

THE DECLINE OF THE CLASS MEETING

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Looking back over the 170 years of existence of Methodism in America 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 followed the American churches and abolished attendance at class meeting as a requirement for membership. This paper will attempt to trace the historical and theological factors which contributed to the decline of this characteristic Methodist institution.³

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

²Moss, 480.

³I 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), 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), 8:259–260. 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*, 8:269–271; "Rules of the Band-Societies," *Works*, 8:272–273; "Directions given

I

One of the factors which contributed to the decline of the class meeting was, paradoxically, the success of Methodism.⁴ As more and more people joined the societies, it became 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 appointed each class leader personally and measured each leader's performance. While he continued to appoint and remove class leaders (not to mention interviewing the class members) all his life, he had to delegate this authority many times as the classes multiplied. He and his assistants made errors in judgment and sometimes appointed inadequate leaders. 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."⁵ 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 the 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 19th 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.⁶

to the Band-Societies," *Works*, 8:273-274; "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), 97-112, and Leslie F. Church, *The Early Methodist People* (London: The Epworth Press, 1948), 149-183.

⁴Since 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.

⁵"People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:255.

⁶Journal, March 16, 1771, *Works*, 3:426-429, and Lewis, 42.

Beside the problems of inadequate leaders and social 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. By 1816 the classes in one locality averaged eighteen. Surprisingly, between 1886 and 1905 a model class averaged seventy-three members.⁷

In addition to the problem caused by growth, another factor in the decline of the class meeting was the arrival of the settled preacher. This 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), were the only expressions 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.⁸

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.

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."⁹ These riches meant upward mobility for many Methodists, but their societies continued to attract the poor. When different social classes were mixed together in the class meetings, trouble sometimes 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

⁷Currie, 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. Robert Currie, *Churches and Churchgoers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128.

⁸Norwood, 132.

⁹"Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity," *Works*, 7:290.

employer, and a "stuff maker" once led a class containing a "gentleman."¹⁰ 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."¹¹

II

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.¹² 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.¹³

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 recorded such an instance: "I was particularly pleased with a poor Negro. She seemed to be fuller of love than any of the rest. And not only her voice had an unusual sweetness, but her words were chosen and uttered with a peculiar propriety."¹⁴ Another instance of the power of Christian experience to cross class lines was the participation of the Countess of Huntington in the Bristol society.¹⁵

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.

¹⁰Henry D. Rack, "The Decline of the Class Meeting," *Proceedings of The Wesleyan Historical Society* 39/1, (February 1973): 15, n. 13.

¹¹Currie, 126.

¹²"People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:276.

¹³"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.

¹⁴Journal, May 7, 1780, *Works*, 4:180.

¹⁵Snyder, 43.

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."¹⁶ 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 always requires fresh growth. 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."¹⁷ Such complaints were nothing new. Rack reports them from as early as 1865.¹⁸

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 devalued 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 salvation is really a permanent possession, unaffected by one's way of living, what need is there of carefully guarding one's heart and 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

¹⁶Currie, 127.

¹⁷Currie, 126-127.

¹⁸Rack, 13.

thence forth we are gradually to 'grow up unto Him who is the Head.'"¹⁹ After Christians have been born again, they must continue to grow. Wesley urged 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.²⁰

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.²¹

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.²²

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.²³ Despite many pressures to do so, Wesley steadfastly refused to separate Methodism from the Established Church.²⁴ 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 said:

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.²⁵

While Wesley did not seem to have used the term, the idea he had of the relationship between Methodism and the church was that of *eccesiolae*

¹⁹"The New Birth," *Works*, 6:74.

²⁰"Sin in Believers," *Works*, 5:156.

²¹Journal, September 30, 1738, *Works*, 1:160.

²²Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 150-151, cites this Wesley quotation, giving *Works*, 14:333-334, 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*.

²³For the literature on this change see Rack, 16, n. 20.

²⁴Note especially his "Ought We to Separate from the Church of England?" in Baker, 326-340, particularly 327.

²⁵Baker, 337.

in ecclesia. Because he refused to identify Methodism as a church, he was not forced to develop that new theory of the church which his practice, and some of his writings, suggested.²⁶ Wesley's understanding of the Methodist societies as little churches within the larger church permitted him to maintain strict discipline in the movement. Since 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.²⁷

In America from the very beginning of organized Methodism, and in Britain from the beginning of the 19th century, some of Wesley's people deviated from his wishes and called themselves churches. Many advantages doubtless resulted, but inevitably the class meeting was harmed. Now that Methodism had become a church, discipline, at least the enforcement of class attendance, became much more difficult. In the early days if one neglected the class, he was merely expelled from the society. 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.²⁸ 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 there for more reluctantly applied.

A final theological factor in the decline of the class is liberalism. In both British and American Methodism during the 19th century there were changes in the doctrines of the Bible, hell, original sin, and Christian per-

²⁶Snyder, 127–129; Rack, 17; and "People Called Methodists," *Works*, 8:251–252.

²⁷Rack, 17.

²⁸Rack, 17.

fection. 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.

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."²⁹ 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."³⁰ In the 19th century, however, the Bible came under the twin attacks of evolutionists and critical scholars. These attacks lessened the confidence of Methodists that every word in the Bible revealed God's absolute will. By 1889 the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 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."³¹ 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.³² 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.

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.³³ But in theological circles the doctrine was softened in the 19th 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."³⁴ "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."³⁵ This release further weakened one of the chief guards against hell, the supervision of life exercised in the class meeting.

²⁹"The Character of a Methodist," *Works*, 8:340.

³⁰Journal, July 24, 1776, *Works*, 4:82; John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, n.d.), 9.

³¹*Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, April, 1889, 314, quoted in Currie, 114.

³²Currie, 112.

³³"Free Grace," *Works*, 6:383 and "The New Creation," *Works*, 7:290.

³⁴Frank Ballard, *Is Amusement Devilish?* (London: n.p., 1889), 8, quoted in Currie, 120.

³⁵Currie, 120.

The longest single work in the Wesley corpus is his treatise on original sin. In it Wesley articulated the classical view of the nature and consequences of sin.³⁶ By the middle of the 19th 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 19th 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."³⁷ 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 was not really that serious, then the cure need not be too harsh.

Wesley believed that God had raised up the Methodists to preach the doctrine of Christian perfection.³⁸ By the middle of the 19th century the doctrine was almost unknown in England and regarded as a special interest in America.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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.

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*.

³⁶"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), 186.

³⁷Chiles, 134.

³⁸"Letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, September 15, 1790," *Works*, 13:9

³⁹John Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 121.

⁴⁰Rack, 18.