

## JOHN WESLEY'S USE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

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When the Methodist movement began to grow in eighteenth-century England, John Wesley faced the problem of dealing with his converts who returned to their old ways. Many Methodists came from the lowest social classes so nothing in their background and environment helped them live "sober, quiet, godly lives." Their back-sliding discouraged others who were trying to follow Christ and gave Methodism's detractors ammunition to use against it. Those who opposed Wesley's gospel preaching argued that the message must be false if not all of its followers could stay true.

The solution to this problem came in a way no one expected. The Methodists contracted a debt to build a preaching house. In an effort to pay off the debt the leaders volunteered to visit every Methodist each week and collect a penny. When they found that it was easier if the people came to the leader, the Methodist class-meeting was born. The people still paid the penny, but the meetings quickly became more pastoral than financial. Through this weekly meeting, the class leaders could keep track of how their people were doing spiritually. Victorious members were encouraged, defeated members were helped, and stubborn members were disciplined. Seeing how effective this practice was convinced Wesley that the work of God could not prosper without church discipline.<sup>1</sup> With church discipline, however, early Methodism prospered, reaching almost a million people before Wesley's death.

John Wesley made church discipline work through four main strategies. First, he taught it. Then he showed his lay leaders how to administer it lovingly. Next he organized his people into small groups where they could look out for each other, and finally, he publicized the benefits of obeying the Lord in this area.

### The Teaching of Church Discipline

John Wesley's practice of church discipline began when he taught about it from the Bible and church history. One of his most preached sermons deals with Matthew 18, the passage in which Jesus gave the steps to take when we discover a brother's sin. Wesley said that the admonition to begin the process of church discipline was not just a suggestion, but "a plain command of God." He said, "No alternative is allowed, no choice

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<sup>1</sup>John Wesley to Adam Clarke, January 3, 1787, in John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1931), 6:362. Hereafter, *Letters*.

of anything else: this is the way; walk thou in it.”<sup>2</sup> In commenting on this passage Wesley asked, “Can anything be plainer? Christ does here as expressly command all Christians, who see a brother do evil, to take this way, not another, and to take these steps in this order, as he does to honour their father and mother.”<sup>3</sup> For Wesley the obligation to reprove the sinful brother was as pressing as the fifth commandment. Later, when teaching 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul told the congregation to cast out the incestuous man, Wesley commented that the congregation had the responsibility to rid itself of the impenitent man because “one sin, or one sinner . . . diffuses guilt and infection through the whole congregation.”<sup>4</sup>

Besides teaching church discipline from the Bible, Wesley also reminded his followers that the early church practiced it. In another oft-preached sermon, he informed his followers: “It was a common saying among the Christians in the primitive Church, ‘The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian;’ implying, that none could be real Christians, without the help of Church discipline.”<sup>5</sup> Wesley thought that where there was no church discipline, there could be no real Christianity. He continued the statement likening the soul and body to the Spirit and church discipline by saying,

But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians; for where is Christian discipline? In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now, wherever doctrine is preached, where there is no discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers.<sup>6</sup>

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

### **The Administration of Church Discipline**

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

<sup>2</sup>“The Cure of Evil-Speaking,” in Edward H. Sugden, ed., *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (London: Epworth, 1951) 2:299-300. Hereafter, *Sermons*.

<sup>3</sup>*Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, 1966), 90.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 599-600.

<sup>5</sup>“On the Inefficacy of Christianity,” in Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 7:285. Hereafter, *Works*.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

did persuading them to come in. Early in his ministry he returned to Bristol to find that things were not going well. He reported,

God humbled us in the evening by the loss of more than thirty of our little company whom I was obliged to exclude, as no longer adorning the gospel of Christ. I believed it best openly to declare both their names and the reasons why they were excluded. We then all cried to God, that this might be for their edification, and not for destruction.<sup>7</sup>

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

After diligent inquiry made, I removed all those from the congregation of the faithful whose behaviour or spirit was not agreeable to the gospel of Christ: openly declaring the objections I had to each, that others might fear, and cry to God for them.<sup>8</sup>

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

I examined the society the following week, leaving out every careless person, and every one who wilfully and obstinately refused to meet his brethren weekly. By this means their number was reduced from nine hundred to about seven hundred and thirty.<sup>9</sup>

His actions were not always so drastic. From Bristol he moved on to Kingswood where it was reported that the society was filled with tale-bearers, evil-speakers, and drunkards. Wesley met with each of the class leaders and discussed the state of each person in the classes. He found that in three months' time only two believers had relapsed into drunkenness and one other had repeated a vicious story.<sup>10</sup>

Near the end of his ministry, Methodism had grown so large that Wesley found it difficult to supervise everything everywhere, but he still tried. Once again Bristol presented him problems. On a visit in 1784 he recorded, "I met the classes; but found no increase in the society. No wonder, for discipline had been quite neglected; and, without this, little good can be done among the Methodists."<sup>11</sup>

### **Love in the Administration of Church Discipline**

Examining the individual members of the Methodist societies gave John Wesley great experience in handling people. He distilled that experience in two sermons, "The Duty of Reproving Our Neighbour" and "The Cure of Evil-Speaking." The latter deals with reproving those within

<sup>7</sup>December 9, 1741, in Nehemiah Curnock, ed., *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1906-16), 2:517. Hereafter, *Journal*.

<sup>8</sup>December 27, 1741, *Journal* 2:518-19.

<sup>9</sup>*Journal*, October 1, 1748, *Journal* 3:380.

<sup>10</sup>October 9, 1748, *Journal* 3:380.

<sup>11</sup>September 20, 1784, *Journal* 7:21.

the church, and thus gives us guidance in the practice of church discipline. The key to success in a case of church discipline, Wesley said, often is the spirit of one who points out the sin.

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

Love can bow down the stubborn neck,  
The stone to flesh convert;  
Soften, and melt, and pierce, and break  
An adamant heart.<sup>12</sup>

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

The loving approach may carry the day; when it does not, the second step is necessary. Sometimes the "mildest and tenderest reproof will have no effect." In these cases one or two others must go with the one who has already gone. The first words in this second meeting should be a declaration of their love for the one who has sinned, and then they should establish the facts. Only then should they add their voices to the first reproof, and attempt to persuade the brother to repent.<sup>13</sup>

If this second attempt fails, it is then necessary to take the matter to church. At this stage, Wesley said, it properly belongs to the office of a minister to rebuke with all authority and, if necessary, to put the person out of the church. Wesley told his hearers that the matter is now out of their hands: "When, therefore you have done this, you have done all which the Word of God, or the law of love, requireth of you: you are not now partaker of his sin: but if he perish, his blood is on his own head."<sup>14</sup>

### **Honesty in the Administration of Church Discipline**

Being mild and tender in the administration of church discipline did not prevent John Wesley from speaking the truth in love. He was too busy in the Lord's service to waste time in idle pleasantries. The weight of the responsibility for souls drove him to ruthless honesty. When his first lieutenant, John Maxfield, threatened to divide the movement, Wesley wrote to him telling him what he liked and disliked about his ministry:

<sup>12</sup>"The Cure of Evil-Speaking," *Sermons* 2:299-300.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 303-4.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 305

Without any preface or ceremony, which is needless between you and me, I will simply and plainly tell you what I dislike in your doctrine, spirit, or outward behaviour. . . . As to your spirit, I like your confidence in God and your zeal for the salvation of souls. But I dislike something which has the appearance of pride, of overvaluing yourselves and undervaluing other, particularly the [other] preachers.<sup>15</sup>

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

Wesley expected all his assistants to speak as plainly to him as he did to them. In addition, they must give every one to whom they speak as much of the truth as he or she can bear: "Tell everyone what you think wrong in him, and that plainly, as soon as may be; else it will fester in your heart. Make all haste to cast the fire out of your bosom."<sup>16</sup> Quickly speaking the truth in love called the sinner to repent and delivered the one who reproves from the possibility of harboring a bad attitude.

### **The Organization of Church Discipline**

John Wesley was able to practice what he preached about church discipline because he organized his followers into small groups. The Methodist society included all the Wesleyans in an area. It was divided into groups, or classes, of twelve. The people met each week to study the Bible, pray, and report on the state of their souls. Each class had a leader who reported to the preacher in charge of the society. Wesley published a list of questions for the class leaders to use at the meetings to help the members examine themselves. He commented that in these groups "advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels made up, [and] misunderstandings removed." Sometimes the examinations revealed carelessness or even open sin. In these cases, Wesley tells us,

Evil men were detected, and reproved. They were borne with a season. If they forsook their sins, we received them gladly; if they obstinately persisted therein, it was openly declared that they were not of us. The rest mourned and prayed for them, and yet rejoiced, that, as far as in us lay, the scandal was rolled away from the society.<sup>17</sup>

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

By organizing his people in small groups and training his leaders in lay ministry Wesley was able to administer church discipline. All the peo-

<sup>15</sup>John Wesley to Thomas Maxfield, November 2, 1762, *Letters* 4:192-3.

<sup>16</sup>"Minutes of Several Conversations," *Works* 8:310.

<sup>17</sup>"A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist," *Works* 8:253.

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

### **The Benefits of Church Discipline**

Although church discipline yielded so many positive results, it never became easy for the Methodists. Throughout his career Wesley had to admonish the other leaders of the Methodist movement to examine the societies and put out all who disobeyed the rules. Writing to Adam Clarke he said, "Be exact in every point of discipline," giving him exactly the same advice he had earlier given to John Mason.<sup>18</sup> To Francis Asbury in America, Wesley wrote requiring "a strict attention to discipline."<sup>19</sup> To Mrs. Savage he noted "[without discipline] the best preaching is of little use."<sup>20</sup> Finally, to William Holmes, who perhaps was fearful of losing his congregation, Wesley sent this order: "Do right and fear nothing. Exclude every person that will not promise to meet [with] his or her class, the steward in particular. I require you to do this. You have no choice. Leave the consequences to God."<sup>21</sup>

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

I cannot allow John Sellars to be any longer a leader; but if he will lead the class, whether I will or no, I require you to put him out of the Society. If twenty of his class will leave the Society too, they must. The first loss is the best. Better forty members should be lost than our discipline lost. They are no Methodists that will bear no restraints. Explain this at large to the Society.<sup>22</sup>

Here he reasoned that the best way to cut the losses when society members were disobedient was to put them out. Even if a large number left with them, it will not hurt the society as much as tolerating sin. If Methodists have to choose between numbers and discipline, Wesley chose to part with

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<sup>18</sup>John Wesley to Adam Clarke, November 9, 1787, *Letters* 8:22, and John Wesley to John Mason, November 3, 1784, *Letters* 7:247.

<sup>19</sup>October 10, 1772, Asbury's *Journal*, quoted in *Letters* 5:341.

<sup>20</sup>John Wesley to Mrs. Savage, September 19, 1771, *Letters* 5:279.

<sup>21</sup>John Wesley to William Holmes, February 18, 1788, *Letters* 8:36-37.

<sup>22</sup>John Wesley to John Valton, January 18, 1782, *Letters* 7:101.

numbers. Along with commending church discipline to his helpers, Wesley was also quick to point out the bad results of neglecting it. He said that at the beginning of Methodism the lack of discipline encouraged laxness and caused people to question whether God was behind the movement:

We quickly perceived there were many ill consequences of suffering these to remain among us. It was dangerous to others; inasmuch as all sin is of an infectious nature. It brought such a scandal on their brethren as exposed them to what was not properly the reproach of Christ. It laid a stumbling-block in the way of others, and caused the truth to be evil spoken of.<sup>23</sup>

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

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 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.<sup>24</sup>

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

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

How would the love of God abound in our own souls, while we thus confirmed our love to our brethren! And what an effect would it have on all that were united together in the name of the Lord Jesus! How would brotherly love continually increase. . . ! . . . By this chiefly would God convince the world, and prepare them also for His kingdom;<sup>25</sup>

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

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<sup>23</sup>"A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," *Works* 8:252.

<sup>24</sup>August 25, 1763, *Journal* 5:26.

<sup>25</sup>"The Cure of Evil-Speaking," *Sermons* 2:307-8.