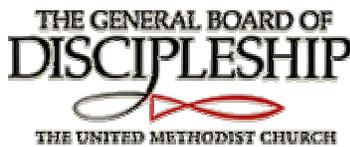


Small Groups & Accountability: The Wesleyan Way of Christian Formation

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INTRODUCTION

There is growing interest in small groups in the church today. Increasing numbers of congregational leaders are discovering the value of small groups for spiritual formation, building Christian community, and involving people in mission and ministry. For example, a simple search on the phrase “small group” at Amazon.com gets 539 books on a wide variety of applications for small groups in churches, synagogues, communities and business. It seems people have re-discovered the value and power of what John Wesley called “conferencing” for building community and forming Christian faith and character.

This paper will explore small groups and their role in the formation of Christian character for both individuals and congregations. Particular attention will be given to accountability as a necessary component of all small groups. We will look at the relationship between the Wesleyan understanding of the Scripture way of salvation and how small groups are a means of Christian formation and maturation.

From my study of John Wesley and the Methodist movement I am convinced they have much to teach The United Methodist church of today. Church leaders are looking for programs and techniques that will help them invite people into a relationship with Jesus Christ, form them as disciples and send them into the world to serve and live the gospel. The tendency, however, is to look for all things “new.” All the while our spiritual ancestors have much to offer, especially with regard to small groups as places of faith formation, learning, and transformation.

Small group ministry is particularly important in this “post-modern” age if the church is to reach youth and young adults. Research tells us that “Gen-X” and Millennial generations are seeking community where they have opportunities to experience genuine faith. They are not satisfied with hearing the stories of God revealed in Jesus Christ. They want to live the story. Churches that minister to post-modern people have developed a discipleship system. The goal of these churches is not to make good members but to make faithful disciples. These churches provide opportunities for people to experience deep, sincere, genuine faith with others. Small groups are integral to these discipleship systems.¹

John Wesley developed such a discipleship system with the people called Methodist in eighteenth century England. The system of societies, classes, bands, and select societies emerged from Wesley’s theology and personal experience. While remaining loyal to the Church, he went beyond its walls to reach the people who rarely attended services or participated in any aspect of its life. He went to the people whose lives were most directly affected by the changing economic and cultural reality of the time. The industrial revolution was transforming Britain from an agrarian to an industrial society. Increasing numbers of people were moving from the land to the town and city to work in factories, mills, and mines. Many left behind family and friends in their search for work and means to support themselves and their families. For many of these folk who lived hard lives in grinding poverty, the Methodist societies and class meetings

became their support network and spiritual home. Wesley and the Methodists brought the good news of Christ and universal grace to the people neglected by the established Church.

Wesley has much to offer the postmodern church. The dawn of the twenty-first century has much in common with the eighteenth century industrial revolution. This is also a time of great social dislocation and rapid change. Wesley's discipleship system, if adapted to the needs of the age, can be just as effective today as it was two hundred years ago. This is true because, while the times have changed, the nature of God and of human beings and the Scripture way of salvation have not. Wesley's system emerged from those realities and eternal truth. This makes it just as applicable today and tomorrow as it was yesterday.

Before we look at small groups and accountability for today, we need to review the theology from which they emerge.

THE SCRIPTURE WAY OF SALVATION

The nature of Christian faith is social. At its heart is a personal relationship with God incarnate in Jesus Christ. Jesus himself began his public ministry by inviting others to accompany him and share in his life (Matthew 4:18-22, 9:9, 10:1-4). In the context of a small group Jesus came to know and be known by his disciples. He taught them, opened the Scriptures with them, worshipped and served with them. Christian faith is lived in relationship with Christ and others whom he gives to accompany us. We come to know and be known by Christ through the relationships he gives to us with others; especially those we would never choose for ourselves.

Wesley preached,

...Christianity is essentially a social religion, and ... to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.

By Christianity I mean that method of worshipping God which is here revealed to man by Jesus Christ. When I say this 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.²

The context of these lines is his Discourse IV on the Sermon on Mount:

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all the house. In the same

way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

(Matthew 5:13-16)

Wesley argues that true Christian faith must be shared with other and with the world. Christians must nurture one another in faith. From the love and nurture received in the community of the church Christians are empowered to share the good news of Christ with the world by the witness of their lives and, when necessary, their words. Regular “conversation” with other Christians was for Wesley an essential component of church life. He knew that women and men were formed as faithful disciples through participation in disciplined Christian community. Genuine faith could not emerge in isolation. It is received, learned, and lived only through “conversation” with others in small groups. Conversation for Wesley meant more than two or more people talking with each other. It encompassed the whole of personal interaction. Christian conversation means loving one another as Christ loves (John 13:34-35; 1 John 2:7-17). When human beings experience the love of God in their lives only then are they capable of truly loving one another and loving the neighbor. Therefore, through Christian conversation the love of God is conveyed and received in the household of Christ and for the world.

Faith is a relationship. It comes through and with others. Faith that is genuine is incarnational. It is shared, learned, questioned, and affirmed with others who have known the source, Jesus. “You are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). Seasoned Christians need to share themselves with those whose faith is young and immature and with those with no faith. They teach and mentor one another. They season new Christians by sharing themselves like salt. Faith is shared and formed when disciples of Jesus give themselves in love to one another.

Because faith is relational, it must be shared. If it is to grow and mature, it cannot be kept as a possession. It is a gift that must be given away. “No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Matthew 5:15). Seasoned Christians and those being seasoned are empowered to share the light of Christ with the world through the witness of their lives. They feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the strangers, visit the sick and imprisoned, and witness to justice and liberty for the oppressed. This is only possible because of their shared life in relationship with Christ.

The Methodist system of small groups served to bring persons to faith, provide the nurture and discipline needed for faith to mature, and empowered people to share their faith in the world. This system was an outward expression of Wesley’s understanding of the Scripture way of Salvation. Wesley believed that God is Creator, Lawgiver, Judge and King. All of those are attributes of God the Father. God is like a loving parent who seeks the ultimate well being and wholeness of his children. This parental God is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Because of the incarnation the primary understanding of God for Wesley is that of Father.

Human beings are by nature rebellious. We convince ourselves that we are self-sufficient and do not need anything from anyone, least of all God, to make our way in the world. Sin defines human nature. The nature of sin is that of two-fold brokenness: a broken relationship with God and broken spirit that distorts relationship with fellow human beings. The image of God within each heart, which is the source of human capacity to live with God and neighbor, is damaged by sin. The life to which we are attracted is a distortion of the life God intends for us. It is self-centered rather than God-centered. It leads to death. Because we are, by nature, morally defective and blind we are not capable on our own to change course and turn toward God.³

God the Father seeks the salvation of the world. God wants to restore the broken relationships. The way God saves and reconciles humankind is to become one of us. God entered into our world and our life of flesh and blood in the Jew from Nazareth, Jesus. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). In Jesus, God’s love for the world was incarnate. The word that best defines the nature of God and God’s relationship with the world is grace. Like a loving father whose children have rebelled against him, God patiently, diligently, painfully seeks to draw them away from their lives that lead to death and turn them toward him and the life he intends for them, the life of grace that leads to shalom. This shalom begins with restoration of relationship with God the Father. It is by God’s universal love that forgiveness, faith, and healing are possible. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of this divine grace. In Christ and his grace God is working to draw the world to restored relationship with God and with one another. “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Grace is prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. This means that grace works in, with, and for each person depending upon the condition of their relationship with God and their neighbors. Prevenient grace is God working in, with and for each life before we are aware of God’s presence and power in the world. It is the grace that draws us to God and brings us to the point of accepting or rejecting the new, restored relationship with God in Christ. Prevenient grace is at work at all times and in all places with, in and for all people to bring them to say “yes” to God’s “Yes!” to the world in Jesus Christ. We see in this grace that God does not impose himself upon us. By this grace God, like a loving Father, gives his children the freedom to say “yes” and to say “no.” When we say “yes” grace leads to repentance and sorrow for our sins. When we say “no” grace continues to accompany us to eventually turn our will toward Christ. Prevenient grace is God’s effort to draw us away from death and towards restored relationship with God.

Grace is justifying. When we say “yes” to God’s “Yes” in Christ crucified we are able to accept God’s acceptance of us. Justifying grace leads us to accept forgiveness of our sins and enables us to become forgiving. It brings about a relational change between God and us. The relationship has broken by sin is restored by grace through Christ crucified and risen. When we accept God’s forgiveness for our sins we begin to become a forgiving person. With this grace comes the gift of faith and the beginning of hope and love. The restored relationship with God is the beginning of faith. It is by this faith that

we experience the love of God. When we are able to experience God's love we are able for the first time to truly love our neighbor as ourselves. Justifying grace brings us into right relationship and holds us with God. By grace we are able to walk with Christ in the world.

Grace is sanctifying. As justifying grace leads to relational changes, sanctifying grace brings about a real change in character. Christ conforms our life to his. Sanctifying grace is God working in, with, and for us to restore our soul, which was broken by sin, to wholeness. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything has become new! All this is from God..." (2 Corinthians 5:17). The beginning of sanctification is the new birth. By grace we are "born again" or "born from above" (John 3:3). This is very similar to the physical birth of a baby. Before birth the child lives in the safety of its mother's womb, suspended in amniotic fluid, receiving nourishment through the umbilical cord. Then comes the dislocation of birth. The child travels down the birth canal and leaves its mother's body. Its umbilical cord is cut and it cries out to the world, filling its lungs with air. The newborn child is welcomed into its new home and family where it grows and learns and develops. The process of sanctification is very similar to the process of human birth and subsequent development.

Sanctification begins when we accept God's acceptance of us and begin our new relationship with God. Justification is the beginning of salvation. Sanctification grows as we live the life of salvation, which is life with God. It is "having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). As we are being sanctified we walk with Christ in the world and learn from him. We gain freedom in Christ through obedience to his teachings to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). Sanctification is the process of growing in grace through which we receive new birth and restoration of the divine image that was damaged by sin.

Through obedience to Christ we participate in our salvation as we grow in grace and love. In other words we as we walk with Christ in the world we "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ..." (Ephesians 4:15b). The goal of this growth and maturation in grace is what Wesley called "Christian perfection." It is maturity in faith, hope and love.

"This it is to be a perfect man (or woman), to be 'sanctified through out;' even 'to have a heart so all-flaming with the love of God,' ... 'as continually to offer up every thought, word, and work, as a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable to God through Christ.' In every thought of our hearts, in every word of our tongues, in every work of our hands, to 'show forth his praise, who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.' O that both we, and all who seek the Lord Jesus in sincerity, may thus be made perfect in one!' ... It is to have 'the mind which was in Christ,' and to 'walk as He walked'; to have all the mind that was in Him, and always to

walk as He walked: in other words, to be inwardly and outwardly devoted to God; all devoted in heart and life.”⁴

Here Wesley is describing a Christian who is “grown up.” He or she has surrendered their life completely to God. They allow the Holy Spirit to govern their every thought, word and deed. All of life in them is lived with and for God and neighbor. This is a Christ centered life. This is the life God desires for all of God’s children because as we are being sanctified our character and relationships are being healed and restored to wholeness and according to the divine will. This is the life we pray for when we say, “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

HOW DO WE LIVE THIS LIFE?

Christ doesn’t call us to live this life alone. He calls us into the community of his household. Christ welcomes and brings us home by grace. Like a family, we do not choose who we live and serve with in this community, Christ does (John 15:16). Christ supplies the grace, faith, and love sufficient for each person to participate fully in the life of his household. It’s up to us to claim the gifts and employ them to serve Christ in the world.

While Christ has saved us by grace through faith, we continue to live in a sinful and broken world. By grace the saved are no longer of the world, but they must live in the world as witnesses to Christ. We continue to struggle with evil, temptation, and distractions from the life to which Christ calls us. That is why we need the community of support in the household of Christ.

Historically, small groups have played a crucial role in the nurture, support and growth of discipleship in the community. Learning and following the teachings of Jesus Christ is not easy. We need the help and support of fellow Christians, who are our brothers and sisters in faith and love. Christ calls us to build one another up through mutual support and accountability (Ephesians 4:2-3, 12, 15-16). “To be together with other Christians in a small group is to open oneself to being formed and transformed in Christ... People who do not meet together do not have a place or place to help one another do the good things of Jesus’ ministry. Righteousness flows directly out of community. It is the fruit of face-to-face human encounters where confession and forgiveness are practiced. Justice is the outward product of groups who practice the law of love within their own group context.”⁵ Left to ourselves we will turn away from Christ and return to the old life that leads to death. But when we accept the support and love of fellow sisters and brothers in Christ, we will be more able to resist the temptations of the world and become more dependable disciples.

Small groups have been part of the Church from its beginning. Jesus started his ministry with a small group. We know them as the Twelve (Mark 1:16-20; 2:13-17; 3:13-18). The early church was composed of small gatherings of believers who met in homes.⁶ Our United Methodist tradition traces its history through the system of small groups developed by John Wesley and the early Methodists.

Wesley was influenced by the Moravians of his time. They were a German pietist sect lead by Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf. He founded an influential Christian community on his estate known as Herrnhut in Moravia. During a visit to Herrnhut in 1738, shortly after his Aldersgate Street experience, Wesley observed how the Moravian society was divided into small groups known as “bands.” These became known as *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, “little churches” within the Church. The purpose of these *ecclesiola* was to provide a place for Christian nurture, teaching, and accountability that was not possible in the larger society or *Ecclesia*.

Upon his return to London Wesley set about to organize the Fetter Lane society in accord with the Moravian model. “The bands were to number no fewer than five persons and no more than ten, with all members of the society to be so divided. Everyone was to speak ‘as freely, plainly and concisely as he [could] the real state of his heart, with his several temptations and deliverances, since the last time of meeting.’ Prospective members were to be formed into trial bands, to be ‘assisted’ for a period of two months before admission, at which point they were admonished to be ‘entirely open,’ using ‘no kind of reserve.’”⁷ Wesley saw this form of organization for Methodist societies to be a recovery of the model found in Scripture and practiced in the early, “primitive,” church. He saw the *ecclesiola in ecclesia* as enabling the society to become the household of Christ.

However, the Moravian band model did not prove to be as successful as Wesley had hoped. In 1742 Wesley and other Methodist leaders discovered a more suitable small group model that became a hallmark of the Methodist movement. The Class Meeting emerged out of the need to retire a debt Wesley had incurred for the building of the first Methodist meeting house, the “New Room” in Bristol. The members of the Methodist societies would contribute a penny a week until the debt was retired. In order to collect the money it was agreed that the societies would be divided into groups of twelve according to neighborhood. These groups were called “classes.” Leaders were assigned to the classes. Each week the leaders were to visit the homes of each member in his or her class to collect a penny. If, for any reason, the member was not able to pay the leader would contribute a penny for them. At the end of the month the leaders met with Wesley to turn in the collected money and to inform him about the state of members in their classes. Because weekly visits to each home eventually became too time consuming, it was agreed that the classes would assemble each week with the respective leaders. In other words, rather than the leaders going to the class members, the class members went to the leaders. Wesley soon realized the pastoral role of these meetings and the Methodist class meeting was born. It soon formed the sinews of the Methodist evangelical revival and movement.⁸

From 1742 to near the end of the nineteenth century every Methodist was required to be part of a class. The Methodists gathered once a week to pray, read and study the Bible, sing hymns, share fellowship, and give an account of their walk with Christ. They were bound together, like family, in their common love for Christ and one another and their desire to live as Christ’s people in the world. Together, they encouraged one

another in the practice of the means of grace, in doing good and sharing their faith that brought thousands of people to Christ and lifted themselves and many others out of poverty and desperation.

Alongside the classes were the bands and select societies that formed a distinctively Methodist and Wesleyan system of Christian formation. While every Methodist was expected to participate in a class, the bands and select societies were voluntary groups. Membership in the classes was determined by where people lived. They were mixed groups of men and women, married and single under the leadership of a mature Christian man or woman selected by Wesley or one of his preachers. Bands were for those who had experienced the assurance of forgiveness of their sins and were ready for a deeper level of sharing and accountability. They were smaller in size and segregated according to gender and marital status. Leadership in the bands was shared. They were characterized by more mutual accountability and support than the classes. Finally, the select societies were for those determined to go onto Christian perfection. “To be specific, it was created for those who were actively pressing after the experience of entire sanctification, to provide more serious mutual support and accountability for their quest. This need for accountability was even greater for those who claimed the experience, since it was open to continuing growth and (experience proved) capable of being lost.”⁹ This system of small groups with progressive levels of support, accountability, and intimacy emerged from Wesley’s theology and his understanding of the way of salvation.

Inherent in this Wesleyan system of Christian formation is the importance of personal relationship with God and with those with whom God gives us to live in the household of Christ. The means of grace were given by God to help build and sustain those relationships. In this sense the Methodist societies functioned much like a family system. People were welcomed and treated as sisters and brothers related to one another through their common relationship with God in Jesus Christ. The means of grace were the practices and rituals all shared in common. They facilitated the flow of grace throughout the societies, classes, bands and select societies.

The Methodists “watched over one another in love,” giving support and encouragement for growth in faith, hope and love. The system of classes, bands and select societies provided a means of progressive catechesis, support and accountability people needed as their faith matured. Wesley believed and taught that salvation was progressive. It was a process of growth and maturation. The system he developed to help people experience “grace upon grace” (John 1:16) and grow in their love for God and neighbor and their obedience to Christ reflects his convictions and experience of human need and the work of grace in the world.

WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY?

The Wesleyan system of Christian formation can teach us about the power and importance small groups and accountability today. If churches today are serious about forming people as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, small groups must be at the center of the congregation’s life. Icenogle writes, “The small group is the *base community* in

which men and women can meet God and one another to be, to plan, and to act for the careful nurturing of relationships with created things. This small group is not only a *being* group for the nurture of persons but an *acting* group for the benefit of creation.”¹⁰ People whose only experience with the church is Sunday morning worship and the occasional Sunday school class will never be formed as disciples. Without the benefit of a small group experience they will not have an opportunity for experiencing relationships of meaning with their sisters and brothers in Christ. Their lives will be unbalanced between *being* or *doing* or nothingness. If the congregation takes Wesley and, more importantly, the Scripture way of salvation seriously, it must develop a system of small groups that provide a means of Christian formation. Such a system will help their people encounter Christ, follow him, and claim the freedom that comes only through obedience with him. Wesley and the Methodists show us that small groups are the most Scripturally sound and effective means of helping people grow along the way of salvation.

Accountability must be part of all small groups. Unfortunately, the word scares people because they regard it as judgement. Nobody wants to be judged and held accountable for his or her shortcomings, perceived or real.

The form of accountability discussed here is simply giving an account of what we have done in our relationship with Christ, with one another, and in the world. “The primary purpose...[is] to support members’ *responsible* participation in the transforming work of God’s *grace*.”¹¹ This accountability is two-fold. It is corporate and personal. As members of a group, we are accountable for the mission and goals of the group and its contribution to building up the church. The nature and scope of accountability depends upon the group type. For example, members of a choir are accountable to the director and one another for being present at rehearsals and being prepared for helping lead the congregations in worship on Sunday morning and other worship services. The Committee on Finance is accountable for assuring that the weekly offering is properly counted and deposited, bills are paid on time, keeping the congregation informed about church finances, and assuring that all funds received by the church are managed in accord with the policies and social principles of the United Methodist Church. In a Bible study group each member is accountable for reading their Bible and being prepared to contribute to the group meeting. The group is accountable for how it is increasing knowledge of the Scriptures and forming persons as disciples of Jesus Christ. Accountability helps groups maintain focus upon their mission and contribute to the building up of the body of Christ.

As disciples we share what we have done to care for our relationship with Christ. This personal accountability is equally as important as the corporate accountability. If all small groups are to be places that contribute to Christian formation, then there needs to be some means of personal responsibility for how we are growing in faith and love of God and our neighbor (holiness of heart and life). The purpose of personal accountability is to help us make sure we do the things we need to do to keep growing in our respective relationships with Christ, with one another, and with the world.

Jesus practiced specific spiritual disciplines that fed his spirit and helped keep him focused on his mission and his relationship with God. He taught his disciples to follow his example of prayer, reading and studying the Scriptures, worship, and service. These disciplines are known as *means of grace*. They are actions that orient us toward God and neighbor. The means of grace are gifts from God that help human beings experience and grow into God's will and way of living in the world.

John Wesley describes *means of grace* to be “outward signs, words, actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to [human beings], preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”¹²

One way to illustrate this is to imagine a sailboat on a lake or the ocean. The sailboat crew works together to set the sails and orient them in a way that catches the wind and moves them toward their destination. The crew practices all the jobs and skills needed to sail the boat. Those with more experience teach and support their newer crewmates. Together, working as a team, they are able to harness the wind's power to propel the boat to their destination.

Grace is like the wind. It is everywhere. It cannot be seen but it can be felt and heard. It is powerful. The means of grace are the skills we learn and practice that enable us to set and orient the sails of our boat so that God's grace moves us forward into God's future, the kingdom of God. As we learn and practice the means of grace we are more able to tap into the power of God for living, witnessing and serving in ways that transform us into the person God created us to become. We also become channels of grace for others and for the world because Christ will be revealed in us and in the way we live.

Accountability is an essential means of grace that helps us make sure we are walking with Christ in our corporate and individual lives. In the life of small groups there needs to be a process of accountability for how we have been doing with the basic means of grace: prayer, Bible reading, worship, and service. Accountability is simply giving an account of what you have done and not done to build up the body of Christ and to care for our relationship with Christ in the world.

A RULE OF LIFE

Our United Methodist heritage gives some fruitful help here. In the Class Meetings the Methodists “watched over one another in love.” Their life together was guided by the *General Rules* given to the United Societies by John Wesley.

The General Rules are simply a Methodist *rule of life*. “A *rule of life* is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness.... It fosters gifts of the Spirit in personal life and human community, helping to form us into the persons God intends us to be.”¹³ The General Rules guided the Methodists in their corporate life together and in their personal growth in faith and love.

This Methodist *rule of life* was general because it allowed for the diverse personalities, needs and spiritual maturity of the members of the class meeting. It was a rule because it was a guide to help the Methodists orient their corporate and individual lives toward Christ and his life in the world. It was like a compass that helps keep a traveler on course to his or her destination. For the Methodists, the destination was holiness of heart and life. They were on a journey together guided by their *rule of life*. Being accountable to and with one another, “watching over one another in love,” helped them make progress along the way.

The General Rules are very simple:

1. Do no harm by avoiding evil of every kind; especially that which is most generally practiced...
2. Do good as often as you can to as many as you can...
3. Practice the means of grace:
 - Private and family prayer
 - Regular worship attendance
 - Bible reading and study
 - The Lord’s Supper
 - Fasting or abstinence¹⁴

This is simple, basic Christianity. The General Rules help persons grow in faith and love by following the teachings of Jesus Christ as he summarized them in Matthew 22:34-40 and John 13:34-35. They provide a model of balanced and varied discipleship. The rules help disciples keep a balance of what Wesley called “works of piety” (loving God) and “works of mercy” (loving your neighbor as yourself).

Works of piety are the instituted means of grace, spiritual disciplines that Jesus practiced himself: prayer, worship, Bible study, and fasting. They are the practices that are needed to nurture our love and personal relationship with God. The means of grace are where we regularly make ourselves available to God and the power of the Holy Spirit. They open our hearts and minds to the movement of grace in our lives and in the world around us.

Works of mercy are those things we do to love our neighbor. They are acts of compassion such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the grieving, visiting the sick and the prisoner (Matthew 25:34-40). And they are acts of justice such as writing letters to elected representatives on issues affecting our community, nation, and the world. The balance provided by the General Rules helps Christians to grow in their relationship with God and to mature in their walk with Christ. In them we have a *rule of life* that gives us what we need to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

HOW ARE WE ACCOUNTABLE?

Accountability in small groups may take many forms depending upon the nature and mission of each group. The group needs to decide how and how often they will practice accountability for their corporate mission and their personal growth in faith and love. Groups may use the General Rules as the guide for shared and personal life. For example, administrative committees (Finance, Trustees, Staff/Pastor Parish Relations, Administrative Council/Board) and program groups (Education, Mission, Evangelism, Membership Care, etc.) may set aside time once a quarter to evaluate their work in light of the General Rules. They may ask themselves how they have contributed to building the body of Christ and served Christ in the world by doing no harm, doing good, and practicing the means of grace together. Such corporate accountability would serve to keep the respective groups mission and work on serving Christ in the world and contributing to the entire congregation's life and mission. The key is to work together to keep Christ at the center of all we do.

The same model of accountability may apply to the "traditional" small groups such as prayer, Bible study, support, nurture, cell, and others. These groups have a more explicit goal of Christian formation for their members. They may adopt the General Rules as the guiding principle for their life together. They too need to decide how and how often they will take time to check themselves against their *rule of life*. Such practice will help keep the group focused on their common mission and assure that Christ is at the center of their common life.

Groups may want to write a covenant based upon the General Rules that states how they will conduct their mission and life together. A written covenant is a useful means for keeping groups focused on their mission and keeping Christ at the center. "While the Holy Spirit may increasingly empower us in our discipleship, the structure of a written covenant provides the form of how we live it out in the world. It is a framework within which we deepen our relationship with Christ while holding fast to the priorities of our obligations to Christ."¹⁵ A written covenant also simplifies accountability. The group simply checks its actions and decisions against its covenant. This helps them see where their strengths and weaknesses are so they can make any needed "course corrections."

If a group chooses to adopt a written covenant, it is important to remember that the covenant is a means to an end, which is keeping Christ at the center of group life and growing in faith and love. Such covenants are agreements of intent. They must not become rigid, restrictive or legalistic. The covenant is the means (a rule of life) to the ends ("having the mind that was in Christ"). It must not become an end in and of itself. If the covenant becomes the ends then it becomes a club that will exclude and drive people away. The purpose of a covenant is to liberate the group so it can be a channel of grace for the world. It is not to become a rod that is held over the group. The covenant is to serve as a teacher or coach that encourages and helps the group grow in holiness of heart and life.

Accountability may take many forms depending upon the nature and mission of the group. What is important is that it is a regular feature of group life. It is the way God helps us make sure we are doing the things we promised to do, whether they be studying the Bible, intercessory prayer, singing in a choir, or serving on a church council or committee. Accountability helps assure that we are contributing to building up Christ's body *and* tending to our personal relationship with him.

We must make clear here that accountability in small groups is the giving of an account of what we have done, or not done. We share only those parts of our discipleship that will be of help to the whole group. It is not to be confessional. We only reveal or share that which is appropriate and will contribute to the building up of the group and our sisters or brothers in Christ. As trust and friendship deepen, the level of sharing and intimacy increases accordingly.

Each group needs to decide how they will practice accountability. Church councils and committees need to incorporate a two-fold plan for accountability. They are accountable as a body to the primary task of the congregation *and* each person is accountable for his or her personal Christian formation. Therefore, these groups may include a regular time in their meeting agenda in which the group reflects upon how their work together has contributed to the church's mission in the world. This may be a time of evaluation at the end of each meeting. The group leader may simply ask the council/committee: "Have we done no harm?" "How have we cared for the needs of our neighbors by doing good in our world?" "Have we included the means of grace as part of our life together?" Such group accountability will help assure that the council or committee has been faithful to the congregation's primary task.

Other small groups (Bible study, prayer, support, fellowship, Choirs, Sunday School classes, etc.) may also include a time of evaluation at the conclusion of each meeting in which they, as a group, ask questions similar to those above. These groups need to be regularly reminded that they are accountable to the congregation and assure that their life together contributes to helping the congregation live out its primary task. Such accountability will help the groups avoid the pitfall of becoming disconnected from the body, insular and exclusive.

Because most small groups have unique purposes and goals, accountability for the personal Christian formation of their members need not take time during regular meetings. Such accountability may take place outside the group meetings in the form of *discipleship partners*. Group members may pair off with partners who agree to be accountable to each other for their personal growth in holiness of heart and life. The rationale behind this is a function of human nature. We are more likely to do things that do not come naturally if we have a partner who promises to do them with us.

For example, some years ago I decided to begin a program of exercise three days a week. The first two or three weeks I was faithful to the plan. I was at the health center working out every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. But after the first month I began to get bored with the program. By the end of the second month I was fortunate to find

myself in the gym once a week. By the end of the third month the gym had become a memory and I was back into my old habits and routines.

After several months of inactivity, I decided to take another approach. I found a friend who was also interested in getting more physically fit. We agreed that we would exercise together. We promised to meet each other at the health club each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at the same time. We each had the same goal of physical fitness and developed a program to help us reach our goal. We didn't follow each other around the gym; we didn't follow identical workout programs. But we helped each other make sure we stuck to our program and helped each other attain our respective goals of physical fitness. Through mutual accountability, we were able to do together what neither of us would do alone.

Having a *discipleship partner* works much the same way. Each person could develop his or her own *rule of life* based upon the General Rules. Then pair off with a person they trust to share their rule with. The partners would pray for each other and help hold each other accountable to faithfulness in their practice. It is best if *discipleship partners* are not spouses or other family members. However, spouses and family members should know enough about their rule to support and encourage them in their practice and growth in holiness of heart and life. *Discipleship partners* could set regular times to meet, either in person or by telephone, to check in with each other, to “watch over one another in love.”

“The Christian life is dangerous terrain to travel alone. We get easily discouraged when our disciplines become boring or difficult. We become distraught when they do not produce the results we expect. We are subject to confusion in our practices in part because we are just learning them, and in part because of our own distorted perceptions and personal limitations. Any spiritual discipline can be manipulated for our own ends rather than offered as a means of God's transforming grace in us.”¹⁶ Mutual support and accountability in small groups or with a *discipleship partner* helps us avoid these pitfalls.

Such accountability is like taking a weekly compass heading that assures that our discipleship is on course, that we are indeed following Christ. It is not where our discipleship happens; it is where we make sure it happens. Mutual accountability prevents our human inclination toward following the teachings of Jesus that we like and that come naturally to us. A weekly checking in with fellow disciples helps assure that we will at least think about doing things (daily Bible reading and prayer, listening when we'd rather argue, or volunteering to serve supper at the local shelter) do not come naturally to us. Some of Jesus' teachings are attractive and, depending upon your personality, easy to do. While others are challenging and hard. That is why we need others in a small group with whom we can be mutually accountable for following all of Jesus' teachings (summarized in Matthew 22:34-40). We need to be reminded, from time to time, that Jesus tells us to “... love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, and with *all* your mind...and ...love your neighbor as yourself.” Notice Jesus did not say to love God with *some* of your heart, or the part of your soul that you feel like giving this week, or the bit of your mind you have to spare today. Jesus is very clear that

the call to discipleship is to give *all* of ourselves to the love and neighbor. This is not easy. That is why we need others to help us along the way. It is the practice of mutual support and accountability in small groups that we can “grow up into ... Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

CONCLUSION

The Scripture way of salvation is a process of growth, development, and maturation in faith, hope and love. It is a way of living that draws us closer to Christ and conforms our lives to Christ’s life. A helpful way of visualizing this life comes from a Sixth Century monk, Dorotheos of Gaza:

Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. ... Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center: the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings. ... Let us assume for the sake of analogy that to move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.¹⁷

Discipleship is how we move from the circumference of the circle closer and closer to the center. In the process we grow in love and are drawn closer and closer to our neighbor and to God. Living the General Rules within relationships of mutual accountability and support in small groups empowers and equips women, men, youth and children to grow up and grow toward the One who is creating, redeeming, and sustaining them in love.

Small group ministry must be at the heart of congregations that want to take the Scripture way of salvation seriously. In order to provide opportunities for adults, youth and children to grow in holiness of heart and life there needs to be a system of small groups available. The system should be organized in steps according to levels of Christian maturity. Such a network of small groups needs to reflect a progression of groups developed by Wesley in the early Methodist societies. The goal of such a system is Christian formation, not member formation. Churches that are effective and growing today are those that focus on helping people live as disciples of Jesus Christ. They are not interested in turning visitors into good members to serve on committees and councils. Rather, their goal is to get every member into appropriate small groups that will help them encounter Christ, and grow in faith, hope and love. Regardless of size, location, or ethnicity, small groups are the most effective means of inviting people into a relationship with Jesus Christ, forming them as faithful disciples and sending them into the world to share their faith and to serve.

Wesley was concerned that the Methodists would become societies having the form of godliness without the power. For him the power of religion was the movement of grace that transforms and heals human hearts and relationships from self-centered

existence to Christ-centered abundant, eternal life. He understood that Christian faith is incarnational. Genuine, life-giving faith is a relationship with the God who has come, is coming and will come again in Jesus Christ. When people gather in the name of Jesus transforming power is released into the world. Lives are set free from slavery to addictions, violence, abuse, self-centeredness, hopelessness and despair. He understood through his study of the Bible, the writings of the early church, and personal experience that divine grace flows from God through faithful disciples who regularly gather in the name of Jesus to pray, study, support, and “watch over one another in love.” He also understood that grace is blocked when Christians neglect these means that God has given them.

It is fair to say that most churches want to have the form *and* the power of godliness. Most have the form, which is all the outward and visible symbols, actions, and organizational structures that go with being a church. The power comes from the Holy Spirit that moves through the hearts, minds, and souls of the people in the church when they gather in Jesus’ name to pray, praise, proclaim, give, serve and watch over one another in love. Churches that have the power are engaged in mission and ministry that is centered on Christ and witnessing to Christ in the world. Wesley teaches the church today, just as he taught the Methodist societies in eighteenth century England, that organizing around small groups for Christian formation will go a long way to assure that the power of grace will flow through the church into the world.

'Prayer for Persons Joined in Fellowship' (Parts I & IV)

Part I

Try us, O God, and search the ground
Of every sinful heart!
Whate'er of sin in us is found,
O bid it all depart!

When to the right or left we stray,
Leave us not comfortless,
But guide our feet into the way
Of everlasting peace.

Help us to help each other, Lord,
Each other's cross to bear;
Let each his friendly aid afford,
And feel his brother's care.

Help us to build each other up,
Our little stock improve;
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,
And perfect us in love.

Up into thee, our living Head,
Let us in all things grow,
Till thou hast made us free indeed,
And spotless here below.

Then, when the mighty work is wrought,
Receive thy ready bride;
Give us in heaven a happy lot
With all the sanctified.

Part IV

Jesus, united by thy grace,
And each to each endeared,
With confidence we seek thy face,
And know our prayer is heard.

Still let us own our common Lord,
And bear thine easy yoke,
A band of love, a threefold cord
Which never can be broke.

Make us into one Spirit drink,
Baptize into thy name,
And let us always kindly think,
And sweetly speak the same.

Touched by the loadstone of thy love,
Let all our hearts agree,
And ever towards each other move,
And ever move towards thee.

To thee inseparably joined,
Let all our spirits cleave;
O may we all the loving mind
That was in thee receive!

This is the bond of perfectness,
Thy spotless charity;
O let us (still we pray) possess
The mind that was in thee!

Grant this, and then from all below
Insensibly remove;
Our souls their change shall scarcely know,
Made perfect first in love!

With ease our souls through death shall glide
Into their paradise,
And thence on wings of angels ride
Triumphant through the skies.

Yet when the fullest joy is given,
The same delight we prove,
In earth, in paradise, in heaven
Our all in all is love.¹⁸

Charles Wesley

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ENDNOTES

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- ² Albert Outler, ed., *Sermons I*, vol. 1, *The Works of John Wesley*, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Fourth" (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 533:26-534:1.
- ³ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 81-83.
- ⁴ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1952), 30.
- ⁵ Gareth Weldon Icenogle, *Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry: An Integrational Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 281.
- ⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 75-77.
- ⁷ David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1987), 81.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 93-94.
- ⁹ Maddox, 213.
- ¹⁰ Icenogle, 23.
- ¹¹ Maddox, 212
- ¹² John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," ed. Thomas Jackson (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House Publishers, 1995), 5:187.
- ¹³ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 138.
- ¹⁴ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1996), 69-72
- ¹⁵ Gayle Turner Watson, *Guide For Covenant Discipleship Groups* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 42.
- ¹⁶ Thompson, 144.
- ¹⁷ Roberta C. Bondi. *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 25.
- ¹⁸ John Wesley, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of The People Called Methodists*, vol. 7, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 676-678 (#489 & 490).