The Form and Power of Godliness:

Wesleyan Communal Discipline as Voluntary Suffering

Kevin M. Watson

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Methodists are, according to John Wesley's *Advice to the People called Methodists,* people who "unite together to encourage and help each other in … working out [their] salvation, and for that end watch over one another in love."[1] The Wesleyan revival, from the beginning, was tied to small group accountability, as John Wesley instituted a discipline that enabled Methodists to "watch over one another in love" so that they grew in their love of God and neighbor. A key part of this discipline was the structure of societies, classes, and bands that helped guide converts from a profession of faith in Christ into a life of committed discipleship. Yet, over time, the Methodist heritage has distanced itself from Wesley's structure. Today, the United Methodist Church has almost entirely abandoned the original Methodist structure for making disciples of Jesus Christ. As a result, while in the United Methodist Church a doctrine has been preserved that is recognizably Wesleyan, the structure Wesley intended to make this doctrine come to life in individual souls has been neglected.

Therefore, this paper will argue that the contemporary abandonment of Wesleyan discipline undermines the vitality of the UMC, because being truly Methodist means being Wesleyan. The argument will further be made that an authentic Wesleyan identity includes both the doctrines and discipline that John Wesley bequeathed to his followers. It will also be argued that Wesley never intended for the doctrine of the movement to be separated from the structure that he designed to make the doctrine come to life in individual souls. For Wesley, beliefs were always connected to actions. As a result, if the UMC is to reclaim its Wesleyan heritage, it will need to recommit itself to a discipline that involves small group accountability as a primary means of making disciples of Jesus Christ. In our increasingly consumer-driven culture, where people often value comfort above all else and struggle with even the simplest form of discipline,

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[1] Rupert E. Davies, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 9. *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 125.

Wesleyan pastors, theologians, and teachers must be able to make a compelling case for the role of self-denial and voluntary suffering in the Christian life if the practice of accountability is to be resurrected in the UMC.

Wesleyan Discipline: The Importance of Accountability for Growth in Holiness

The basic structure that John Wesley organized consisted of societies, classes, and bands. Wesley instituted this structure because he "was convinced that only through an accountable fellowship could Christian discipleship be nurtured and made effective."[2] Randy Maddox argues further that because of "the subtleness and deceitfulness of sin, Wesley was convinced that every Christian needed spiritual direction to provide accountability for their growth in holiness."[3] Thus, one of Wesley's major contributions to Methodism was a discipline "which could guarantee their continued spiritual health if it were maintained."[4] Without this discipline, "the early Methodists could not for long have maintained their witness… They watched over one another in love, not so much to deepen their spiritual experience… but rather to hold fast to the task at hand."[5]

Predictably, Wesley's description of the different parts of the Methodist structure consistently focused on the importance of communal support in the Christian life in order to "work out your salvation."[6] In "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies" Wesley discussed the origin of the United Society which was, "a company of men 'having the form, and seeking the power of godliness', united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out

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[2] David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1985) 67.
[3] Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994) 212.
[4] Ibid., 211.
[5] Watson, 143-144.
[6] Phil. 2:12.

their salvation."[7] The only condition for admission into a society was, "'a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.'"[8] While it was initially very easy to be admitted into a society, it was more difficult to remain in one. Those who "continue to evidence their desire of salvation" were expected to follow the general rules of "doing no harm," "doing good," and "attending upon all the ordinances of God."[9]

The class meeting originally came into existence as a means of paying off debts related to building the first New Room in Bristol in 1739. Wesley wrote, "'This is the thing, the very thing we have wanted so long.' I called together all the *Leaders* of the *Classes*… and desired that each would make a particular inquiry into the behaviour of those whom he saw weekly." Wesley saw that one of the important results of these class meetings was that Christians "began to 'bear one another's burdens', and 'naturally' to 'care for each other'".[10] Wesley's enthusiasm for these new classes was due to his observation that when Christians united together, they also tended to grow in their faith.

The final piece of the Methodist structure was the band meeting. According to the "Rules of the Band Societies," "The design of our meeting is to obey that command of God, 'Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed.'"[11] The Wesleyan band meeting involved the deepest level of commitment to Christian faith and to growing in that faith. For instance, before someone was even admitted into a band group they were required to testify to a sense of forgiveness and peace with Jesus Christ and to express a willingness to be completely open and truthful with the other band members.

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[7] Davies, *Methodist Societies,* 9:69.
[8] Ibid. 9:70.
[9] Ibid. 9:70-73.
[10] Ibid., 9:262.
[11] Ibid., 9:77.

The society, class, and band structure was valued by Wesley because it encouraged growth in the Christian life and it enabled Christians to participate in their own salvation. Wesley's belief in small group accountability was strong enough that in 1763, 25 years into the revival, he wrote in his journal on August 25th:

> 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.[12]

The society, class, and band structure was one of the major ways that the Methodist movement was distinct from similar revivals of the time. For example, one of Wesley's chief rivals and friends, George Whitefield, famously lamented that he had ignored the need for a structure to undergird the movement he led, "My Brother Wesley acted wisely – the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand."[13] In other words, the uncommon results that Wesley found in Pembrokeshire were the results that Whitefield found more typically wherever he had preached.

In 1763, Wesley apparently considered the "connexion" to be the glue that held both the revival and individual souls together as the Methodists sought to "spread Scriptural holiness over the land."[14] Wesley's experience further taught him that Christians most effectively participate in their own salvation when they are united together "watching over one another in love." Therefore, a key insight of the revival was that Methodist doctrine would not come to life in

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[12] W. Reginald Ward, and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 21. *Journals and Diaries IV* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 424.
[13] qtd. in D. Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley's Class Meeting* (Nappanee: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 30.
[14] Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002, reprint edition), 8:299.

individual souls without the structure that enabled Methodists to hold each other accountable for growing in grace.

One of the main purposes of the society, class, and band structure was to enable Methodists to grow in grace. This structure had the "goal of holiness in constant focus."[15] The societies "proclaimed and explained the doctrine, the class meeting… implement[ed] the behavioral quest for holy lifestyle, and the bands facilitated the cultivation of inner purity and the purging of the attitudes."[16] The movement itself was even "derisively called 'Methodism,' because even his [Wesley's] detractors recognized that the heart of the movement was a method – a powerful and effective educational method."[17] This method taught that there should be an intimate connection between the Methodist belief in holiness and the actions of Methodists.

During Wesley's lifetime, a key emphasis was that "doctrine and discipline were inseparably bound up with each other in the practices of holiness."[18] To early Methodists, the word discipline "expressed the inherent quality of their common life, namely, their sense of mutual accountability."[19] This accountability was "practiced first and foremost in the societies of Methodists through their structure of class meetings and bands."[20] As such, the goal of our spiritual forebears was "to enter more fully into a life of love," which "could not be achieved alone… but only in a community of mutual support and accountability."[21] The basic goal of Methodism was holiness of heart and life, or entering "more fully into a life of love," which Wesley understood to mean loving both God and neighbor fully. Wesley saw the Methodist discipline as the means to achieving this goal.

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[15] Henderson, 115.
[16] Ibid., 115.
[17] Ibid., 11.
[18] Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 47.
[19] Ibid., 48.
[20] Ibid., 48.
[21] Ibid., 49-50.

Wesley's discipline, then, sought to ensure that Methodists did not elevate either faith or works to the exclusion of the other. Wesley realized that our beliefs impact what we are likely to do and our actions reveal much about what we actually believe. In other words, for Wesley, "theology and practice *really were* one."[22] The Methodist discipline, then, was the surest method through which Wesley could ensure that Methodist beliefs would come to life in individual souls.

Wesleyan Doctrine: The Importance of Entire Sanctification for Growth in Holiness

Wesley's understanding of sanctification was the primary doctrine which connected beliefs to actions. And Wesley felt that entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, was a particular doctrinal distinctive of Methodism. Towards the end of his life, Wesley described the doctrine of entire sanctification as "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up."[23] Entire sanctification, for Wesley, meant obeying Christ's commandment to love God and neighbor.[24] The belief that Christians, empowered by God's grace, could actually love God and neighbor fully was an "essential" belief of early Methodism. This doctrinal emphasis, some scholars have argued, is the key to Wesley's spirituality.[25] For Wesley, to deny Christ's power to make his people perfect in love, in this life, was ultimately to undercut the "power of godliness."

Randy Maddox summarizes what is at stake in Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection:

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[22] Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996) 5.
[23] Jackson, 13: 9
[24] See Matt. 22:37-40.
[25] Frank Whaling, *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Writing and Hymns* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981) 47.

> [Wesley] believed that both Scripture and Christian tradition attested that God's loving grace can transform our lives to the point where our own love for God and others becomes a 'natural' response… To deny this possibility would be to deny the sufficiency of God's empowering grace – to make the power of sin greater than that of grace.[26]

In *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, Wesley reminds his followers that Christ's grace is sufficient for them. In fact, they should expect to be made perfect in love in this life. Wesley writes, "expect it *by faith*, expect it *as you are*, and expect it *now*!"[27]

Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification illustrates how intimately connected theology and praxis are in Wesley's theology and method. For Wesley, "The critical question for Christian discipleship… was how to permit God's grace to foster a maturity of constant obedience, so that sanctifying grace might work with an unimpeded love."[28] Wesley believed that the most effective way to accomplish these goals was to create "a weekly meeting of like-minded persons who would exercise a mutual accountability for their discipleship."[29] Wesley's goal was to convince his audience to believe in Jesus Christ and to participate in Christ's gracious transformation of their lives. As he wrote in *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, "'Ye *are* saved.' It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing, a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of."[30] Salvation is not given by God simply in order that Christians will go to heaven when they die. Rather, salvation is something that when it is experienced, changes the way life is viewed and lived. Wesley "was vitally concerned with 'practical divinity,' which saw doctrine as important because it points us to God and teaches us how to live as faithful disciples."[31] So, while Christian faith has eternal consequences, it also has

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[26] Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 188.
[27] Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John* Wesley, Vols. 1-4. *The Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 2:169.
[28] Watson, 64.
[29] Ibid., 64.
[30] Outler, *Sermons*, 2:156.
[31] Henry H. Knight III., *Eight Life-Enriching Practices of United Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 86.

immediate implications for the present. Thus, a major concern of both Methodist doctrine and discipline was enabling Methodists to grow in holiness.

Wesley's commitment to Christian perfection illustrates why the Methodist structure was crucial to the movement's success. The goal of "holiness of heart and life," brought the expectation that disciples would completely surrender their lives to the lordship of Jesus Christ. For Methodists, then, the gospel was relevant to every part of life. Yet, Wesley discovered in his ministry that those who responded to the gospel but were left on their own to live out the Way of Salvation often fell away from the grace given to them. The best way to ensure that those who had experienced the new birth would continue to grow in their faith was to plug them into the Methodist structure.

This structure, as a result, was designed to help Christians make progress along the Way of Salvation, moving towards the goal or *telos* of being made prefect in love. If the doctrine of the movement was "salvation by faith, preceded by repentance, and followed by holiness,"[32] the method of enabling Christians to grow in holiness was small group accountability. The Methodist structure, then, deliberately complements Wesley's understanding of the Way of Salvation. The society meeting provided an experience of awakening where sinners became aware of God's prevenient grace working in their lives, the class meeting helped people come to faith in Jesus Christ and receive the forgiveness of their sins, and the band meeting was intended to help those who had already experienced the new birth to grow in holiness through God's sanctifying grace.[33] Wesleyan doctrine and discipline were designed to work together to enable Methodists to continue moving forward in their faith.

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[32] Davies, *Methodist Societies,* 9:528.
[33] Steve Harper outlines the relationship between the Methodist structure and prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace in *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1995) 131.

The Danger of Comfortable Living: A Lesson from the Revival

Wesley believed that it was crucial to maintain both the basic doctrine and discipline of Methodism in order to ensure that Methodists grew in holiness. In *Thoughts upon Methodism*, Wesley summarized the basic doctrine and discipline of Methodism and he predicted that as long as they were maintained, the movement would continue to thrive. However, Wesley warned: "if even the circumstantial parts are despised, the essential will soon be lost. And if ever the essential parts should evaporate, what remains will be dung and dross."[34] In 1786 Wesley took inventory of the state of Methodism, observing that "wherever riches have increased … the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion."[35]

The danger of wealth and affluence caused Wesley to worry that the revival would not last. He wrote: "I do not see how it is possible… for any revival of true religion to continue long."[36] Similarly, in his sermon, *Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity*, Wesley asked, "Does it not seem (and yet this cannot be!) that Christianity, true scriptural Christianity, has a tendency in process of time to undermine and destroy itself?"[37] Wesley feared that "wherever true Christianity spreads it must cause diligence and frugality, which… must beget riches. And riches naturally beget pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive of Christianity."[38]

As a result, it is not surprising that near the end of his life, as Wesley wondered what the future would hold for the Methodist movement, one of his biggest fears was that Methodists would become "rich." He feared that riches would divide Methodist loyalties so that those who became rich and had been entirely dedicated to the pursuit of holiness of heart and life now

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[34] Davies, *Methodist Societies*, 9:529.
[35] Ibid., 9:529.
[36] Ibid., 9:529.
[37] Outler, *Sermons,* 4:95.
[38] Ibid., 4:95-96.

pursued riches more actively than holiness. If the society, class, and band structure was the method that encouraged growth in holiness, Wesley feared that riches would be the yeast that spread throughout the revival, causing it to unravel.

The cure for the temptation of riches was self-denial. Wesley asked, "Why is self-denial in general so little practiced at present among the Methodists?" Even from the perspective of 1790, Wesley feared that self-denial was falling out of favor and was undermining his best efforts to "spread scriptural holiness." Wesley found that "Methodists grow more and more self-indulgent, because they *grow rich*."[39] Wesley wanted his followers to "gain all that they can and save all that they can," but he did not want them to become rich. According to Wesley, if you gain and save all you can, "you must in the nature of things grow rich. Then if you have any desire to escape the damnation of hell, *give* all you can."[40]

Clearly, for Wesley, this was not a trivial issue. The issue of riches has eternal consequences. If Methodists gained all that they could and saved all that they could but refused to give all that they could, Wesley warned them, "I can have no more hope of your salvation than for that of Judas Iscariot."[41]

As Wesley looked at Methodism, late in his ministry, he feared that the system he had created was somehow failing. Methodists were not holding one another accountable for growing in their faith. But by Wesley's own definition, Methodists were people "'seeking the power of godliness', united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation."[42] The structure, by definition, was failing if people were coming together and not holding each other accountable.

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[39] Outler, *Sermons*, 4:95.
[40] Ibid., 4:96.
[41] Ibid., 4:96.
[42] Davies, *Methodist Societies,* 9:69.

They could not claim to be watching over one another in love if they allowed each other to become comfortable with their riches, instead of encouraging each other to grow in holiness.

Wesley's fear of Methodists growing rich provides a powerful example of why small group accountability is necessary for holiness of heart and life. Without being held accountable, Methodists seemed to be pulled back into the world and its desires. Wesley designed the system of accountability because he was aware of the distractions that Christians would face as they sought to grow in holiness. Thus, the entire structure had the goal of holiness as its constant goal.[43] Every week Methodists were required to give an account of where their loyalties had been the last week. Had they denied themselves, following the Way of Salvation, or had they chosen to be comfortable, following the way of the world? The Methodist structure provided a constant reminder that Jesus calls his disciples to carry their crosses, that discipleship requires a willingness to deny oneself. It reminded Methodists that Christian faith was about growing in holiness, not about becoming comfortable in this world.

The culture in which Methodists found themselves in Wesley's day constantly enticed Methodists to divide their loyalties and to compromise. Accountability was the antidote to this powerful influence, as it reminded Methodists that their ultimate allegiance was to Jesus Christ. As such, the society, class, and band structure was the bulwark against the main threat to scriptural holiness: comfortable living. If Methodists refused to deny themselves in favor of riches, they were moving farther and farther away from the image of God, and from the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.[44]

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[43] Henderson further develops the role each part of the Methodist structure played in encouraging growth in holiness: "The societies proclaimed and explained the doctrine, the class meeting was designed to implement the behavioral quest for holy lifestyle, and the bands facilitated the cultivation of inner purity and the purging of the attitudes. It was an interlocking system, woven around a common theme." Henderson, 115.

[44] See Heb. 12:14.

The Contemporary Context of the United Methodist Church

As Wesley considered his legacy, it is interesting to notice his confidence that Methodism was well enough established that it would continue into the foreseeable future. What did concern Wesley, however, was whether Methodism would continue as spirit-filled movement, or only as a "dead sect." Towards the end of his life, he wrote:

> I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.[45]

Ultimately, for Wesley, it is clear that to be Methodist means to "hold fast" to the doctrine and discipline that he articulated.

This naturally raises the question: Is the UMC's doctrine and discipline recognizably Wesleyan? Doctrinally, the United Methodist Church can be considered to be Wesleyan because the *Book of Discipline* includes Wesley's *Standard Sermons* and *Explanatory Notes* as part of the doctrinal standards.[46] Although, one could argue that the emphasis on growing in holiness is not as strong as it could be. It is much less clear whether the UMC has preserved a Wesleyan discipline. It could be argued that the "connexion" has been preserved due to the continuing practice of conferencing at Annual Conferences and General Conference. On the other hand, most of the conferencing that happens today in the UMC is institutional in nature; little, if any, of it is focused on "watching over one another in love." One also wonders whether the average Methodist is even aware that they are members of a church that has a heritage known for being incredibly disciplined and methodical. A survey of the practice of UM churches would likely

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[45] Davies, *Methodist Societies,* 9:527.
[46] United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004) ¶103, p. 71.

reveal that small group accountability in contemporary Methodism is the exception, rather than the norm.

Ironically, though the *Book of Discipline* continues to mention the *Standard Sermons* and *Explanatory Notes* as part of the doctrinal standards of the UMC, it barely mentions the Wesleyan disciplinary structure. Aside from using conferencing as a bureaucratic structure, the original structure of societies, classes, and bands has essentially disappeared. The closest the *Book of Discipline* comes to preserving the Wesleyan structure is by reprinting the *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Our United Societies* in ¶103 and in talking about "Small Group Ministries" and "Accountable Discipleship" in ¶1118. Yet, even this discussion of small group accountability has been relegated to a small section under the discussion of the role of the General Board of Discipleship. Here, the demise of the Wesleyan structure is acknowledged, because one of the foci is "revitalizing the role of the class leaders."

Henry Knight III. has argued that "In Wesley's day, a Methodist was someone who was committed to the discipline – the Rules of the United Societies – and to attend the weekly class meeting."[47] But today, the *Discipline* gives the impression that someone committed to the discipline is not a typical member of a UM congregation, but is a member of the General Board of Discipleship! Surely Wesley would insist that revitalizing small group accountability is the responsibility of every local church, not just the responsibility of a board or agency. He would also insist that growing in holiness is the responsibility of every Christian, it is not just the responsibility of an elite few.

Unfortunately, Wesleyan classes and bands currently appear more likely to disappear entirely from the consciousness of the UMC than to be revived within mainstream Methodism.

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[47] Henry H. Knight III, "The Means of Grace and the Promise of New Life in the Evangelism of John Wesley," *Considering the Great Commission: Evangelism and Mission in the Wesleyan Spirit*, eds., W. Stephen Gunter, and Elaine Robinson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005) 141.

Robin Maas laments that "Neither bands nor classes survived into the twentieth century… efforts to revive the forms have met with little or no success."[48] D. Michael Henderson further notes the loss of the method behind Methodism: "By the time the requirement of participation had been dropped as a condition for membership, the entire group system had crumbled and Methodism became just another religious denomination with no particular methodological distinction."[49]

Today, many United Methodists resist being held accountable. Most members of the UMC would be uncomfortable or confused by Wesley's insistence that holiness is linked with communal practice. Yet, Wesley was adamant that "'Holy solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness."[50] Over the last several decades, the deepest form of communal practice that most Methodists have experienced is Sunday School, and even Sunday School attendance is not a requirement of membership. As Wesley predicted, the Methodist movement continues to exist. But does the UMC still have the power that Methodism had in John Wesley's day?

Small Group Accountability Is Necessary for the Revival of the United Methodist Church

If the UMC is in danger of losing its spiritual vitality, it could be argued that this decline is due to ignoring the discipline that was always intended to be the primary vehicle that brought the "form" of Methodist religion to life. As Randy Maddox has written: "if contemporary Wesleyans have lost the *power*, it is not because we need to seek more 'experiences,' but because we have discarded Wesley's spiritual guidelines and disciplines."[51] It was these very

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[48] Robin Maas, and Gabriel O'Donnell O.P., eds., *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990) 316. It should be acknowledged that much of David Lowes Watson and Steven Manskar's work to promote Covenant Discipleship groups has occurred subsequent to Maas' comments.
[49] Henderson, 142-143.
[50] qtd. in Henderson, 86.
[51] Randy Maddox, ed., *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990) 15.

guidelines and disciplines that brought the movement to life. The class meeting was especially crucial to the Methodist movement during Wesley's lifetime. Our Church's history witnesses to the necessity of reclaiming a similar structure and discipline if United Methodism is to succeed in finding spiritual renewal.

In *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal*, Howard Snyder chronicles elements typically found in renewal movements, noting that they always use "some form of small group structure."[52] This structure is a crucial component of the spiritual vitality of any renewal movement. Recent advocates of Wesleyan theology have occasionally "forgotten this practical small group structure and thus have tended to overindividualize Wesley's concept of sanctification and to lose the secret of much of the spiritual power of early Methodism."[53] Snyder points out, "In Wesley's view, if believers were really serious in their quest for holiness, they would band together in small groups to experience that level of community which is the necessary environment for growth in grace."[54] In other words, the contemporary abandonment of a Wesleyan discipline actually calls into question United Methodism's commitment to growing in holiness. For Snyder, "the demise of the class meeting in large measure explains the decline of Methodism."[55] The obvious implication for Methodism today is that recovering "some functional equivalent of the class meeting with its intimacy, mutual care and support, and discipline is essential."[56]

In looking at the UMC's Wesleyan heritage, the crucial role that small group accountability played in the Methodist revival is evident. This heritage provides a strong foundation in making the case for a return to a Wesleyan method. A crucial key to the UMC's

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[52] Snyder, 138.
[53] Ibid., 149.
[54] Ibid., 148-149.
[55] Ibid., 149.
[56] Ibid., 149.

ability to revive the practice of small group accountability will be reclaiming Wesley's connection between beliefs and actions. Leaders in the United Methodist Church seem to be increasingly comfortable talking about John Wesley and his theology, but are they willing to live into the implications of Wesley's thought, even when it is difficult?

Accountability is crucial because it maintains the connection between beliefs and actions: "Accountability is how we make sure our discipleship happens."[57] Small group accountability also "helps disciples stand against the trap of believing and living as though they were self-sufficient… [which] prevents us from believing there is no need to 'work out (our) own salvation."[58] Accountability helps Christians to avoid the temptation of confessing Christ with their mouths, while denying their confession in the way they live their lives. Methodists who avoid being held accountable may become cultural Christians who are practical atheists.

Elizabeth O'Connor further illustrates the need for balance between believing and doing in her book, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*. O'Connor discusses the "narrow gate" Jesus speaks of in Matthew 7:14, equating it with "the inward journey."[59] O'Connor's concern is "with the renewal of the church."[60] She believes that the church will not be renewed unless its people are on an inward and an outward journey.[61] This journey inward and outward is "what the Christian life is all about."[62] Ultimately, O'Connor's experience, as well as Wesley's, supports the argument that Christians more effectively practice what they say they believe when they come together in community. A key aspect, then, of making disciples of Jesus Christ involves engagement with and accountability to other disciples.

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[57] Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006) 23.
[58] Ibid., 24 (Phil. 2:12 is cited within the quotation).
[59] Elizabeth O'Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975) 9.
[60] Ibid., 9.
[61] Ibid., 9.
[62] Ibid., 10.

Reclaiming the Importance and Value of Self-Denial

In Wesley's day, all Methodists were required to attend a weekly class meeting and twenty percent were members of a band meeting.[63] Today, on the other hand, many Methodist churches may just barely have more than twenty percent of their "members" in worship on any given Sunday, as it is unfortunately common for UM churches to have memberships that are two or three times higher than their average attendance![64] In this situation, if the church hopes to reclaim an authentically Wesleyan discipline, the case will have to be made to the laity of why accountability and self-denial are necessary for spiritual growth and development. Wesleyan pastors will need to be able to explain why discipline is important not just to the church but to individuals who often resist restraints on their perceived freedom.

One of the most important ways to reclaim a Wesleyan discipline in the contemporary context of the UMC, especially in America, is through a renewed understanding of the importance and value of self-denial. Just as Methodists in Wesley's day began to pursue comfortable living through riches, American Methodists today are similarly tempted to value comfort above anything else. Wesley might wonder today, as he did at the end of his life, "why is self-denial in general so little practised at present among the Methodists?" As membership in the UMC has declined over the past forty years[65], the UMC has increasingly accommodated to the dominant culture. As a result, self-denial is a virtue which has too often been ignored or forgotten in contemporary Methodism.

The Methodist heritage reminds the contemporary UMC that it was the goal of holiness of heart and life that provided the momentum for the revival. For Wesley's contemporaries, this goal has not changed. God is still seeking to renew people into the image in which they were

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[63] Harper, 131.
[64] Adam Hamilton, *Leading Beyond the Walls* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) 53.
[65] Hamilton, 202.

created and Jesus is still seeking to save the lost. The UMC's mission of "making disciples of Jesus Christ" reminds Methodists that Wesley's goal was not just to tell people about the content of Christian faith. Rather, his ultimate concern was to help people discover how they could experience the power of God's transforming grace in their own lives, to discover how they could become disciples. For Wesley, disciples are people who live out their confession of faith in Christ in the way in which they live their lives. And discipleship was not just an option for a religious elite, it was every Christian's privilege and responsibility.

While reclaiming the importance of small group accountability is crucial to the renewal of the United Methodist Church, moving the church back to the discipline of a small group structure will not be easy. Elizabeth O'Connor frankly acknowledges that living out one's faith commitment with others is difficult: "Engagement with others in depth is always difficult within the church, which is probably why so few try it and why there is so little genuine Christian community in the world."[66] Yet, the difficulty of being involved in Christian community, if anything, makes it more important. O'Connor argues, "Whereas Christian community is the most difficult to be involved in, it is the most rewarding and the most essential to those on an inward journey."[67] Suffering and self-denial seem to be to some extent an unavoidable part of life together in community. Even though small group accountability comes at a cost, it is a small price to pay for achieving the goal of growth in holiness.

Therefore, while some sort of small group accountability is essential to the renewal of the church[68], it will require that United Methodists willingly embrace self-denial. This is because "a rigorous structure naturally goes against the grain in our lax, individualistic, live-and-let-live

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[66] O'Connor, 24.
[67] Ibid., 25.
[68] Snyder argues further for the need for small group accountability for church renewal, writing: "The whole tenor of this book suggests the need for some sort of committed small group structures for the vitality and renewal of the larger church." Snyder, 162.

society."[69] Yet, the very reasons why implementing a small group structure are difficult, are the same reasons why it is desperately needed. As Snyder argues:

> Talk of discipline, discipleship and responsible Christian lifestyle seldom gets beyond mere talk until folks make the kind of serious commitment to each other which provides the structure for space-time follow-through on professed beliefs and shows that believers are willing to ratify their commitment to Christ by commitment to his body. Only thus do we begin to understand *in practice* the truth that "we are members of each other."[70]

Snyder reminds us that there was resistance to the small group structure in Wesley's day as well. Wesley, realizing what was at stake, held firm to the need for mutual accountability. He believed "that such structures were essential if Christians were to make a successful stand against the world, the flesh and the devil and to be gospel leaven in society."[71] As a result, "In any time when Christian values are in near-total eclipse, only a countercultural expression of the church will have the spiritual and social power to speak a gospel word to the dominant spirit of the age."[72] It is telling that the church even needs to be reminded that it is to be countercultural. Snyder's argument suggests that relevance and faithfulness are directly tied to being countercultural.

Yet, Wesleyan values do seem to be in danger of being overwhelmed by the dominant culture. The need to be countercultural, or different from the surrounding culture, may not be welcome news to United Methodists. One of the most painful parts of reclaiming a Wesleyan discipline may be realizing that the United Methodist Church has often made good citizens of the United States more effectively than it has made disciples of Jesus Christ. The fruit of these labors is that many United Methodists may not appreciate the need to be countercultural. This is

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[69] Snyder, 149.
[70] Ibid., 149-150.
[71] Ibid., 150.
[72] Ibid., 150.

a challenge that will require pastoral sensitivity and thoughtful articulation of what the mission of the church really is and how that calls us and sets us apart from the broader secular culture.

Conclusion:

This paper has argued that the keys to the renewal of the United Methodist Church are found in its Wesleyan heritage, which primarily consists of a doctrinal emphasis on scriptural holiness and a disciplinary insistence on the need for Methodists to "watch over one another in love." This heritage bears witness to the role that small group accountability plays as a prudential means of grace that God has used to renew hearts and lives in the image that they were created in. For many different reasons, the contemporary UMC has wandered away from its Wesleyan heritage, especially as it relates to Methodist discipline. Nevertheless, this paper has sought to demonstrate that to be truly Methodist means being Wesleyan, and a Wesleyan identity includes a distinct doctrine and discipline.

Contemporary Wesleyans who seek to revitalize accountability will face some serious difficulties. Robin Maas provides a sobering reminder:

> The recovery of a genuine Wesleyan spirituality, though highly desirable, will not be an easy task. Many cultural factors weigh heavily against it. But the same could be said of Wesley's own time, and he was not one to be daunted by unfavorable conditions! It is *never* easy to be faithful to the demands of discipleship, and that is why Wesley emphasized so heavily the importance of regular, mutual, structured support for individuals struggling to be faithful to Christ in a culturally hostile environment.[73]

Gradually, Methodism has moved away from holding its members accountable to practicing their faith. In moving away from this communal practice, Methodists have also, perhaps unintentionally, severed Wesley's deliberate connection of beliefs and actions. A result of the dissolution of Wesleyan discipline is that the church has lost what made it distinct from the surrounding culture. Methodism has come to increasingly resemble American culture,

[73] Maas, 320.

instead of being "gospel leaven in society." Members of the Methodist Church have also been tempted to see faithfulness to the commands of Christ as optional, or only required for an elite few. The contemporary church, as a result, faces the challenge of convincing nominal Christians that they are missing out on the essence of Christian faith, that "without holiness no one will see the Lord."[74] The UMC must remind its members that God's will for every Christian is that they grow in love of God and neighbor.

The UMC must avoid the temptation to accommodate to the dominant culture. Instead, it must insist that genuine expressions of Christian faith require obedience to the commands of Christ and a commitment to growing in holiness. A major conviction of this paper is that Methodists today are most likely to be obedient to Christ and to grow in their faith if they "watch over one another in love," just as the early Methodists did. As such, small group accountability is the most promising pathway to accomplishing the UMC's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Methodists who, in faith, risk letting others into their lives, or who risk investing themselves in the lives of others who are trying to live as faithful followers of Christ in this world, will find both joy and suffering. Being held accountable can be a humiliating or embarrassing experience. Entering into a deeper level of fellowship with those whom we have previously known on only a superficial level will not be easy. But faith has always involved risk. And faith in Christ has always come with Jesus' command to "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow."[75] The UMC, as it seeks to be faithful to its mission, faces the challenge of helping its members value self-denial and suffering in the Christian life as they seek to enter

[74] Heb. 12:14.
[75] Matt. 16:24.

through the "narrow door" of Christian discipleship.[76] The vulnerability and accountability of a Wesleyan discipline will involve suffering. John Wesley continues to remind United Methodists that the only way "that one who was 'conceived and born in sin'" can hope to be "'purified as his Lord is pure'" is by walking in the way of Christ, "'taking up his cross daily,'" and submitting to "a constant continued course of general self-denial!"[77] This is the "Way" that leads to salvation, and it is where the UMC can hope to rediscover both the form and power of godliness.

[76] See Luke 13:24.
[77] Outler, *Sermons*, 1:412.

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