *Arminian Magazine*, founded by Wesley in 1777 to combat his Calvinist opponents.⁵⁷ These sources are valuable, both because they are written by people other than Wesley with direct experience in a class meeting and because Wesley allowed them to be published, implying his tacit agreement with the sentiments they express. Among the numerous references to class meetings and class leaders in the *Arminian Magazine* published before Wesley’s death in 1791, the following instances are particularly revelatory of the operative practical theology of the class meeting.

In 1779, a Methodist preacher named Benjamin Rhodes penned an autobiographical testimony in which he recounts how he was asked to lead several classes after his own awakening. Rhodes reports, “I found those meetings were both solemn and profitable to myself and others. The first quarter several found a sense of forgiveness; and others were greatly stirred up.”⁵⁸ From the exhortations that Rhodes offered as a part of his leadership of the classes, he eventually answered a call to start preaching. It is notable that his recollection of classes he led includes some people being awakened and convinced of their sin, while others were “greatly stirred up.” While this latter phrase is somewhat ambiguous and could refer to either awakenings or experiences of new birth, it certainly has the connotation that intensely spiritual experiences were happening in class.⁵⁹ In a similar account, the preacher John Mason writes of his conversion and subsequent ministry in a testimony published in 1780. Though he experienced a great deal of fear at taking the

⁵⁶ See Wesley, “The Image of God,” in *Works* 4:292-303, and “The One Thing Needful,” in *Works* 4:351-359.

⁵⁷ See Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 268, for a succinct description of the *Arminian Magazine*’s founding by Wesley.

⁵⁸ Benjamin Rhodes, “An Account of Mr. Benjamin Rhodes, Written by Himself,” *Arminian Magazine* 2 (1779), 364.

⁵⁹ Albin evaluates various forms of testimony from early Methodists that show a “tendency to stylize their spiritual journey around definite stages: (a) the workings of prevenient grace resulting in conviction of sin; (b) the experience of justification and new birth resulting in the sense of forgiveness and peace; and (c) the quest for holiness of heart and life, often culminating in the experience of entire sanctification.” See Albin, “An Empirical Study of Early Methodist Spirituality,” in Theodore Runyon, ed., *Wesleyan Theology Today: A Bicentennial Consultation* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 275-290. Albin limits himself to testimonies from men and women from between 1725 and 1790, roughly the period of John Wesley’s public ministry. His statistics include, but are not limited to, reported experiences from class meetings. Beyond Albin’s presentation of the statistical data, also remarkable is the overwhelming evidence that experiential moments along the way of salvation were of high importance to the early Methodists and figure prominently in their testimonies.

step of leading a class, he writes, “But so much the more did the Lord make it a blessing to me. For while I prayed for my brethren, and laboured to help them forward in the way to the kingdom, he gave me great consolation in my own soul.”⁶⁰ Like Rhodes, Mason’s experience seems to include both the personal experience of sanctification and the experience of seeing others move “forward in the way” of their own sanctification.

Perhaps one of the most dramatic accounts of the activities of a class meeting comes from the testimony of Robert Roe, who was blocked from ordination in the Church of England because of his connection with the Methodists and who struggled with a call to preach for his entire life.⁶¹ Roe tells of his experience attending a class when he was struggling with the nascent realization of his own sin:

Amidst all these trials, by the grace of God, I persevered; and one night, in much trembling, I went to the Class. When I heard the people wrestling with God in faith and prayer, I thought them mad, and began to resolve I would come no more: and when a young man, a neighbour, began in the most elevated and heavenly manner to praise God, and declared he now felt his sins forgiven, I was in an agitation not to be described. Either this man is a fool, thought I, or I who never experienced the same, am in the road to destruction.⁶²

Roe’s report is a clear example of people joined together in a community who are progressing along the way of salvation, and the “young man” Roe describes as receiving the gift of justification anticipates the experience of pardon Roe himself would later receive. Like leaders Benjamin Rhodes and John Mason, the young man represented something for which Roe could strive. Roe’s remarkable depiction of the activities of the class is given theological summation in a letter appearing in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1786, where a “Miss A. B.” writes to Wesley, “I see more than ever how our Love-feasts, Classes, and Bands are adapted to increase our union with God and each other.”⁶³ Such testimonies point to a reality experienced in the class that goes beyond maintaining Society discipline and mutual accountability for personal discipleship; it is a peculiarly soteriological reality—sanctification manifested—and it found practical expression in the transformed lives of class members as evidenced in their own words.

In sum, the available evidence of the class meeting’s purpose and significance, from Wesley and others, does not simply offer report after report of class members holding one another accountable for weekly faithful living. It rather consists of firsthand testimonies that the class was a practice

⁶⁰ John Mason, “Some Account of the Life of Mr. John Mason: in a letter to the Rev. Mr. J. Wesley,” *Arminian Magazine* 3 (1780), 653.

⁶¹ Robert Roe, “The Experience of Mr. Robert Roe,” *Arminian Magazine* 7 (1784), 587. The abrupt end of Roe’s autobiographical narration and the subsequent account of his death (on 635-638 of the same volume) make it appear that he missed out on the opportunity to fulfill his calling to preach. He did, however, serve as a class leader.

⁶² Roe, “The Experience of Mr. Robert Roe,” *Arminian Magazine* 6 (1783), 524.

⁶³ “Letter from Miss A. B. to the Rev. J. Wesley,” *Arminian Magazine* 9 (1786), 284. Letter is dated April 16, 1773.

where certain God-given goods were realized in the lives of class members through common aims and in the course of shared activity. They desired salvation, and for them the class became a preparatory forum for justification and a facilitative vehicle for sanctification. In class, the experience of God’s saving grace was manifested. That experience was never intended as an end in itself, though, for as a means of grace, the class was intended to move its members along the way of salvation. Present salvation—holiness of heart and life—means living outwardly in ways expressive of Christian love; but the very possibility of that outward life requires the experience of God’s grace so that one can say truly, “Come, feel with me his blood applied.”⁶⁴ The class meeting’s role in nurturing both inward and outward holiness in human life was the reason it became a fundamental part of early Methodism. We can therefore summarily describe the class as a prudential means of grace, best characterized as a Christian practice that aimed at the sanctification of its members through the nurturing of social holiness.

Conclusion

In 1781, a brief essay by Charles Perronet appeared in the *Arminian Magazine*, outlining the purpose of both classes and bands. In the essay, Perronet writes:

The particular design of the *Classes* is,
 To know who continue Members of the Society;
 To inspect their Outward Walking,
 To enquire into their inward State;
 To learn, what are their Trials? And how they fall by, or conquer them?
 To instruct the ignorant in the first Principles of Religion: if need be, to repeat, explain, or enforce, what has been said in public Preaching.
 To stir them up to believe, love, obey; and to check the first spark of Offence or Discord.⁶⁵

This remarkable description demonstrates the role of the class meeting as a practice, according to the definition offered in this essay, representative of Wesley’s practical theological approach to the sanctification of believers. Note the elements in Perronet’s listing of mutual accountability—both organizationally and personally. But added to the element of accountability

⁶⁴ John Wesley, “Another [Desiring to Love],” *Hymns and Sacred Poems (1742)*, 26-27. Available for download under “John Wesley’s Poetry and Hymn Collections,” at the Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, Duke Divinity School. URL: www.divinity.duke.edu/wesleyan/texts/jw_poetry_hymns.html. This online collection represents the fullest scholarly source for John and Charles Wesley’s poetry and hymns. The particular hymn from which this line is taken is traditionally thought to have been composed by Charles Wesley. Cf. “O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done,” *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 287.

⁶⁵ Charles Perronet, “Of the right Method of meeting Classes and Bands, in the Methodist-Societies,” *Arminian Magazine* 4 (1781), 604. Italics, spelling, etc., are original. In a postscript to the essay, Wesley writes, “I earnestly exhort all Leaders of Classes and Bands, seriously to consider the preceding Observations, and to put them in execution with all the Understanding and Courage that God has given them” (605-606).

are other points that help to fill out the description of the class meeting as a practice that aims toward the sanctification of its members. The inquiry into “outward walking” and “inward state” is made in order to “instruct” and “stir up” the believers so that they will “believe, love, obey.” The class meeting, as a prudential means of grace, helped the early Methodists journey along the way of salvation. That salvation was a thing experienced through inward spiritual transformation, that propelled an outward change of life, and thereby made sustained commitment to faithful living possible. In Wesley’s soteriological understanding, the transformation into holy living requires social contexts intentional about their purpose in furthering the work of grace. Perronet’s listing thus serves as an appropriate conclusion to this account, which has presented the class meeting as the paradigmatic historical expression of John Wesley’s practical theology of social holiness.