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## The Modern Wesley Class Meeting - Bringing Accountability, Practical Faith, and Personal Connection into Established Local Congregations

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The Modern Wesley Class Meeting:

Bringing Accountability, Practical Faith, and Personal Connection into Established Local Congregations

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**The Modern Wesley Class Meeting:**

Bringing Accountability, Practical Faith, and Personal Connection into Established Local  
Congregations

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## Introduction

The Church is meant to be a community. While many congregations will use language befitting of a family, the true strength of the body of Christ is the community that is found within. Every congregation tries to build this community through many different avenues, but one of the most important is the small group setting. In the small group, relationships can begin, be nurtured, grow, and deepen into lifelong and life changing bonds. In four churches, spanning almost twelve years of ministry, I have served as a local pastor within the United Methodist Church and have been asked by senior pastors and congregations alike to create small group ministries that helped to foster spiritual and physical growth within the congregation. I have tried many different methods of gathering together small groups, only to have them become short, multi-week Bible studies that break apart halfway through the study and finally limp to their conclusion. This cannot be what Christ intended when He asked us to go make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19)<sup>1</sup>, nor can it be what He prayed for when He asked, “that they may all be one” (John 17:21a).

Throughout my time in seminary and the beginnings of my ministry, I found myself intrigued and excited about a particular small group ministry that had tremendous success, the Wesleyan class meeting. From my first introduction to it in Methodist history, I have continued to be in awe of the spiritual and physical growth that occurred due to the vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith that came out of those small groups of Methodists. The more I learned and struggled to find viable and fruitful small group ministries, the more I came to

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<sup>1</sup> Harold W. Attridge et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books with Concordance* (San Francisco, CA, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

realize that the pillars of the class meeting were necessary and were the means by which all that growth came, both in Wesley's Britain as well as in the early American Methodist church.

By no means am I the first to take up the class meeting as a profound and powerful tool for the church. I am preceded by great minds and scholars that are used throughout this text. However, of all the great scholars that have helped, studied, researched, and worked to bring this tool of faith to the forefront, I must highlight a few that have made enormous contributions to this area of academia and without which I would have been very lost.

### **David Lowes Watson**

The first is someone whom I could make a library just out of the sheer volume of books that he has written on the subject of the Wesleyan class meeting, Rev. Dr. David Lowes Watson. Throughout this paper there will be a great number of references to his historical research and analysis of the class meeting, as well as his accurate assessment that there are great parts of the class meeting that could help the modern Methodist movement.

A contribution that I could not have done without was David's *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origin and Significance*<sup>2</sup>. This work is a vastly important source that has done so much to bring the class meeting out of the shadows of history. Chapter upon chapter gives great detail about the Wesleyan class meeting; from the Moravian influences, the humble beginnings as a small group dedicated to raising funds for building, and finally to the declaration of John Wesley that this group was so important as to make it compulsory for all Methodists that wished to remain in their societies. This volume has primary accounts from clergy and laity outlining and detailing the great work that was done through these amazing groups of believers. It also

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<sup>2</sup> David Lowes. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origin and Significance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

details how John Wesley utilized these groups to build a strong foundation in Britain by creating leaders within the group that were passionate and driven to help their fellow believers become the best versions of themselves by adhering to the principles that they vowed to uphold when they became members of the Wesleyan societies.

David was also willing to meet with me on several occasions through phone call and email to help me put together my understanding of the class meeting. He gave to me a lecture that he gave, and shared with me experiences that he had inside modern-day class meetings. His expertise was on full display in his lecture to the Northeast Methodist History Society. His lecture solidified the need of the modern church for the class meeting, as well as detailing how a current class meeting was functioning in today's era.

### **Kevin M. Watson**

Kevin Watson serves as Acting Director of the Wesley House at Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He is an expert on the Wesleyan band meeting and has attempted to bring the band meeting back into the modern church through his book *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice*.<sup>3</sup> I utilized his work in rounding out the historical analysis of the Wesleyan class meeting. The ability to truly separate the two small group meetings in the Methodist societies was of great importance to single out the pillars of the Wesleyan class meeting.

I also used another of his works as a monumental help to my project at the local congregation that I serve. Kevin's book *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and*

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

*Essential) Small Group Experience*<sup>4</sup> was an incredible help in formatting my project, so much so that I had my first members read the book in order to fully grasp what we were attempting to reclaim and create. It was of great help to have that information in a convenient and easy book that could be taken home and read. This allowed for more conversation and work during the initial meetings.

### **Steven Manskar**

The final scholar that I must give credit to is Steven Manskar. While I utilized one text from him, Steven is a strong and avid proponent of the pillars of the class meeting that I latched onto in my paper and project. Steven advocates for the passionate, strong, and difficult accountability among disciples that drew me so passionately to the class meeting. The book *Accountable Discipleship* was of great historical and analytical relevance to my work. Rev. Manskar had some wonderful insights into how both the class meetings and band meetings operated within Wesley's world as well as those implications for a modern interpretation of this kind of accountability.

### **Thesis**

The class meeting is an amazing tool that allows for the growth of its members through the comradery of love and accountability. When I look into the modern church, and even the modern society, I see so many who have become isolated in their worlds. The churches that I have served have all been mixed in their age demographics, but every congregation had a significant population that was over the age of sixty-five (65). These members would always reminisce about knowing their neighbors and meeting with friends on a regular basis. But when

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed Publishing, 2014).

I look into the congregational life of the church and the surrounding community, I didn't see this kind of community. With some exceptions, I saw groups of houses not homes, streets of buildings not neighbors, and members of the church but not disciples of Christ. Since I was charged in my very first church, I have wanted to create a small group experience that would not only be meaningful to the individual that participated in it, but also be impactful to the congregation that it was part of and to the world outside the walls of the church. The class meeting meets all of these criteria.

I will use Scripture and history to bring forth the need for the class meeting in today's setting. I will reach all the way back into the early church of the Apostles and look at the catechism of the early church that saw a generation of believers truly become disciples that took a fledgling religion and turned it into world changing faith. I will then turn to the modern society that we find ourselves in and show that the pillars of the class meeting are still in use. This discovery is important to teach us that the vulnerability and accountability are not something of a bygone era, but are still able to be used and harnessed to produce great fruit.

The class meeting was a group designed to be a small group of people who loved each other through all things, learned and grew in their faiths together, and held each other accountable to become the best Christians that they could be. I claim that if the modern church were able to reclaim the pillars of the Wesleyan class meeting into a small group setting, then it would revitalize congregations by creating members that had deep, personal connections, a practical faith, and accountability with each other.

### **Overview of paper**

We will begin in Scripture, by looking at how God's Word instructs those who would follow Christ to build communities that can change and shape the foundations of the world. We

will study the history and humble beginnings of the class meeting in the Wesleyan societies of Britain, and how these groups continued to add members of deep faith in those societies. This paper will look at different groups that embody the vulnerability and accountability that we find within the Wesleyan class meeting, starting with the ancient catechumenate that helped the early church bring in and develop new converts to the faith so that they were setup for success in a world that did not want them to share the faith that they had begun to follow. Then looking at groups in the modern world that utilize these same principles to overcome forms of addiction, to build comradery within military societies, and building small pockets of disciples within different religious societies. Finally, looking at a modern Christian group that grew into the vulnerability and accountability of the Wesleyan class meeting into their group to see how this type of group can operate in the modern world.

This paper will also hypothesize why the Wesleyan class meeting eventually died away and that Sunday school attempted to replace it within the society of believers. In this chapter, it will be examined as to how effective Sunday schools were in building strong communities, as well as enumerating where they fell short of the mark. Ultimately culminating in the conclusion that while we should continue to keep and support Sunday school classes, the vulnerability and accountability found within the Wesleyan class meeting is something that needs to come back.

In the final chapter, the experiment that was conducted at the First United Methodist Church of Needville will be laid out as an example of how we can resurrect this amazing community and faith builder. By looking at the preparation that was taken in order to bring to life something that had not been previously found within this congregation, and by walking with the very first class meeting that this congregation has ever seen, we can see what this small group of believers was able to accomplish in such a short period of time. Through personal interviews

we will be able to see the transformative power of vulnerability amongst believers, as well as how their faiths and lives were changed by the members of the group showing true Christian love by holding each other accountable for their actions. Ultimately, the group shows that a deep and intimate relationship with fellow believers is important to “protect us from the evil one” (John 17:15) and that these groups are truly God’s answer to Christ’s prayer for all who would call themselves His followers.

## Chapter 1: A Scriptural Basis for Building a Real Community

When I look at the world that I have inhabited for over thirty-six years, I ask myself how Jesus, God's only begotten son and my savior, could have left His legacy in the hands of such inept creatures. From the very beginning of the Bible, mankind was created in the very image of God, meant to be the crowning jewel of creation and given dominion over all the Earth (Genesis 1:26).<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, from just barely past that point in Biblical history until the present, humankind has continually tried to abandon, flee from, and replace God in almost every aspect of our lives. This dissertation is an attempt to resurrect a kind of community that was last called by name as the Wesley class meeting.

Jesus came and spent His life trying to teach and guide this wayward part of creation back to its maker. In the final hours of freedom that He had before the mob, led by Judas Iscariot, came to arrest Him, He would say a prayer that has been in my thoughts since I first read them back in grade school.

Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer

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<sup>5</sup> Harold W. Attridge et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*.

in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’ [John 17:1b-26]

Jesus’ prayer for all who would ultimately choose the path of discipleship was that they would add themselves to the community of faith and be unified to one another as they were united back with their Creator. The ability to be unified with the Father was to come to fruition through the sacrifice that Jesus would make on the cross less than twenty-four hours from the end of this prayer. Jesus spent His ministry giving the world an example of this community with the twelve men whom He called to follow Him. Upon His resurrection, Jesus would bestow what is naturally titled the “Great Commission” upon the eleven that were left; after Judas’

departure from the group for his betrayal of Christ. This command of Christ was meant for so many more ears than the twenty-two ears on that mountain side, and has been the source of countless sermons, studies, Sunday school classes, Vacation Bible Schools, and revivals throughout the 2000+ years that Christianity has been on this Earth. Yet, with all this emphasis on unity and community for the entire human race, I look into the world and see so much separation and isolation. Human beings were created by the Creator to be social animals. We were created from the very beginning to be able to create, nurture, and sustain relationships. We need to know what these relationships are, if we are ever to understand how they interact with each other.

### **Our Relationship with God**

We were created to first and foremost to have a relationship with God. “I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart” (Jeremiah 24:7). The idea of having a personal, intimate, and real relationship with a deity was exclusive to Judaism in the ancient world. Monotheism and a jealous God who desired loyalty and exclusivity from His/Her worshippers was a foreign concept in the ancient world. The Old Testament Scriptures detail out how God instructed, nurtured, and loved a people who time and again turned away from Him. Stories abound in those pages of people from all walks of life attempting to control their own destiny and replace God and God’s commands for their own.

The stories of King Jeroboam (1 Kings 14:7-16) and King Saul (1 Samuel 15:10-35) show us how Kings went against the will of God to the detriment of their subjects. But even the greatest King, David, was not without his blemishes; as he committed adultery and then murder to try to cover up the adultery (2 Samuel 11). We see those in religious power turning away as

well. Moses took credit for a miracle, and was punished by only being permitted to see the Promised Land (Numbers 20:1-13, Deuteronomy 32:48-52). Eli was a priest who allowed his sons to profane the priesthood (1 Samuel 2:11-17). We even see how the people abandoned the worship of God immediately following the miraculous liberation from Egypt, when they worship the golden calf at Mount Sinai (Exodus 32). The beauty that is found in these stories, and many more within the Old Testament Scriptures, is that in each situation God did not leave the Israelites to their deserved fate. The story of Israel is the story of salvation; humanity turns away, God brings them back out of infinite love for the creation. Our relationship with God was part of our makeup from the very beginning.

This continues in how God brings the creation back to Himself for eternity, or, to put another way, how God brings about salvation for His wayward creation.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So, you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God" [Galatians 4:4-7]. Paul gives us this understanding that is the summary of the Gospel accounts. God sent Jesus so that humanity would be freed from the slavery that it had chosen, back in the Garden, and continues to choose to this day and beyond.

Our sinfulness as humans would be a deal breaker and a permanent break with the perfect nature of God, if it were not for the perfect sacrifice of Christ on our behalf.

For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith [Romans 3:22b-25a]. The Grace of God is found in the sacrifice of Christ, so that all who would believe in Him would have their sins purged and forgiven. It is God calling out to His wayward and sinful creation that He still loves and desires us to be close to Him.

Our relationship with God began with His creation of us in the Garden of Eden, took its first steps as Adam and Eve walked with God, and fell out of step after the fruit was eaten. Ever since humanity has tried to regain what was lost by that fateful misstep, by searching in all the wrong places. We continue to try to fill that void with so many other things, but no matter what we try it never satisfies because we do not turn to the one thing that we need. We were made from the very beginning to be in deep relationship with our creator. Until we, as individuals, choose to submit our will to God, we will never be truly whole.

### **Our Relationship with the rest of Creation**

When God created the world, God put humankind in charge of it.

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so [Genesis 1:28-30].

Even if we take the second creation story, we find that God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden to till it (Genesis 2:15) and take care of it; possibly in preparation for when he would have to “till the ground from which he was taken” (Genesis 3:23b) upon leaving Eden. The environment was meant to be taken care of by us as humans. Environmental theology is based on this principle, that we should make sure to cultivate and sustain a symbiotic and healthy relationship with the rest of the creation. God might have put us in charge, but God did not give us dominion so that we would ourselves become lords. Just like Christ epitomized being both Lord and servant, humankind was supposed to do the same (Matthew 20:28).

The flipside of this is the fact that humans are the jewel of creation. There is something within humankind that separates us from the rest of what God created, and that is that we are

made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). This image is not the idea that God has two arms, two hands, and ten fingers and toes. This image that we share with our creator is not corporeal. What we share with our maker is the ability to have freewill and use reason. Our intelligence is given to us from the One who has ultimate reason and intelligence. It is like the difference between a child who shows promise at being intelligent and the child's post-doctorate mother who has already proven to be the head expert in her field. The child has promise and genetics on his side, but no one would say that he could out argue or outthink his mother. The same idea, but on a grander scale, is what we find between God and humankind. A grander scale because the son might grow up to be even smarter than his mother, or at the very least on her level, but we will never 'grow up' enough to be anywhere close to God's level of intelligence and reason.

With this intellect and reason that humankind has been given, we are set above the rest of creation by our ability to make choices that go against our instincts. While the rest of creation is required to succumb to its own nature and live its life based on instinct, humankind has the ability to overcome and subdue our basic instincts; of course, this requires us wanting to do so. That is why when a dog chews up a garden hose, while it is annoying and angering when they do so, owners will tend to forgive the animal because they understand that the dog was simply following its nature to chew. Humans were created with the ability to think for themselves, to think of others, to be able to make decisions between choices, to go against our instincts, and to be creative in coming up with new solutions. We have the capability to choose God, but as Paul so adequately puts,

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord [Romans 7:15;24-25]!  
While the rest of the creation must follow their base instincts, humankind has been given the amazing ability to choose how we will act. However, we must have Christ and the

afore mentioned relationship with God so that our actions are righteous and holy.

Otherwise, we, like Paul, will do what we do not want to do and leave alone what we truly desire to have done.

It is this trait of freewill that was granted to humankind that gives humanity dominion over the creation (Genesis 1:26). However, this dominion was never meant to allow humankind to Lord over the creation. Humanity's dominion over the rest of creation I liken to a gardener's dominion over their garden. A garden can only flourish when the gardener has love and wisdom to take care of it properly. This means that the gardener will till it, water it, feed it, prune it, and, when the time comes, harvest the fruits. These things are all necessary for the plants to grow correctly and healthy. When the gardener shirks the responsibility and does not do this work, then the garden, and the plants within it, will grow wild and be fruitless. Our relationship with the rest of creation must be one born out of a love for the creation, which is given to us by the Creator, and a desire to see the creation come into great fruitfulness.

### **Relationship with our Fellow Humans**

Finally, we are to have a relationship with each other. As soon as man was created, God tells us that we are never meant to be alone (Genesis 2:18). This is why God created woman and in doing so shows us that community is of vast importance to the human race. This is more than just a statement about marriage; this is a statement about the nature of humanity from the creator who knows us better than we know ourselves. We are not built for isolation but were instead only seen as good when we were no longer alone. God built us to have human companions. In the Garden of Eden, Adam had every creature surrounding him. Adam named them all and knew them all, yet he could not find his equal among them (Genesis 2:20). Only when God brought forth Eve did Adam find another creature who could grow, learn, and love as he did.

Throughout the Scriptures, God says that humans are not to be isolated. Even the great heroes and heroines of the Old Testament have companions that walk with them. Of course, they have God and of course there are tests and acts that must be done by the person with just the companionship of God to help them through, but that hero/heroine always comes back after the ordeal to those whom they are in community with; Moses had Aaron, David had Jonathan, Esther had Mordecai, just to give a few examples.

When we look at Jesus, we see the same thing. Jesus could have spent His days wandering around Judea by Himself, teaching the lessons and performing the miracles. He had the power, wisdom, and ability to have done this. The Disciples, despite them building the Kingdom after Christ's resurrection, didn't do much on their own except for make mistakes, misinterpret Jesus' lessons, and ultimately fail Him in His hour of deepest need. However, Jesus spends his three years in ministry showing the world what a Christian community looks like by sticking with and teaching these men. Twelve men with different backgrounds, different ages, different education levels, different opinions, and different politics are brought together. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Jesus knew that the world would look in on this community of faith and see a community that, by the world's logic and wisdom, should not be together. And yet, if they chose to love each other, the way that He had loved them, then they would change everything and continue the mission that Christ began.

This community that Christ built is the church. Not the United Methodist Church, not the Roman Catholic Church, not the Baptist Church, but just the church. It is important to make this distinction that Christ's church, the real church, has no denomination, but instead encompasses all denominations. Christ initiated His church with the 12 from the very beginning of His

ministry, and uses this band of misfits to showcase how grace and holy community are enough to move the world back into a proper relationship with its Heavenly Father and Creator.

### **Discipleship is Perilous**

It is through discipleship that we can be part of Christ's mission. When Jesus called Peter and Andrew, He said to him, "I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).<sup>6</sup> Becoming a Disciple is a necessary step in order to follow the Great Commission of Christ to

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you [Matthew 28:19-20a].

Only a disciple can make more disciples, and this call into discipleship and the making of more disciples is the bedrock of the community of faith. However, Jesus knew from the very beginning that this path that He was sending us on was a dangerous one. The world would not like us, just like the world did not like Him. The world would reject our message, just like it had rejected His. In the disciple's very first foray into evangelistic work these are the words that Christ spoke to them.

See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles [Matthew 10:16-18].

Jesus says this to the disciples in Matthew just before he sends them out to the countryside two by two to spread His message. Even at this sending out, Jesus knows that they will encounter resistance.

However, in verses seventeen and eighteen Jesus is speaking about more than just this very first 'mission trip' that the disciples are about to embark on. On this little journey into evangelistic work, the disciples will not have to encounter deadly persecution. They will

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<sup>6</sup> "The Bible - Read and Study Free Online," Bible Study Tools, 2022, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/>. King James Version.

experience people who are not willing to listen, and they may experience people not wanting them around, but the persecution that Jesus speaks of is an experience that will come later in their journeys; when they become apostles desiring to fulfill the Great Commission that Jesus will hand down on the mountainside after His resurrection.

When Jesus sends out the disciples to the countryside, a companionship of two is sufficient for the adversity that they will face. Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane proves to us that the new task that will be set before them, and all who believe and follow Christ, is a much more difficult one. Three times in the prayer Jesus prays for God to 'protect' those who are His (John 17:11, 12, 15). We do not have to guess how this protection is to come about.

"...[P]rotect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (John 17:11). The first thing that Jesus says in the prayer when talking about protection is that our protection stems from our proximity to and relationship with the Father. The relationship and unity with God are the foundation of our protection. As the apostles would go out into the world to spread the Good News of Christ it would be their connection to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, that would give them the strength and courage to sing in prison (Acts 16:16-40), proclaim the news in the streets (Acts 2:5-36), and stand up to angry and violent mobs with murderous intent (Acts 7), in order to build the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

Our connection to God through our faith in Christ and the Holy Spirit within us is how we are protected by God from the powers of this world. We are not protected in the sense that nothing bad will ever happen to us. The countless martyrs of the faith can attest to the fact that faith in Christ is not a license to an easy or safe life. However, the protection that is afforded us is that in those times when the world seems to have all the power, we are comforted to know that the world does not have the final say in anything. Through the power of the resurrection and our

connection to Christ we can have peace and hope that God has the final word, and that word is 'life'. We will be resurrected with Christ and have eternity with God, that is our hope and reward for our faith. The protection that is prayed for by Christ is given through eternity.

The protection that Jesus seeks for us and the protection that God grants to us is not just an abstract protection of a future that we have hope in. Although, if that were the only protection afforded, it would be enough. God knows His creation better than that. God knows that we as humans need more, and just like in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus tells us that God knows what we need and gives it to us (Matthew 6:25-34) we find the same principle at work here. "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15). Jesus knows that Satan will do everything in his power to derail the union of the Creator and the Creation, and Jesus knows firsthand how powerful that temptation is. It is one of the most important parts of Christianity to know that the God that we serve is one who knows our plight because He has truly walked it.

Jesus battles Satan throughout His ministry by being confronted by the religious elite, friends, and even being betrayed by one of his followers, but we get to see the actual battle play out twice in the Scriptures. The first time is immediately following Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. Jesus goes into the Wilderness for forty days and confronts Satan. Satan tempts Christ three different times in the wilderness by tempting Jesus to turn stones into bread (Matthew 4:3-4), to jump from the precipice of the Temple (Matthew 4:5-7), and to bow to Satan in order to receive the world's kingdoms (Matthew 4:8-10).

While Satan's attempt to get Jesus to turn stones into bread is a play at the humanity of Jesus (i.e., Jesus is hungry because He is fasting and living in the wilderness), the other two temptations are directly related to where Jesus' ministry is going to lead. When Satan tells Jesus

to jump from the highest point of the Temple it is to get Christ to show His power in a way that would be completely irrefutable. If Jesus were to jump and be caught by angels in the middle of the busy city of Jerusalem, from the tallest point of the most holy site; even the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes would have to admit who He was. There would be no need to build relationships with the people or travel around the country. It seems as if this route gives Jesus all that He would want, notoriety and publicity, without the need for a gruesome and painful death. However, Christ knows that the Cross is needed in order that humanity would be able to reconcile to God. The salvation that He came to purchase for the human race requires the cross and Jesus' sacrifice.

The same ploy is at work in the third of these wilderness temptations. Christ is to be the King of Kings, but in order for Him to attain that title within God's plan, He will have to go through the betrayal of Judas, the hatred of the crowd, the pain of the passion, and the excruciating death of crucifixion. Satan promises Jesus that He can have all the kingdoms of the world at His feet without this horrible experience, but this comes at a price. The price being that Satan would be in control and it would be his plan. This plan does not lead to salvation, but instead makes the separation between Creator and creation become permanent. Jesus knows that God's plan is the only one that brings salvation because His sacrifice is needed for humankind to be freed from their slavery to sin. Without the payment for our sins, the human race would never be able to be reconciled to God. With this knowledge Jesus refuses the final temptation of the Wilderness and Satan retreats. But Satan was not finished with Jesus.

The final temptation of Satan towards Christ is harder to see because Satan is not directly named. In the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks for the cup of death to pass from Him. In this part of the prayer, Jesus utters the amazingly powerful words, "not my will but

yours be done” (Luke 22:42b). It wasn’t until I stood on the Mount of Olives on my trip to Israel that I understood that from Jesus’ place of prayer He could see two things. First, Jesus could witness the angry mob of soldiers and temple guards, led by Judas, starting to make their way from the city gates towards the Mount of Olives. There is a reason why Jesus knew that the mob was there when he beckons the eleven to go meet his betrayer, and it is not the fact that He is all-knowing. He watched them form. He watched them travel across the valley. He knew they were there because He had watched them the entire way. Second, there was an easy escape route for Jesus and the eleven remaining disciples. Just over the Mount of Olives, Jesus and the disciples could have easily fled into the Wilderness and been lost to the mob; like David did when he avoided the pursuit of King Saul. With these two realizations, we can see that Jesus’ words, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me” (Luke 22:42a) are not just a plea to not have to go through the pain that He knows is about to come, but it is also as a statement that there actually was another way.

I believe that this is the final temptation of Satan. Tempting Christ as He sees His torture and death approaching with a safe and good way out for not only Christ but also for the eleven that had stayed by Him. Just like Satan did in the wilderness with the ability to display His power to the masses (i.e., jumping off the precipice of the Temple) and Satan’s request for Jesus to bow in order to receive His reward early, Satan seems to give Jesus all He wants to accomplish without the need of the cross. Yet Jesus continues to place His faith and trust in His Father’s plan and stays in the Garden until the mob finally comes and arrests Him. Ultimately choosing the cross over safety and life.

Jesus is protected in doing the right thing because of His unity with God, and through His deep desire to save and love His followers. When Jesus prays that His followers will be

protected from the evil one (John 17:15), He knows that, just like He was tempted to leave the Godly path, His followers will also face that temptation. However, there is a big difference between us and Christ. Jesus is already one with the Father, and it is through that connection that Jesus knows and can resist the temptation that Satan brings to bear on Him. However, we as humans have broken this connection, therefore Jesus prays for us to have the strength to stay in this world and be able to resist this temptation from Satan. This protection is given to us through our community of faith.

### **The Protection that we Need**

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The disciples, after receiving the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room, came out and at once testified to the crowd in Jerusalem. While we may see the sermon given by Peter as a powerful exhortation that brought thousands of people into the faith, let us also note that not a single person stood by themselves. The disciples stood together, appeared together, and spoke together. Upon conversion, the new converts were told to “[r]epent, and be baptized” (Acts 2:38, but they also would come together in groups to worship and study this new faith and new religious life that they had just embarked on (Acts 2:46).

The new faith immediately went and formed groups so that teaching could begin. However, I think there is another reason why these groups were formed from the very beginning, and it goes back to Christ’s prayer for protection.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy [1 Peter 2:9-10].

Just like the heroes/heroines of the Old Testament, we cannot live the life that God is calling us alone. Community is what protects us “from the evil one” (John 17:15).

Unfortunately, we need to define what community is because the world that we live in today has redefined that word to mean simply the people in the pews on Sunday morning. This is not the community that brings protection. The protection that we need in order to live the life that all Christians are called to is a community of fellow believers that walks with each other day by day, holds each other up in constant prayer, and holds each other accountable so that they may grow together in their faith and their relationship with God.

### **Scriptural Community**

“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25). From the very beginning of the Christian faith, the gathering of the faithful has been necessary. Not only was it the place where the faithful broke bread, learned of the faith from apostles and their writings, and prayed together, but it was the place where God’s grace could be seen for the whole world. Throughout the Epistles of the New Testament, we hear the authors of those letters encourage and demand communities of faith to stand together, hold each other accountable to live righteous lives, and even to cull out those who will not do so.

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1-2).

This is just an example of the many verses found within the New Testament encouraging and informing those who come after to gather together. There must be sound wisdom here that we need to heed. This passage from the letter to the Galatians tells us that this gathering is more than just a place to sing, pray, and listen to a lecture. This community must be one that holds its members accountable for their choices and their lives. They are not encouraged to do this so that

there will be judgment or a hierarchy where some are able to lord over the others. However, they are encouraged to do this because sin that is left unchecked will corrupt and poison the whole community. Jesus teaches that “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matthew 5:29). If this is the lesson for our own body, then we must understand Jesus next lesson to pertain to the whole of the church. “[i]f the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector” (Matthew 18:17b).

Excommunication is to be used if the person will not repent until the person corrects their ways and desires to rejoin the community. It should be noted that the excommunication, whether from Jesus or from modern churches, is a statement by the church towards an individual’s choice. Neither Christ nor the body of Christ relish in excommunication, but when a professing member abandons or goes against the vows that were taken at their baptism, excommunication is the statement from the church saying that the person has made the choice to no longer live within the life that they had once taken a vow to do. It is not permanent, as the person can repent of their ways and return to Christ, and this should be both the prayer and hope of those inside the church towards all who have separated themselves.

By having a community based on accountability and vulnerability, it produces the sheep-like faith that Jesus rewards in His parable. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus praises the sheep for giving food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, and being present with those who were sick and in prison (Matthew 12:35-36). The works praised by Christ are what I like to call practical faith. Practical faith is a faith that can be seen by the outside world because it is faith that has been manifested into action. In the sixth chapter of the Book of Acts, it was the community of faith, holding the leaders in

accountability, for the care of the Greek widows. The apostles, hearing the voices of the community, employed seven (7) other members of the community to deal with the situation. This is one example of how a community can hold each other to the highest of Christian standards of living, will listen to and even be criticized by other members of the community, and then act upon that conversation in a positive and fruitful way. I believe that if the modern church is going to be as world changing as the early church was, we need to get back to being a community of vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith.

### **Scriptural Truth Outside the Body**

Further on in this paper groups outside of the main body of the church will be looked at as examples of how vulnerability and accountability can produce amazing communities that benefit and change the lives of their members as well as those outside their membership. Groups such as AA, Valor, and Emmaus Reunion groups utilize these Scriptural truths to bring healing from addiction, comradery through faith in foxholes, and strength and encouragement through a common experience. The exegesis of Scripture proves that, even if these groups do not exclusively call upon the Bible or God, they have their strength found in the truth of the God's Word and design for His creation. Their success is predicated on the fact that we were made for community, and a community that can be vulnerable and accountable with each other will be a community that can produce great fruit for not only themselves, but for the world as well.

In the next chapter, we will dig deeper into a specific tool that not only helps to build strong, faithful communities based on vulnerability and accountability, but that also makes disciples of Christ who are determined and passionate about following the Great Commission given to us by Christ after His resurrection.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **The Wesley Class Meeting:**

#### **The Building of Relationship**

This project is all about reclaiming an instrument of community and faith from history. An instrument that found great success in the annals of history and helped to build a strong and vibrant group of people who were not only strong in the Lord, but were also socially conscious to the needs of their surrounding communities. While the catechumenate was a masterstroke towards its goal of indoctrinating the non-believer into the Christian life and society of the catholic church, the Wesley class meeting evolved into something that surpassed initiating a non-believer into the life of the church/society. The class meeting was meant to be a group that built real, life-long relationships between members in order to allow for a more complete following of Christ. Vulnerability and accountability in these meetings led to intimate relationships with the small community of believers within the group, a new view of the greater society that they found themselves in, and a deeper understanding of what it meant to be God's tools to build God's kingdom where they found themselves. These relationships created a drive for the members to be part of a deep Christian community where the Spirit of God was both felt and seen by all members of the society around the church.

John Wesley would make the class meeting so integral to the Methodist movement, that it would become a requirement of all members to have full membership within a class meeting in order to become part of a Wesleyan society.<sup>7</sup> Along with the catechesis of the early church, John Wesley would pair membership and involvement in the class meeting with Communion.

Whereas the catechesis of the early church focused on bringing new believers into the society of

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<sup>7</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*. 95.

the church through instruction, which culminated in baptism and Holy Communion; the class meeting was not needed for baptism in John Wesley's rules. However, every week the members of the class would receive tickets that would permit them to come forward for Communion that week. Without one of these tickets, signed by the class leader, a person would be refused participation in Communion, or in the early societies the quarterly Love Feasts, until such time that they were able to procure a valid ticket.

If our goal is to reclaim the Wesleyan class meeting for the modern-day church, we have to understand what made the class meeting so important when it was created. The parts of the Wesley class meeting that made it so groundbreaking and powerful stem from the intimate and strong relationships that were formed within the close knit group of believers that not only grew the believers in their faiths, but also served to push them towards living out the parable of the sheep and the goats by finding ways in which they could become like the sheep that Jesus spoke about.<sup>8</sup> This kind of relationship and community that was built within the class meetings would be of great importance and value to the modern congregation, as well as to a society that is thirsting for real relationships built on trust and respect that leads towards something that is greater than any individual within the group. While John Wesley created the class meeting out of necessity; he quickly found it to be instrumental in creating, molding, and growing the society that he was after.<sup>9</sup> I believe that one of the keys to bringing in a new age of practical faith can be found in the bones of the Wesley class meeting.

Therefore, this chapter will be dedicated to understanding why the class meeting is worthy of being reclaimed for the modern church. Wesley saw something important in the class

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<sup>8</sup> Harold W. Attridge et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, 1713.

<sup>9</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 93.

meeting, and people saw the same as it continued to flourish in the New World and in the newly formed Methodist denomination in the United States. I believe that the reason it was such a powerful tool to create true believers is found within the accountability, vulnerability, and confession that was the foundation of each class meeting. I do not believe that there is any other way for Christians to pursue their own salvation than to do it with the confidence, love, and accountability of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

## **The Origin Story**

### The Moravian Influence

While we want to reclaim the class meeting, it would be a mistake to leave out a crucial step in its creation story. In Wesley societies, people were first introduced to intimate, faith building small groups through band meetings. Kevin Watson says it this way, “[t]he band meeting was the part of Wesley’s approach to communal formation that was most focused on ongoing growth in holiness.”<sup>10</sup> David Lowes Watson is an expert on the Wesleyan class meeting, having written many books on the topic. David Lowes Watson is a retired Elder in the Tennessee Conference of The United Methodist Church. He was educated at Oxford University (M.A.), Eden Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri (M.Div.), and Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Ph.D.). He has written extensively in the fields of Methodist history and theology, evangelism, and congregational life and mission. His books include *Accountable Discipleship*, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, *Class Leaders: Recovering a Tradition*, and *God Does Not Foreclose*. He has written curriculum resources for The United Methodist Church, including the New Testament studies in troublesome Bible passages. He was the founding editor of the *Covenant Discipleship Quarterly* and the *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in*

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 2.

*Theological Education*, of which he is a past president. He also served on the board of directors of the Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley and the board of directors of Eden Theological Seminary.<sup>11</sup> I will utilize many of his books throughout this paper due to his extensive and informative writing on the topic of the Wesleyan class meetings.

At first glance it would seem that the band meeting would be the more important of the two meetings since the band meeting's goal, as stated in Wesley's "Rules for Bands" was for the group "to obey that command of God, 'Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed.'"<sup>12</sup> In the early days of the Methodist movement the "bands provided an intimate setting for accountability and support for growing in faith."<sup>13</sup> When John Wesley implemented the band meetings it is clear to see that they were a remnant and nod to the Moravian communal piety that influenced John Wesley's theological understanding.<sup>14</sup>

The Moravian band started as small groups of disciplined fellowship called *collegia pietatis*, "gatherings for piety". Eventually, the small groups would take a more practical turn and would start to create entities which would meet the needs of their surrounding communities in the form of an orphanage, a school, dispensary, and a publishing house.<sup>15</sup> As the movement evolved over many years, bands came into being when the *Unitas Fratrum* grew in considerable size at Herrnhut in 1727.<sup>16</sup> The leader of the Moravian community at Herrnhut, Count Nikolaus

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<sup>11</sup> "Ministry Matters™," Ministry Matters™ | David Lowes Watson, accessed January 26, 2022, [https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/author/david\\_lowes\\_watson](https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/author/david_lowes_watson).

<sup>12</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 63.

<sup>13</sup> Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 91.

<sup>14</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 77.

Ludwig von Zinzendorf, created a system that would somewhat be found within the Methodist piety.

The initial ‘classification’ of the Herrnhut membership soon developed a twofold division. Groups which were divided according to sex, age, and marital status became known as choirs, adopting a residential pattern as the community expanded. At the same time, within the choirs, those who wished to further their spiritual growth formed smaller groups, known as bands.<sup>17</sup>

The bands were originally only for those who desired to go deeper into their faiths and to hold themselves to a higher scrutiny than the average member would find.<sup>18</sup> Because of this, the bands were much more flexible and not compulsory. It is here that we see the great nod from John Wesley, as his band meetings would be designed for the same group of people and would have the similar distinction that membership in a band would be voluntary.

The Moravians sent a mission to Georgia in 1735, and would be the ones who would board a ship with none other than John and Charles Wesley bound for the colony of Georgia.

Not finding, as yet, any door open for the pursuing our main design, we considered in what manner we might be most useful to the little flock at Savannah. And we agreed: 1. To advise the more serious among them to form themselves into a sort of little society, and to meet once or twice a week, in order to reprove, instruct, and exhort one another. 2. To select out of these a smaller number for a more intimate union with each other, which might be forwarded, partly by our conversing singly with each, and partly by inviting them all together to our house; and this, accordingly, we determined to do every Sunday in the afternoon.<sup>19</sup>

David Lowes Watson pointed out that while John Wesley didn’t explicitly say the word band in this *Journal* entry, it is clear that the impact of the Moravians was already seen and felt even in his ministry in Georgia.<sup>20</sup> However, the further impact of the Moravians and their bands

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 78.

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley and Percy Livingstone Parker, eds., *The Heart of John Wesley's Journal* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014), 11.

<sup>20</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 80.

would be felt in the creation of the Fetter Lane Society where bands would be at the heart of life within that society.

### The Class Meeting Before the Class Meeting

The small groups in Savanna, Georgia were the precursor and experiment that would lead to the formation of bands when John Wesley returned to England. Therefore, it is helpful to know that before the Wesleyan class meeting would become the heart and soul of Methodist societies in both England and America, Wesleyan societies were dominated by these small groups called bands. Just like the *choirs* within the Herrnhut membership, band meetings were segregated by sex, age, and marital status. This allowed for the groups to be homogenous in their makeup so as to help facilitate more intimacy with people who were living in the same station of life. It seems as though John Wesley, whether by design or accident, also incorporated into his band's makeup the similar size to the Herrnhut bands. Wesley's bands would usually only consist of five to ten people. Again, the focus on intimacy was key, but also the idea that not everyone was ready for this kind of deepening. While all members of the Methodist society were people who were "flee[ing] from the wrath to come"<sup>21</sup>, John Wesley believed that some were 'fleeing' harder than others. Thus, we find the biggest difference between the class and the band; the band meeting was not a mandatory group, nor did it ever become one. To quote Steven Maskar, "Not everyone in a society was in a band, but everyone in the bands was a member of the society."<sup>22</sup> The band meeting was restricted to people who "wanted and needed 'some means of closer union'".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley*; (Oxford University Press, 1964), 178.

<sup>22</sup> Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 116.

It is worthy to note that the creation and adoption of the Wesleyan class meeting did not destroy the band meeting. On the contrary, John Wesley still maintained that band meetings were essential and highly recommended “as a means of being strengthened in love, and more effectually ‘provoked to abound in every good work’”.<sup>24</sup> The band meetings required even more of their members than the class meetings did, and therefore were fewer and more selective in their memberships. It is like when you look into a grade school and find children that participate in advanced, average, and remedial classes. All the students are in class and all the students are receiving a quality education, but only a select few are able to excel in the advanced lessons. Band meetings would become the ‘advanced’ course while class meetings would become the ‘average’ course.

To quote the letter to the Hebrews,

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.  
[Hebrews 5:12-14]

In all spheres of life, you do not start out with the most difficult lessons, but with the most basic to build a strong foundation. The author of Hebrews as well as John Wesley’s bands follow this same principle. To realize that you must “flee the wrath that is to come”<sup>25</sup> is a great step towards God, but it is only the first step in a long and difficult journey.

The Class Meeting is Born

Most have heard the story of the truly humble beginnings of the class meeting. However, it bears repeating as it shows exactly what God can do through the meekest of beginnings. John

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 117.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley*, 178.

Wesley had taken it upon himself to manage the debt that was incurred at the purchasing and raising of a facility, the New Room as it was called, in Bristol. After a time, the debt was getting too much for John Wesley to handle on his own, so he turned to the membership that met at that location and spoke with the leadership on how best to manage the debt so that it would no longer be solely on John Wesley. Captain Foy<sup>26</sup> offered his opinion that the Bristol society should be split into small groups of people, with each group responsible for a portion of the debt. A leader should be appointed over each of the groups who would shoulder the weight of collecting from each member their contribution, and ultimately settling the amount of debt that the group owed even at the leader's own expense if need be. Each week the leader would make the rounds by visiting each member and collecting from them whatever they could spare. While it may not sound like the intimate group of faith building that we are trying to reclaim, it is worthy to note that through a practical and typical church need, the raising of funds, God was able to sow the seeds of faithful discipleship.

What began as a methodical way to raise funds for the society, quickly became a tool to deepen the faith and connect the society into even closer relationships that would serve to hold the members accountable to the "General Rules" preached by Wesley and upheld by all members of the Wesleyan societies. As mentioned before, band meetings were thought to be the best tool for this job, but not everyone was in a band. Wesley immediately recognized both the practical application and the desperate need for this kind of intimate group where all members would be participants. Therefore, the class meeting became a staple of Methodism, ultimately leading Wesley to make it mandatory for all members of a society to be a member in good standing with

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<sup>26</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 22.

a class. There are many examples within the Methodist archives of the ‘class ticket’ that John Wesley used to denote who was and who was not a member in good standing with a class. These tickets were handed out and signed by the class leader in charge of each class and then shown at the gatherings so that the member was able to fully participate in the Love Feast, or in later years the Communion Table. This practice was one that John Wesley adopted from the Graeco-Roman world, and in the next chapter the ancient Catechumenate will be discussed where this practice came from.<sup>27</sup> When a class member attended the classes regularly, they would receive a ticket from the class leader. This ticket would allow that person to participate in Communion at the next public worship, and without such a ticket they would be refused. With this mandate from John Wesley, a Methodist, at their most fundamental level, was someone who attended a weekly class meeting.<sup>28</sup>

There needs to be a small clarification here, else it could be said that John Wesley focused on the class meeting more than the individual choice and desire of the person for their own salvation. John Wesley wrote in the General rules that, “[t]here is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into these societies – ‘a desire to flee from the wrath that is to come, to be saved from their sins.’”<sup>29</sup> Once a person felt that desire and came to the society, they would continue and solidify their membership by participation in a weekly class meeting.<sup>30</sup> John Wesley believed that while we might not be able to directly see into the heart and soul of a person the way that God can, we can nevertheless discern the heart of the person by

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<sup>27</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 104.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley*, 178.

<sup>30</sup> Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship*, 93.

judging their fruits. Therefore, the class meeting was a great way for this desire within the soul to “be shown by its fruits”.<sup>31</sup>

Since allowance to the Communion table was at stake within the Methodist societies, John Wesley would not allow the classes to falter. However, the membership and good standing with a class were never brought to bear inside the Anglican Church where Christians could continue to receive communion without need of a ticket. John Wesley would meet with the class leaders on a regular basis (quarterly)<sup>32</sup> to make sure that the members of their classes were not only in good standing but were also progressing in their faiths. We can get a sense of the powerful accountability that was found within these groups when we read John Wesley’s example of how it works as he examined classes in Gateshead:

On Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, I examined the classes. I had been often told, it was impossible for me to distinguish the precious from the vile, without the miraculous discernment of spirits. But I now saw, more clearly than ever, that this might be done, and without much difficulty, supposing only two things: First, courage and steadiness in the examiner. Secondly, Common sense and common honesty in the Leader of each class. I visit, for instance, the class in the Close, of which Robert Peacock is Leader. I ask, “Does this and this person in your class live in drunkenness or any outward sin? Does he go to church, and use the other means of grace? Does he meet you as often as he has opportunity?” Now, if Robert Peacock has common sense, he can answer these questions truly; and if he has common honesty, he will. And if not, some other in the class has both, and can and will answer for him. Where is the difficulty then of finding out if there be any disorderly walker in this class, and, consequently, in any other? The question is not concerning the heart, but the life. And the general tenor of this, I do not say cannot be known, but cannot be hid without a miracle.<sup>33</sup>

The accountability that John Wesley demanded of these classes was only able to be met if the members of the class accepted and submitted to the vulnerability of being open and honest with

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<sup>31</sup> John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley*, 178.

<sup>32</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 105.

<sup>33</sup> John Wesley, *Journals 1745-1760*, vol. 2 (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1996), [http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-11/LIBRARY3/WES\\_WW02.PDF](http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-11/LIBRARY3/WES_WW02.PDF).

the other members within the class. However, as John Wesley points out, if honesty and openness are submitted to, then not only will the sins of the individual members not be able to be “hid without a miracle”<sup>34</sup>, but the leader and the rest of the group can love and seek ways to walk with their brother or sister in order to help them down the road towards salvation.

### **The Evolution of the Class Leader**

In light of using John Wesley’s account of evaluation of a class and the class leader, I want to make a special mention of the role of the class leader. While the reclamation of the Wesleyan class meeting will help the modern church build deeper community, facilitate intimate relationships, embolden faithful disciples, and bring the whole of society closer to God, I believe that one of the greatest benefits of reclaiming the Wesleyan class meeting is to be found in the ability of the class meeting to develop lay pastors. The class leaders, while beginning as simply the responsible party for paying off debt, would become invaluable to the Wesleyan societies as they would become guides and guardians for their members and incredible resources for the local clergy.

When the class meetings began, the leaders would go out every week to collect from the members of their class. As they went from house to house, they would do more than simply ask for money; they would talk with their members. It was these discussions that highlighted something that was not known to Wesley, or any of the leaders, about the society at Bristol. The society members, on the whole, were not practicing the “General Rules” that had been laid down by John Wesley. To be more precise, the leaders found out that the society members were not adhering to the third of the three rules; they were not attending to the ordinances of God which included things such as “public worship, ministry of the Word, the Lord’s Supper, family and

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

private prayer, searching the Scriptures, and fasting or abstinence.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the first thing that John Wesley saw as a great benefit of the class meeting was that the class leader was “ideally situated to address the lack of discipline in keeping the General Rules among Methodists.”<sup>36</sup>

The class leader was one who had authority that was given to them by both the clergy and the laity. David Lowes Watson, in a lecture he gave to the Northeast Methodist History Society, said that “while preaching brought early Methodists to the New Birth, it was the pastoral oversight of the class leaders that guided them in their discipleship, and the fellowship of the class meeting that nurtured them toward spiritual maturity.”<sup>37</sup> In this lecture he also recalls a modern story of a modern class meeting where the class leader was able to speak truth to his two friends who had invited him to come along. They had invited him to preach to the group as a guest and so when the three of them arrived the class leader welcomed David as any good leader would welcome a guest preacher, and then turned to the couple saying, “We’re glad to see you two here tonight. Now we’ve been here every week, but we haven’t seen you for months. So, get yerselves back!” David’s final remark on the story was that he could not think of any clergy, himself included, that would actually speak to a congregation member like that, but that the class leader had that power, as evidenced by the beaming faces of the admonished, but loved, delinquent members.<sup>38</sup>

This story proves two things to me. It proves the need of our laity, no matter what they might say, to be held accountable. The persons in the story were scolded for their lack of

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<sup>35</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> David Lowes Watson, “Northeast Methodist History Society,” *Northeast Methodist History Society* (October 21, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

attendance, and yet they are beaming from it. I do not believe in the least that this is because they enjoyed the chastisement, but they saw the true meaning behind it. They understood and knew that behind those harsh words was a man who truly loved and cared for them and their souls. He was not chastising them out of judgement in the superiority sense, he was chastising them as a fellow sinner like them whom he loved enough to notice when they were gone, loved enough to rejoice that they had returned, and loved enough to desire for them to not make that same mistake again. These harsh words were a practice of grace, and they were received as such by the members. Secondly, the class leader in the story has been truly given the authority to speak this way by the members of the class. He was not a clergyperson, nor did he have any paper giving him authority from a bishop or any other religious leader. Yet he was the appointed shepherd of the class; appointed by the members of the class that he led. Anyone who has ever had a truly deep relationship where harsh truth can be spoken knows that this kind of relationship requires the gift of authority and permission. Those that are members have bestowed upon this leader the authority to lead them and have given him permission to speak to them in this way. Without that permission, those words would be interpreted as being looked down upon or judged, in the sense that Jesus instructed us never to do (Matthew 7:1-2). In this brief story, I hope that the power and significance of the class leader office is conveyed.

Given the power and authority that is vested in the class leader position, we must understand how this position came to be. The creation and development of the class leader is particularly important to the reclamation of the class meeting in the modern church which will be detailed in a later chapter. Therefore, it is important to see the evolution of the class leader from simply a person tasked with collecting and raising funds, into what can easily be seen as a pastoral role within the society as a whole. We can see the drastic change by simply reading

John Wesley's own words within the General Rules as he details the evolved duties of the class leader:

That it may the more easily be discerned whether they are indeed working out their own salvation, each society is divided into smaller companies, called classes, according to their respective places of abode. There are about twelve persons in a class, one of whom is styled the Leader. It is his duty:

1. To see each person in his class once a week at least, in order:
  - (1) to inquire how their souls prosper;
  - (2) to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort, as occasion may require;
  - (3) to receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the preachers, church, and poor.
2. To meet the Minister and the Stewards of the society once a week, in order:
  - (1) to inform the minister of any that are sick, or of any that walk disorderly and will not be reprov'd;
  - (2) to pay to the stewards what they have received of their several classes in the week preceding.<sup>39</sup>

One final word about the people that took on the class leader role, as put forward by John Wesley. class leaders ended up doing a large amount of pastoring due to their already intimate relationships with their classes, as well as the lack of ordained clergy. This allowed for both constancy for the congregation, as well as support for the clergy to be able to focus on other tasks. When we read the role of the class leader, it is not difficult to see that the class leader was the perfect place for lay members who thought that they might have a calling by God into pastoral ministry to test out the waters. In a society where pulpits are left unfilled and congregations are left leaderless because of the lack of ordained clergy, the reclamation and reinstatement of the class leader could very easily usher in a new era in pastoral formation and clergy growth.

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<sup>39</sup> *Book of Discipline UMC 2016* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Pub House, 2017), ¶104, 76.

## The Class Meeting's Impact

### On Wesley's Britain

If we take away the moment in the history of the class meetings that they were used for the purposes of gathering money, then we see a small group that allowed for great fellowship and growth in the budding movement of Methodism in Britain. In Leslie Church's book, he gives a wonderful statement about the how the class meeting helped the early Methodists and gives a great starting point for this section. "The classes were the 'fireside' round which members of the 'family' shared a common experience and kept their sacred tryst."<sup>40</sup>

The class meetings were a place that created great comradery and fellowship between brand new converts and lifelong Christians. As they shared with each other and opened up about their lives, they were able to truly grow with each other. The metaphor given by Church truly captures what these meetings were, a place where the desire to grow in faith met with a familial love for each member.

David Lowes Watson enumerates the society that the class meeting grew up. British society was "suffering from radical change and depersonalization"<sup>41</sup>. The Age of Reason was sweeping the intellectual scene by undermining and, in some cases, eliminating ideas and established orders that had been around in Europe for many generations. If that were not enough, there was also significant economic unrest.

Domestic industries were replacing the old trade guilds, and monopolistic practices were beginning to encroach on those trades which remained established. Rapid colonial expansion added further commercial pressure to a domestic industry not yet equipped to serve and use a growing empire to advantage – added to which there was a great deal of social displacement... Under Elizabethan Poor Law... resources proved increasingly inadequate for the thousands who gravitated

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<sup>40</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 116.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 129.

from the country to seek work in the towns, causing a drastic increase in the numbers of the poor.<sup>42</sup>

The average person would have been looking for anything to cling to in these tumultuous waters. As the class meetings and Methodism began to take hold in Britain, the people that were joining and latching onto this new expression of faith came in droves to find something that could anchor them. A large group of Britain citizens found themselves in terrible conditions with no way of escaping. Throughout history, we can see that when this kind of thing happens, the disenfranchised turn to God in droves to find meaning, purpose, and life because nothing in their real world will give them any. The class meeting brought together all these people, who were desperate for identity, grace, and peace, and gave it to them. “There can be little doubt that those who joined the Methodist societies found, in their weekly class meetings, the human relationships which provided the means of achieving their identity.”<sup>43</sup>

The interesting part about the Methodist movement was that while it did such a great job at reaching the masses that were in poverty through what was stated above, it also reached the rich just as well. Methodism reached through to “the educated classes through its literature and the polemics which surrounded the movement from the very beginning.”<sup>44</sup> This ability for the Methodist movement to break through the barriers of the secular society was key for the class meetings. This meant that the class meetings could be filled with people from different backgrounds, coming together in order that all members could grow in their faith. The class meeting was a “more pragmatic and more task-oriented”<sup>45</sup> group that allowed for all the societal

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 130.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 131.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 131.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 132.

barriers to slide off, and allow for the members to realize that they were all in the same place; that they were all sinners in need of the grace given by God and desired to become better.

The early class meetings were instrumental in the growth of the Methodist movement and the bringing together of so many who desired to be the hands and feet of God because it was a space that allowed the members to reorient their lives around serving God and building His kingdom. The class meeting, with its questions and the class leader's guidance, was a place where the members were able to name and recognize their sins, work through the process of forgiveness, and seek to make strides to overcome future temptations of that sin. The class meeting was a place that allowed for the members to truly make good on trying to create a new life for themselves through a "commitment of the members to an accountable discipleship."<sup>46</sup>

Ultimately, the class meeting was a place that allowed all believers to find their new identity in Christ, be able to learn and experiment on what that meant for their lives moving forward, and gave structure and grace for those same members when they fell and sinned. This allowed for the members of the classes to pray for each other, love each other, and build each other up so that they could grow in their discipleship. This growth allowed for the members to start looking beyond their group and out into the society so that they could take the grace that they had out to those who needed it. As Watson says, "[w]e must look at the class meeting, not as a paradigm for Christian witness to the world – for that was its *effect* – but rather as a means of seeking obedience to God's will – for that was its purpose."<sup>47</sup> The class meeting of the early Methodists should teach us that if we aim at creating true disciples, who have a commitment to an accountable discipleship, then those disciples will become great witnesses to the world.

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 132.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, 142.

## On Early American Methodism

Early American Methodism was known for the preachers who left the pulpit to go beyond the walls of the church. Those preachers, following John Wesley's footsteps, brought the Word of God to the people, instead of insisting that those same people come to them. The camp meeting "served well to command the attention and to create the community around the Methodist message and program requisite for individual transformation and corporate formation."<sup>48</sup> Watson alludes to many different Methodist biographies that point to the class meetings as a "major influence in bringing people to the point of Christian commitment as well as confirming them in it afterwards."<sup>49</sup>

The camp meetings would grow the size of local congregations by forcing people to leave the world behind and spend quality and purposeful time in study and worship. Under those tents the true church of God could be seen as believers of different denominations came together for days at a time to worship and grow in the Spirit together. A local pastor Ezekiel Cooper wrote to Bishop Coke about one such event:

There is a great and glorious Revival in Tennessee and Kentucky, among both Presbyterians and Methodists, who join in Christian fellowship, and help each other in the blessed work. Some of our Ministers, and some of the Presbyterian Clergy, join as a band of brothers to make war against the kingdom of the Devil; and the fruit of their joint labours is wonderful. Their meetings continue for days together; the people come from far in their wagons, &c. to their great meetings: They bring provisions with them, pitch their tents in the woods, and there continue for days, worshipping the Lord together.<sup>50</sup>

Many other great camp meetings happened throughout the United States from the wild and untamed West to the urbanized East. These camp meetings would produce great numbers, but

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<sup>48</sup> Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller. Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 84.

<sup>49</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 132.

<sup>50</sup> Ezekiel Cooper, "Letters," *Methodist Magazine* 25 (September 1, 1802): p. 424.

what was there to keep those who had been through such a great spiritual awakening from drifting back towards their previous lives instead of continuing to deepen the roots of the seed that had been planted under the tents?

The class meeting would take this need on as the early American Methodist Church was still only experiencing quarterly worship meetings because of the circuit rider preachers. Without ordained clergy being always on hand, the needs of the early Methodists would fall to the class leader to “[guide] them in their discipleship” and it would be “the fellowship of the class meeting that nurtured them toward spiritual maturity.”<sup>51</sup> The class meeting was integral to the amazing and rapid growth of Wesleyan theology by creating small and intimate learning spaces where people could grow with each other in their faith of the one true God. Class meetings would be filled with members who had the desire to “flee from the wrath that is to come”<sup>52</sup>, and through that desire would create a strong community of believers. These believers would then look out into the world around them and be moved to become Christ’s hands and feet, in order to answer the request of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”.<sup>53</sup> This is what will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

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<sup>51</sup> David Lowes Watson, “Northeast Methodist History Society,” (October 21, 2017).

<sup>52</sup> John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley*, 178.

<sup>53</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Pub. House, 1989), 895.

## Chapter 3:

### How the Class Meeting can Become Christian Community

#### The Class Meeting Builds Relationships

In the previous chapter, we looked at the history of the Wesleyan class meeting. While the class meeting began as a way to raise funds to pay for a building, John Wesley immediately saw the implications of the group reached far deeper and wider than just being able to bring in funds. While the class leaders would go to each of their members asking for money, they were also able to look in on the way in which the members were living their lives. In just the first couple of meetings with the class leaders, John Wesley realized that these classes were able to keep the members true to the general rules that they had vowed to uphold when the members first became members of the society. David Lowes Watson gives us an in-depth look at the birth of the true class meeting in this way,

One of the leaders reported to Wesley that he had found instances of misbehavior on his rounds – a man quarrelling with his wife, another drunk – and “it immediately struck into Mr. Wesley’s mind, ‘This is the very thing we wanted. The Leaders are the persons who may not only receive the contributions, but also watch over the souls of their brethren.’”<sup>54</sup>

In this, the Methodist movement found the greatest form of discipleship building. The class meetings became groups that had the ability for their members, who had backslid from their initial commitment to the general rules of the society that they had joined, to find new strength in following and upholding their vows. The class meeting was a “prudential means of grace whereby Christians in witness to the world could sustain one another in their distinctive tasks assigned by God.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> David Lowes. Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*. 93.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 145.

These small groups were the backbone of the growing Methodist movement. We can see how the societies grew from the time that the class meetings were first introduced starting in 1760 by this chart:<sup>56</sup>

Year	Population of England and Wales	Membership of Methodist societies
1760	6,664,989	19,267 (1766)
1770	7,123,749	25,701
1780	7,580,938	35,680
1790	8,216,096	53,691
1801 (First Census)	9,168,000	85,063

While the numbers may not jump off the page given today's standards, it is good to remember that this was at the very beginning of the movement. A 341% increase in thirty-four years is quite astounding. While it can be argued that there were other factors that contributed to the growth of the Methodist movement other than the class meeting, I argue that the class meeting was the part of the movement that made people stay. This is of vast importance because while it might be quite easy to get people in the door to the church, getting them to stay and bring others in is much different and much more difficult.

What the class meeting produced in those early years in Britain was societies of members who were truly working towards their own salvations. The members of Wesleyan societies were not giving lip-service to their vows, nor to their desperate desire to get out from under their sin. The class meetings gave them a place to belong, be loved, and be held accountable so that they could truly grow in their faith and be strong in their callings. The class meeting provided the space for real relationships to be held. A real relationship, in this context, is a relationship that

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 131.

grows by vulnerability, trust, and love. Even in the world today, we can see varying degrees of relationships. Not every relationship is the same. To take the class meeting to the next step, we must define the types of relationships that there are in the world. To be sure, the world is full of shades of grey, not every relationship can be neatly and easily segregated into perfect little boxes. However, by drawing some broad strokes, we can come to a basic understanding of how relationships can be understood.

### **What is a Relationship?**

In the world of relationships, there are many different levels. In England, Dr. Robin Dunbar, a leading anthropologist, was studying the relation between the size of primate's brains and the size of their social circles. While his initial discovery was quite simple, the larger the brain the larger the social circle, Dr. Dunbar used his research to come up with a hypothesis about humans. That hypothesis was that humans could not have more than 150 people in their social circle. Through research and testing, Dr. Dunbar proved his hypothesis to be mostly correct. With few outliers, "Humans really do seem to have a natural limit to the number of meaningful relationships they can have. And this number is about 150."<sup>57</sup> Further research, brought him to the conclusion that of those 150 people within the circle, there are actually layers of relationships. Dr. Dunbar says it this way, "Individuals, he says, generally have up to five people in the closest layer. The next closest layer contains an additional 10, the one beyond that an extra 35, and the final group another 100."<sup>58</sup> After years of research, "the study shows good

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<sup>57</sup> Emerging Technology from the arXiv, "Your Brain Limits You to Just Five Bffs," *MIT Technology Review*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2016/04/29/160438/your-brain-limits-you-to-just-five-bffs/#:~:text=Humans%20really%20do%20seem%20to,the%20emotional%20closeness%20betw,een%20individuals>

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

evidence for the existence of the innermost and outermost layers but with some variability for the size of the intermediate layers.”<sup>59</sup> With this as our basis, let us name and define what these layers might be.

The outermost circle consists of about 100 people. The relationships found here will most likely be of an acquaintance level. These are people so distant from you that you might interact with them once or twice a month or maybe even less. They are just above being strangers. Except for the event or place that you see them, they know nothing more about you and you know nothing more about them. Most of the people in this circle barely know your face, much less your name, and they certainly do not know much about your life.

The next two circles are difficult to pinpoint both in size and distinction. However, I will make an attempt to show some distinctions that might be good for the relationships that are on the outside edges of these groups, but may not be helpful for relationships that are closer to the boundary between the circles. The next circle from the outside consists of 35 people. This would be the group of people that you see on a more regular basis, but still only share one event or hobby with. A good example here is distant cousins or coworkers. In both examples you find common ground and you probably know them by name, but, outside of the office or a family reunion, it will be rare to mingle with them. Unlike the previous group, you may have some trust here and be willing to call upon these relationships for small things or in a dire emergency. The important piece to note here is that these relationships are not ones that you divulge anything more than you absolutely must. You may vent to your coworker about an assignment due, or you may share gossip with your distant cousin about another family member, but you will not be

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

sharing the fact that you are struggling financially or that you are having difficulty in your marriage. Bottom line in this circle, there are many boundaries that you will not cross with them.

The next circle has only 10 people in it. These are your close family and friends. As said previously, this circle and the previous circle are a little hazier when it comes to numbers. For example, if you come from a large family and have 8 siblings, this circle will probably be bigger than for someone who is an only child. But this circle of relationships counts those who you meet with and converse with on a regular basis out of desire to do so. The key here is the desire. Take for example your coworkers. You are forced to interact with and be around your coworkers while you are at work, but if you were to make sure that twice a week you went out with a particular coworker, then that might bring that relationship into this circle. However, it is more than just how often and how much time you spend with a person. The important part of this circle is how much you allow them to influence you and how deep you let them see into your personal life. This circle of friends knows some of your secrets, they know some of your regrets, they know some of your temptations, and they love you anyway. You truly trust this group of people. Think of it like this, if you were in a difficult situation, these would be some of the names that would come to mind that you would feel comfortable calling to help you out.

Finally, we get to the inner circle of 5 people. While the previous two circles are hard to pinpoint, this circle is easy to delineate. These are your BFF's. These are the people that you are always thinking about. They are spouses and best friends; people whom you would call at the drop of a hat no matter what was going on. Think about the worst thing you could possibly find yourself in the middle of and the first name that pops into your head as to who you would call is part of your inner circle. We do not have many of these because it requires a huge amount of trust to have this kind of relationship.

I went through this list for a simple reason; as we look at this list, we see how trust is gained by each circle as it gets smaller and smaller. No one would allow someone from their outer circle to come and tell them that they were making huge mistakes in their lives without getting defensive, recoiling, and leaving that relationship altogether. The further towards the inner circle you get, the more weight the words and opinions of the other person gets. This is important to understand when we look at the class meeting. Which group is better to reprove someone of their sins? The entire congregation of 60 to 100 people (or even bigger depending upon the congregation that you are a part of), or a small group of 10-12 close knit and trusted believers? Dr. Dunbar's research, and our own common sense, should tell us that the latter is going to produce significantly better results.

### **Driven to a Community of Faith**

Before we go any further with the class meeting and Dr. Dunbar's conclusions, we must first enumerate how one comes to be part of a group like the class meeting in the first place. In my years of ministry, I cannot tell you how many testimonies I have heard from people who joined a church family out of a very dark place. There is a saying that has its origin and author lost to time that says, "there are no atheists in foxholes." Many people in the world will come to the family of faith due to tragedy, sorrow, pain, or mistake that they have experienced. Not only do we see that in the modern day, but John Wesley also saw that in his day as well. When John Wesley states what it takes to become a member of a society it is easy and succinct, "The only condition for membership in a Methodist society was 'a desire to flee from the wrath that is to come, and to be save from their sins.'"<sup>60</sup> That wrath may not be the person's sin, it may be just

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<sup>60</sup> Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship*. 93.

an escape from the pain and sorrow that this world can visit upon someone. But what brings people to the church more than anything else is the desire to escape the wrath of this world.

If the person who is escaping truly converts, then the next thing that they find is that they are flawed. The problem of sin is a problem that all of humanity has. Paul tells us, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and this principle will be found out soon enough to every new believer. What is the new believer to do? Some, no doubt will scoff at the idea and leave to find another message that will make them feel better (2 Timothy 4:3). But to those who will acknowledge their own sin and seek to become better, they will realize very quickly that they need help. CS Lewis has a real knack for bringing complicated theological premises into common language, and he does so when speaking about this phenomenon in his book, *Mere Christianity*.

Thus, in one sense, the road back to God is a road of moral effort, of trying harder and harder. But in another sense it is not trying that is ever going to bring us home. All this trying leads up to the vital moment at which you turn to God and say, ‘You must do this. I can’t.’<sup>61</sup>

In the desire to be better, we find that Jesus’ prayer in the Garden is powerful. Unity with God certainly will protect us in our desire to stave off sin, but because we will not truly become one with God until after death, we need another line of protection. That protection is unity with fellow believers.

Therefore, the next step in discipleship is for the new disciple to surround themselves with other faithful believers that will help to support them in their new journey. In the beginning, this might just be the joining of a local congregation as a full member, and maybe

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<sup>61</sup> CS Lewis, “*Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis - My.dacc.edu,” DDAC.edu - *Mere Christianity* By CS Lewis (DDAC, 2002), <https://my.dacc.edu/assets/pdfs/PCM/merechristianitylewis.pdf>, 72.

even joining a Bible study group. This is the step in the faith process where the disciple learns that they need God and others if they are going to continue to grow in their faith.

As the disciple continues to grow and feel the grace that is poured out for everyone, the words of 1 Peter will come to bear on them, “[l]ike good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Peter 4:10), and the desire to give the grace that has set them free to others will abound. Upon receiving such lavish Grace from both God and from their fellow believers, the disciple will want to bring that same grace to others as well so that they might experience the freedom, forgiveness, and love that the disciple is now in. Thus, we come to the idea of the Great Commission, where Christ gives the edict to go and make new disciples of all people (Matthew 28:19).

### **Real Relationships Lead to Practical Faith**

The above steps to becoming disciples of Christ beg the question, how to make sure that new disciples get the support and help that they need to continue the difficult and lifelong journey of discipleship? The previous chapter about the Wesleyan class meeting gives the answer that the small group atmosphere is a perfect place to do this.

The class meeting created a small group that had a real purpose and a structure to help the members along the path towards that practical discipleship. David Watson has a distinctive way to tell how the class meetings went from outer circle relationships to the deep and meaningful faith families that they became:

Initially there would be some awkwardness as the catechetical process was implemented, and people would be diffident about answering such direct and evaluative questions. But as the accountability was exercised, they began to realize that they were indeed on a common journey – and that their mutual accountability was not pejorative, but supportive. The fellowship was rich because they

understood the real purpose of the gathering; and the meetings were informal because their structure was assured.<sup>62</sup>

In the final chapter of this paper, we will see how this played out in a real-world setting, but it suffices to say here that while the class meetings produced faithful communities, it took some time for those classes to build the trust necessary to truly grow. The accountability and vulnerability found within the classes led to people having real and deep relationships with each other. Through these relationships the members of the class meetings were able to have practical faith and practical discipleship. I take these terms from my reading and understanding of the parable given by Christ, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 21:31-46).

In the parable, Jesus tells the disciples that there are two types of people in the world, those who follow Christ and those who do not. This seems very linear in its thinking, but if we go to the Gospel of John, Jesus says that His commandment to us is to, “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12) and Jesus follows this up with “You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14). When Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, he gives many examples of what each did and did not do to deserve their position. In both cases, the examples are the same:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me [Matthew 21:35-36].

However, we see that Jesus draws a distinctive line in the sand that is easy to see considering the commandment in John’s Gospel.

The sheep loved their neighbor, while the goats did not. What is more, the love that the sheep bore for their neighbor was not a passive kind of love. The sheep loved their neighbor in

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<sup>62</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 116.

ways that could be truly felt and seen by the outside world, and more importantly by the recipient of their love. The sheep gave food and water, they brought their neighbors into their homes, they risked their own safety to take care of a neighbor who was sick, and they showed up and were present with those who were imprisoned. The goats on the other hand gave lip service to loving their neighbor. They gave some food to a food pantry, but they never set foot inside one to help. They said a prayer in their living room or Sanctuary for someone who was sick, but never went into their hospital room to give comfort and support. The idea here is clear, if a person desires to follow Christ, then they will obey His commandments. If His commandment is to love our neighbor, (John 15:12) then a follower will love in such a way that the neighbor will know that they are loved.

### **Practical Faith Leads to Practical Discipleship**

Following this logic, let us now take the Great Commissioning by Christ as another of Christ's commandments to His followers. If practical faith is the inward desire to follow Christ, then practical faith is the driving force that makes a disciple want to follow the commandments of Christ. Therefore, practical faith is going to be the inward drive to carry out the Great Commission because Jesus commanded all His disciples to do so. And here is where we get practical discipleship, it is the product of practical faith. While practical faith is inward, practical discipleship is the drive to truly act out the commandment from Christ. Practical discipleship is the drive to,

Go [therefore] and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you [Matthew 28:19-20a].

If we look back at the parable of Christ, the practical faith of the sheep made them truly see the need that was around them. Their practical faith saw the need of food, water, shelter, or presence, and that practical faith led to the practical discipleship to act towards those needs in

love. The goats, on the other hand, did not see these needs. Hence their statement to Christ, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” (Matthew 25:44).

When I look to the modern church, save some wonderful exceptions, I see many churches falling into the trap of trying to equip their members to go out. The modern church holds so many classes on how to talk to other people, how to answer questions about faith, and how to evangelize the whole world. While these tactics and bits of information are important, this way of thinking misses a huge point. If the church raised its members to have practical faith and practical discipleship, then there would be no need to tell them to ‘go’. Their commitment to Christ would compel them to do it without human prompting because the Spirit would already be leading them out.

The vulnerability and accountability of the Wesleyan class meeting allowed for believers to have real, honest, and deep relationships with other fellow believers. “The weekly class meeting proved to be the very thing that was needed to foster discipleship among the society members.”<sup>63</sup> The class meeting utilized the strength of the small community to energize the members to turn the love they have for the members of their small group, towards their neighbors outside their small group. In so doing, these small communities of faith were able to protect the members to withstand the Satanic forces of the outside world while still desiring to go into that place knowing that they went “like sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matthew 10:16).

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<sup>63</sup> David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002). 43.

## Where Did the Class Meeting Go?

Up to this point, the class meeting has been shown to be a great instrument and tool that helped the early Methodist movement grow and make amazing disciples who built the Kingdom of God. David Lowes Watson describes the Wesleyan class meeting thus:

A dynamic of Christian fellowship quickly developed, as members began to ‘bear one another’s burdens,’ and to ‘care for each other.’ The openness which was engendered by the meetings led to ‘a more endeared affection’ between the members, and they felt free to be honest with each other.<sup>64</sup>

The class meeting was a requirement of all Methodists, but over time it would eventually vanish.

In order to resurrect this powerful tool, the reasons for its demise must be understood.

The Wesleyan class meeting had its humble beginnings in 1742 to relieve the debt on The New Room in Bristol, but by the mid 1800’s the class meeting was already starting to decline. The decline of the class meeting is both tragic and, unfortunately, predictable. The reasons for the decline are predictable because no matter what point of history we look at, humans, regardless of technological advances, societal advances, languages, or anything else, still sink back into the same patterns. Humans become disillusioned, we become lazy, and we lose the holy by focusing on the mundane. David Watson puts it well when he paraphrases John Wesley’s understanding of the second of his rules, ‘Do Good’.

Wesley knew only too well from his own years of rigorous spiritual learning that the promptings from God could easily be ignored, or even misinterpreted, due to ill temper or lazy disposition<sup>65</sup>

The class meetings would suffer from the same thing that almost every good discipleship program does, it starts to focus on the humans that are doing it instead of focusing on God who is inspiring it. Overall, the class meeting suffered and declined because of “a neglect of the works of obedience in the weekly catechesis and a growing self-preoccupation with religious

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<sup>64</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 94.

<sup>65</sup> David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship*, 46.

experience.”<sup>66</sup> I believe that there are four reasons for the decline of this discipleship making tool. If we are to truly resurrect the class meeting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we will need to find a way to overcome these mechanisms so that they do not rear their ugly heads again.

#### Reason #1 – Lack of Personalization

When the class meeting began, the people were invested and passionate about the meeting. The class meeting was a place that brought the members not only to a relationship with God, but also confirming them in that relationship with God.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, the class meetings had lost that spark and passion and eventually became “repetitious”.<sup>68</sup>

The class meeting became just another meeting that happened during the week. In the church, I like to call it becoming a ‘check-list Christian’. It means that the person is not at church because their spirit would war against them if they did not come, but they are at church because it is just what they are supposed to do. When they come to Sunday school or a Bible study, the same rule applies. Their hearts are not in to being there, they are simply there because ‘that is what a good Christian is supposed to do’ and since they fancy themselves a ‘good Christian’ they go so that they can check off the imaginary list.

Unfortunately, when this becomes the reason for attending there is little to no growth that occurs. That person is not looking for the holy in the worship service; they are looking at their watch to make sure that they can still make it to lunch on time. That person is not seeking God in the lesson of that Sunday school class; they are making sure that someone sees them so that their presence is noted. It goes back to Christ’s words to the Disciples from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. Jesus tells the Disciples that those who pray, do charity, and fast in ways that the

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<sup>66</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 145.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, 132.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 146.

world can see have already received their rewards by the mere fact that those around them have given them accolades. Jesus instead tells them to do these things secretly so that the reward can come from God (Matthew 6:1-8).

When fasting, praying, or giving to others becomes about getting accolades from the world, instead of being focused on God, then it loses its power and ability to bring you into relationship with God. Instead, it starts to bring you into closer relationship to the World. This is hugely problematic when we remember the words of Paul, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Once the class meetings became just something else to check off on a list of things that ‘good Methodists did’ then the meeting lost its purpose. The meetings no longer could point people towards God because the people were not there to be pointed towards God. They were there because they were supposed to be there. Accountability fell by the wayside, and without that, the class meetings had “lost their essential purpose”<sup>69</sup>.

#### Reason #2 – Loss of Leadership, Sincerity, and Accountability

In the last reason, accountability already came up, but it is hard to pinpoint which came first; was it the lack of personalization that produced poor leadership in the class meetings and made accountability suffer, or was it a lack of leadership and accountability that led to the members losing their passion. Regardless of which came first, it is documented that both occurred and led to the decline of the class meeting. Class leaders were designed to be those who held the rest of the group accountable. In describing the building of a good class leader,

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 147.

David Watson says that, “the class leader will become a trusted friend”<sup>70</sup>. However, this is not just a regular friendship, it will be a friendship that “will always be directed toward an accountability for faithful discipleship”<sup>71</sup>.

In an excerpt of an American minister from the early twentieth century given in David Watson’s book, the minister states, “leaders were dull and profitless in their remarks”<sup>72</sup>. A leader who has lost their passion for the ministry is only going to breed passionless members. While we do not have evidence of this, I can say that we have seen things like this in the modern church. Leadership roles tend to attract persons who want the power of the position but may not have the true passion for the work. While the early class leaders were men and women of passion and purpose, over time men and women who just wanted the title and influence could have easily gotten into the positions. Their lack of passion and zeal to hold their members accountable and their reluctance to ask the difficult questions in the meetings led to the members of the class no longer being sincere in their responses.

The lack of sincerity is seen by the members making exhortations of repentance through hollow words that had no passion behind them. That same American minister remarked that he had heard the empty phrases of members “so often that I could give their testimony verbatim before the meeting began.”<sup>73</sup> I know that I have come across this kind of thing before in my ministry settings. There have been many church members that I have come across that love to be self-deprecating in public, but do not seek to change anything about themselves. Of course, it is always a good thing for all of us to recognize and acknowledge our shortcomings. However, just

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<sup>70</sup> David Lowes Watson, *Class Leaders*, 72.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, 72.

<sup>72</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 147.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, 147.

like the prayers, almsgiving, and fasting that Christ spoke of in Matthew's Gospel, if we only speak about our shortcomings to make ourselves look humble in other's eyes, then we have received our reward from them; not from God. When the class member gave a platitude or generic answer, it should have been the leader's responsibility to hold them accountable to speaking the truth. And so, we see how this problem is a downward spiral that does not matter which side started it because they both feed off each other.

### Reason #3 – The Appointed Pastor

While the previous reasons pertain to the whole of Methodism, the next two are exclusive to the American experience. Once the Methodist movement became a denomination during the Christmas Conference of 1784, the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) experienced Methodism quite differently than their British brothers and sisters. When the MEC first started, there were very few preachers and therefore one of the most iconic images of the Methodist movement is the traveling pastor on horseback, also known as the Circuit Rider. These preachers would ride throughout the country and stop in at a church on certain Sundays to give a message and give communion to the congregations of Methodists that scattered the new nation.

By the mid-1800's, the church had grown, and preachers were no longer wanting to be on horseback for extended periods. Even as early as the 1810's people such as Nathan Bangs were advocating for both permanent housing for worship and parsonages for pastors.<sup>74</sup> Bang's argued that it was "imperative that Methodists occupy cities, towns, and villages and provide there their full missional repertoire."<sup>75</sup> In Bang's own words he said that "for the want of having a preacher stationed in all important places, we had lost much of the fruits of our labor."<sup>76</sup> It was no secret

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<sup>74</sup>Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America*. 111-112.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, 111-112.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 112.

that having a stationed and appointed local pastor was a boon to the congregation, as the clergyperson could focus their entire life on reaching others and performing the duties of the church in ways that laity could not. This was due to even what we see today, laity have their own jobs and responsibilities outside of the church. With an appointed clergy, the pastor could focus on the Spiritual needs of the church and the community surrounding it. Along with the focus of purpose for the appointed clergy, the clergy also had the training that the laity, overall, did not have. This seems like it would be a great thing for the local churches of the growing MEC in America. While it did wonderful things for the newly formed and growing denomination, this was one of the factors that contributed to the decline of the class meeting, specifically the decline of class leaders.

The class leaders lost a large portion of their responsibilities when appointed pastors started to come into the church setting.

Stationed pastors – appointed to a charge with a single congregation or society and therefore present in a community 24/7, not simply stopping by every two, four, or six weeks – took on more and more of the nurturing, ‘local’ functions once the prerogative of the class leader<sup>77</sup>

It did not stop at the appointed pastors though. Now that pastors were able to be stationary, the landscape of clergy was no longer reserved for bachelors. With the creation of parsonage committees and the desire for appointed pastors to stay in one location for long periods of time, pastors were getting married and starting families. The class leaders did not just have to compete with a local pastor, but now had to compete with the clergy spouse who would also assume roles within the church to support both the church and her husband.

Stationed preachers and stationed preachers’ wives reflexively usurped the roles ascribed by *Discipline* to the class leaders. And while class leaders struggled to

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, 113.

find time for their duties, preachers and wives dedicated their entire lives to the cause.<sup>78</sup>

With the sudden increase of clergy presence within the churches and societies, and the spouses coming right alongside, the class leaders found their jobs to be obsolete and lacking in comparison with people who could devote the entirety of their energy towards what they could only spend part of their energy doing.

With the leader's role diminishing, the meeting itself devolved too. While the pastor could spend his entire day devoted to the ministry of the church, any pastor will tell you that holding an entire congregation accountable cannot be the prerogative of just one person; nor can it be the prerogative even of two people. Just like the old saying that it takes a village to raise a child; it takes a church to run a church. As the leader diminished and the responsibility of the clergy grew "the class meeting's function in discipline, spiritual formation, and nurture increasingly devolved"<sup>79</sup> and fell onto the appointed pastor, his wife, and Sunday school.

#### Reason #4 – The Growth of Sunday School

I want to begin this reason with a caveat; Sunday school is a wonderful thing. Just like having appointed pastors who can engage and be present in the local community was an overall good thing for the church, Sunday school is a boon to any congregation that still has it as part of their makeup. Unfortunately, the decline of the class meeting came at the broadening of the Sunday school class. As the class leader position deteriorated and the appointed clergy became the 'class leader' for the entire church, it is no surprise to find out that the need for small groups was still present. I have served small congregations that worshipped only 20-30 people, and can attest to the fact that even in that size of a congregation, being present with every member will

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, 113.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, 113.

take up every moment that you have as a pastor; leaving you with no time to work on sermons, be with family, raise kids, or do anything else in life. The small group where the congregation could be fed and taken care of was a necessity that the class meeting no longer met. Enter the Sunday school teacher and Sunday school class.

Sabbath school teachers conducted their gathering with prayers, hymns, testimony, and exhortation – offering an alternative small-group experience in the style of the class meeting.<sup>80</sup>

The Sunday school class became a place to grow in faith and learn how to be better disciples.

While the Sunday school class has done amazing and holy things in the church, it could not and was never designed to do what the class meeting did.

When we look at the differences between the groups, one of the easiest differences to see is the change in leadership. The class meeting had a leader who held his/her members in accountability, and the members held the leader in accountability. The Sunday school class was led by a teacher whose job was to instruct the members, not hold them accountable. Kevin Watson breaks down small groups into three types of small groups, “affinity groups”, “information driven groups”, and “transformation driven groups”.<sup>81</sup> Affinity groups are “organized around common passions, interests, or hobbies”<sup>82</sup>. Information driven groups are “focused on conveying information and are organized by a common curriculum”<sup>83</sup>. Transformation driven groups are “small groups [which] are organized around a common desire to support one another in their efforts to become increasingly faithful Christians who are growing in love of God and neighbor.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, 114.

<sup>81</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*. 5-6.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

The Sunday school class has its roots in being an information driven group. To this point, let me say something controversial; anyone can be a Sunday school teacher. Please do not take this to mean that anyone can be a good or even great Sunday school teacher. I too, have fond memories of great teachers who taught me valuable and worthy lessons from Sunday school. But the great teachers did more than just read the curriculum, and that is what made them great. However, almost anyone can get up and read a pamphlet to a class, and at the most basic level, this is all it takes to teach a Sunday school class.

The second difference between the Sunday school class and the class meeting was its purpose. The Sunday school class's purpose was, "global, even transcendent" and "looked beyond the group to the children, the unconverted, and the heathen."<sup>85</sup> When we look at the class meeting, its purpose was to give its members the ability to "grow in holiness".<sup>86</sup> Essentially, the Sunday school was producing missionaries that would go out into the world to convert the world to Christ. Whereas the class meeting was designed to create disciples who "consistently grew in their ability to love God and neighbor."<sup>87</sup>

### **Why the Class Meeting?**

Ultimately, the biggest question in this entire dissertation hinges here: Why should we spend all this energy and effort into resurrecting the class meeting? Why should we not just repurpose the Sunday school class or reimagine small group ministries? The answer lies within the purposes for these groups and the purpose that lies at the heart of the class meeting. The modern church needs a group whose purpose falls in line with the class meeting. At the heart of

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<sup>85</sup> Richey, Rowe, and Schmidt, *The Methodist Experience in America*. 114.

<sup>86</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *A Blueprint for Discipleship Wesley's General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2009). 101.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, 101.

the class meeting lies a purpose to build discipleship among fellow believers by creating a close-knit community built upon grace, vulnerability, and accountability. Steven Manskar said it well when he says,

The class meeting was the means by which the Methodists lived out the commandments of Christ. They brought good news to the poor, proclaimed the release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, set free the oppressed, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited the sick and the prisoners. Through the class meeting the Methodists were nurtured in their faith and were given the grace they needed to love God, to love their neighbor as they loved themselves, and to love one another as Christ loved them. The class meeting was the engine that moved the Methodists forward. Grace was the fuel that provided the power.<sup>88</sup>

The Sunday school class is a great tool of the church that helps to build a community of missionaries who desire to look for the least, the last, and the lost of the world. They fund great mission projects and think critically about how to bring about the Kingdom of God. Barring those few exceptions of Sunday schools that have accountability built into their makeup, the bulk of Sunday school classes lean on the individual to change, follow through, and go on their journey of faith. The Sunday school class is wonderful and needed in the church, but its purpose is not that of building disciples; its purpose is to build missionaries.

The affinity groups, like quilting ministries and cooking ministries, are also beautiful and needed inside the church. These groups give people a place to belong and lets them meet people who enjoy the same kinds of things. In one church I served, we had a group that would meet every Monday night through the NFL season to fellowship while watching the sport that we enjoyed watching on a big screen in the Youth Room. The Holy Spirit was ever present in our friendship, laughter, and fellowship. These groups are great ways for people who are new to the faith or who do not even know Jesus yet, to experience the fellowship of believers in a safe and

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<sup>88</sup> Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship*, 97.

non-threatening way. But these groups do not go any deeper than the surface of a hobby. Quilters may make quilts to give to shut-ins and food ministries may minister to the bereaved by cooking meals for families after the funeral of a loved one. But the purpose of these groups is not to move people to a deep relationship with God, nor is their purpose to make its members into disciples. The purpose of these groups lies in making friendship among people.

The small groups known as Bible studies, again, are wonderful tools of the church. It is of vast importance that the average church member delves into the Word of God. “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The early church is described as a group of people who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The study of the Scriptures and how to incorporate the Word of God into a follower’s life is paramount for their growth.

However, the Bible study’s purpose is not to build community. The Bible study’s purpose is to convey knowledge about the Scriptures to its members. Like the Sunday school is made to create missionaries and the affinity group is made to create friendships, the Bible study is made to create literate followers of Christ. In the modern church this has become one of the primary ways to engage members of the church outside of communal worship. Unfortunately, the great attention given to these kinds of groups has produced congregations filled with pharisees who have all the ‘right answers’, but live contrary to the answers that they give.

The class meeting was a place where the members had one purpose, to become like Christ in as much as they could in this life. The class meeting’s purpose was to create true disciples who took their vows and Christ’s commandments seriously and desired above all things

to follow Christ. Ultimately, the members of the class meeting wanted to be drawn closer to God through the Grace that had been poured out for all of humanity at the Cross.

The class meeting provided an environment in which people could trust and be trusted, love and be loved, and be vulnerable in a way that is needed for true growth in grace and love of God, neighbor, and self to occur.<sup>89</sup>

The accountability that is found within the class meeting is found nowhere else in the church on a grand scale. Yet, every church is seeking for a way to be relevant and to build a community of disciples that attempt to live the Gospel message, that spread the Gospel message, and that transform the outside world instead of conforming to it (Romans 12:2).

In the next chapter, we will look at groups from many different walks of life in the modern world that utilize similar tactics and have similar purposes to the class meeting. I hope to prove that the success of these groups could become the success of the church, if we could bring these principles, structure, and purpose back into the body of Christ.

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, 93.

## Chapter 4

### The Class Meeting Outside Methodist Churches:

#### From the Early Church to Modern Day

The previous chapter ended with answering the question, why do we need to resurrect the class meeting. The church already has two very large and very successful means for creating small group ministries in the Bible study groups and Sunday school classes. In both groups there is the capacity to build community and disciples. After all, what church does not state that they are in the business of making disciples? My own annual conference of The United Methodist Church's mission statement is to "[e]quip congregations to make *disciples* of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world to the glory of God."<sup>90</sup> (emphasis mine). This is not to even count the churches that I have served over my time as a pastor and their mission statements that included the desire to make disciples of the members within the church as well as reaching out to bring the unbelievers in their neighborhoods into relationship with Christ and make them into disciples as well. These are great goals and fall very much in line with the edict and commandment from Christ, but how are we going about making sure that our churches are truly producing the disciples that Christ is wanting us to make?

The Sunday school class and the Bible study are great tools to help disciples become better disciples, and, just like the weekly communal worship service, should not be abandoned. However, the class meeting is a group whose purpose is not found within these two mainstays of the current church. Because we have allowed the Wesleyan class meeting to decline to the point that many Methodists do not even know that what it is, has produced a modern church that

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<sup>90</sup> "Mission and Vision," The Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.txcumc.org/missionandvision>.

demands discipleship while not having the means to produce it. In C. S. Lewis' "Abolition of Man," he speaks to this problem regarding the whole of humanity, but it is something that we do in the church all the time.

In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.<sup>91</sup>

In the church we have the same problem. The preacher is seen as the most qualified person to preach and teach the Word of God, and then we wonder why the laity are too scared to go talk to the outside world. The Bible study meets for six weeks delving deeply into the Gospel of John, but only serves to raise more questions about faith than the teacher can answer because they are just reading out of a book. The Sunday school class raises money to help send a young boy in a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country through school, but never seeks to go visit or make any other sacrifice other than throwing a few dollars into the offertory jar. The church writes up on its walls and on its webpages that it desires to make disciples that will help to transform the community and the world, but then fails to help its members become practical disciples.

The class meeting is the place where real relationships, practical faith, and practical discipleship is born, raised, matured, and sent out. In this chapter we will define more clearly and distinctly what the pillars and the foundation of the class meeting are. It is not good enough to just juxtapose one thing against another and be done with it. Comparing the Bible study, Sunday school class, and affinity group to the class meeting is a good start, but we must define the pillars and foundation of the class meeting so that the resurrected creation still has the same function.

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<sup>91</sup> CS Lewis, "Abolition of Man. - Samizdat," *The Abolition of Man* (*Samizdat*, January 2014), <http://www.samizdat.qc.ca/cosmos/philo/AbolitionofMan.pdf>, 16.

In this section I am going to call upon something that has been used in the Wesleyan tradition for many years. John Wesley may not have coined it, but Albert Outler gave us the phrasing after spending years studying John Wesley and the theological understanding is distinctly Wesleyan in nature. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is comprised of four parts that help to shape our understanding of both God and faith. The four sides are reason, experience, Scripture, and Tradition (REST for short). Therefore, the three pillars that we will look at are experience, reason, and tradition, with Scripture being the foundation that it is all built on. Wesley believed that Scripture was the firm basis that we should build our entire faith upon, and with that as my belief as well, that is where I place the foundation of the class meeting.

### **The Foundation: Scripture**

John Wesley is quoted as saying “Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one book].”<sup>92</sup> Now it is clear that Wesley never intended to say that he never read anything but the Bible, but I believe that he meant to say that he held no other text at the same level as the Bible. Scripture was of vast importance to Wesley, and it is of vast importance to me as well. I believe in the statement from Paul’s second letter to Timothy,

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. [2 Timothy 3:16-17]  
With that being the basis of understanding, we will explore the foundation of the class meeting. The foundation of the class meeting comes from the foundation of all small groups, the Twelve called by Christ to follow, learn, and eventually go out and begin the family of faith. Jesus’ interaction with the original disciples is the basis for our class meetings and we begin to look at that with the calling of the disciples.

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<sup>92</sup> John Wesley, “A Man of One Book,” A man of one book. vol. iv. (Bartleby.com, November 2012), <https://www.bartleby.com/209/750.html>, 1.

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. “And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.” [Matthew 4:18-22]

This passage from Matthew is probably the most iconic of the callings from Jesus to the original Twelve who would follow Christ from the very beginning of His ministry in Israel. The foundation of the class meeting is rooted in how Christ cared for, raised, taught, and built the original Twelve.

To start with, the original Twelve were a hodgepodge of Jews. They were fishermen, disciples of John the Baptist, a tax collector, a couple of zealots, a scholar, and some others that the Scriptures do not tell us enough about to make sure of what they did before they met Christ.<sup>93</sup> What we do know is that this group of men, whom Christ originally called together, were not placed together because of their commonality; they came together because they had an initial belief in the Rabbi who called out to them. It is not until Peter’s declaration at Caesarea Philippi that the disciples are even aware of who Jesus really is. Jesus’ statement to Peter after this statement proves this point, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). However, from the very beginning of Jesus calling them they all dropped their earthly pursuits in order to learn from the Master.

This starting point for the disciples should carry over to inform our understanding of the class meeting. The class meeting is not just for those who are already far down the path of discipleship or have been in the faith for a certain amount of time. Just like the Twelve, the class

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<sup>93</sup> “Who Were the 12 Disciples?,” Bibleinfo.com, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/who-were-twelve-disciples>.

meeting is to be a tool for anyone who has a yearning for Christ and, to quote Wesley, “a desire to flee from the wrath that is to come, and to be saved from their sins.”<sup>94</sup> This means that, just like in the original iteration of the class meeting, it is a group that is made for any and all who have joined the church, but not for any who have not taken those vows yet. To utilize CS Lewis once again, “who would urge the high and hard duty of chastity on people who have not yet wished to be merely honest?”<sup>95</sup> This phrase comes from him discussing the ‘Law of Justice’, but the logic in it stands quite firm. If someone has not even acknowledged the Lordship of Christ and the need for God in their lives by taking the simple vows of membership within the body of Christ, then there is no way to exercise the even more difficult step of the class meeting upon them.

### **Pillar #1: Experience**

“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:32).

Once we have accepted that the class meeting is for all those who have accepted the initial call of Christ, has accepted His sacrifice, and has joined the body of faith, then the next step is for them to join a class meeting. We noted in a previous chapter that class meetings do not start off with the ability for the members to lay bare their deepest and darkest secrets, sins, and temptations. “Initially there would be some awkwardness as the catechetical process was implemented, and people would be diffident about answering such direct and evaluative questions.”<sup>96</sup> What can be the starting ground however is testimony. The proclaiming of Jesus

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<sup>94</sup> Steven W. Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship*. 93.

<sup>95</sup> CS Lewis, “Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis - My.dacc.edu,” DDAC.edu - Mere Christianity By CS Lewis (DDAC, 2002), <https://my.dacc.edu/assets/pdfs/PCM/merechristianitylewis.pdf>, 54.

<sup>96</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*. pg 116.

Christ as Lord is a historical tradition of the faithful from the very beginning. The sermon of Peter at Pentecost is the very first example that we have. Within the testimony, Peter alludes to signs, miracles, and lessons that Jesus taught (Acts 2:14-36).

As we begin to build the class meeting back up, this is the first pillar of the meeting that gives us structure. The testimony of the faithful within the group help to solidify the group's faith and belief in Christ. This is akin to the way that the Ancient Jews named God. In the Old Testament God says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6a) when talking to Moses. Throughout the Scriptures we find that the prophets and psalmists continue to remind the people of the names of great leaders, but the names of these leaders are not what is important. What is important is what God did through them. This is made plain in the 105<sup>th</sup> psalm,

Remember the wonderful works he has done,  
his miracles, and the judgements he has uttered,  
O offspring of his servant Abraham,  
children of Jacob, his chosen ones [Psalm 105:5-6].

In using these names and remembering the stories of great things that God had done, like when Joshua told the Israelites to remember the stones near the Jordan river (Joshua 4:6-7), the Israelites were able to recall all the wonderful things that God had done to fulfill His promises to them.

On my trip to Israel, I was blessed to have a guide who was one of the most knowledgeable teachers I have ever had the privilege to learn from. Dr. John Beck was employed as a professor at Jerusalem University College and led a small group of clergypersons through Israel for two weeks. One of the things that he instilled in us is how the geography of the land was of great importance to the ancient Israelites. Since they had to walk from place to place, this was how the stories of the Bible came to life. As they would pass by a certain

mountain, plain, river, or village, one of the elders of the group would point to it and recount the time when God did something great there. Dr. Beck would do the same for us, though we were on a charter bus, by pointing out different sites and their significance to the Scriptures.

By learning the about God in this way, the ancient Israelites could remind themselves constantly about how amazing God truly was. We in the modern church can learn from this. When the world brings us to our knees and we feel, to quote David from the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, that we are walking “through the darkest valley” (Psalm 23:4); it is always of great benefit to remember that we serve a God who is still with us. Bringing testimony of how God has acted in your life is the first step to being able to share and build relationship within the class meeting setting. This must be the first step because, barring some extreme exceptions, most people do not immediately trust someone enough to divulge secrets to. The class meeting must start here.

While it is a good first step, the leader’s responsibility is to move the group deeper. To be sure, testimony should always be part of the meeting, the next step is to expound upon that testimony. Bringing testimony of what God has done in our lives will eventually open the door for another part of the faith, confession. “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). The author of James teaches the faithful to be able to confess our sins to each other so that we can be in prayer for one another.

From the first step of testimony, where the members of the class are telling the group how God has worked for us, we come to the second step in this pillar with confession, where the members tell honestly how they have attempted to live for God. This step will evolve some as the beginning stages will most likely be positive examples, like adding prayer times, reading Scripture, listening to a sermon online, and the like. However, again the responsibility will fall

on the leader to push, after some time, to start to confess how the member has fallen short. This will start out small with little transgressions being confessed to, but with trust and courage, will grow into deeper and deeper confessions.

At this step, the members are building trust and relationship with fellow members as well as with the leader. This is how all relationships are built, whether they are secular in nature or spiritual. We test our relationships with small secrets, if the person is trustworthy with that secret, then we trust them with greater secrets. God works the same way. In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus tells us that God will reward us for being obedient like the master rewards the servants, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:23). The building of trust is paramount to the formation of the class.

Before we move to the final step of this pillar, I want to make pause for one piece of instruction. At this stage in the growth of the group there is no critique or rebuke of the member. Deep trust and intimate relationship are required for advice and admonishment to be accepted by the one confessing. When Christ teaches the Twelve about helping out their neighbor, He says, “first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matthew 7:5). Until you have the relationship and trust with someone to know that they truly love you and desire the best for you, then you will never be able to accept advice or correction from them. Until that level is reached it will always be like judgement and therefore will be unwelcomed and offensive. When the class is initially being formed, this pillar will go through these stages of growth, but the end goal should always be in front of the group, and that is the final step of true vulnerability.

True vulnerability includes all that has already been discussed in this pillar, and it is why I give this pillar the name of experience. When the quadrilateral speaks of experience it means personal experience; that each of us come to God and to our faith from different perspective because of how we were raised, where we come from, our race, our education, and everything little thing that makes us individuals. True vulnerability is the opening of your life, the opening of everything that makes you an individual and giving permission for others to come in and mess with it. Not for destructive purposes, but for the building up of the faithful. The true vulnerability that the class meeting demands of its members is that each member gives permission to the other members of the class to speak truth in love into our situations and into our lives. Without that permission, the conversation will only lead to death, but with the permission it is the only kind of conversation that can lead to life.

In David Watson's lecture to the Northeast Methodist History Society, he speaks of a couple who brought him to a class meeting. He recounts that the couple brought him for a number of reasons, but one of them was because they had not been to the group in some time and "their invitation was really seeking a way to return".<sup>97</sup> When he arrived at the midweek meeting, he was greeted by the leader of the group enthusiastically and graciously. When the leader turned to the couple that had brought him and spoke to them in a way that no clergy "would speak to church members like that"<sup>98</sup>. The leader said this, "We're glad to see you two here tonight. Now we've been here every week, but we haven't seen you for months. So get yourselves back!"<sup>99</sup> When David turned to face them, he recognized that the couple was far from being

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<sup>97</sup> David Lowes Watson, "Northeast Methodist History Society," *Northeast Methodist History Society* (October 21, 2017), 22.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 22.

offended, they were “beaming with pleasure”.<sup>100</sup> When the permission has been given to someone to speak truth in love, then true vulnerability becomes a joy that leads to life.

## **Pillar #2: Reason**

Reason is defined as the ability “bring[s] to bear on the Christian faith discerning and cogent thought.”<sup>101</sup> In other words, this is the ability to use the intelligence that God bestowed upon human beings to interpret the Scriptures and illumine our faiths. This part of the quadrilateral serves as a safeguard to our feelings getting the better of us. While experience is a good to acknowledge and use to interpret God, either through Scripture or through the events in our lives, we can be sure that if our experience teaches us only then we will be very fickle when it comes to our beliefs. Our experiences might make us very distrustful of a certain type of person or it might make us see the world in only one way. Reason helps us to overcome the fear and anxiety that our experience brings to the table and helps us to discern what is appropriate and uplifting, and what is detrimental and sinful. In this way, our next pillar is all about building a close-knit community of believers who can hive-mind their experiences and thereby gain even greater clarity into their faith and their callings from God.

This pillar, like the previous one, has steps that need to be taken when the class immediately forms, in order to build the trust that is needed to reach the final goal of the class meeting. The pillar of community must start in relationship. In a previous chapter we noted that there were four circles of relationships that humans have in this world. The goal of the building of relationships in the context of the class meeting is for the entire group to be within the

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<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>101</sup> Alan K Waltz, “Glossary: Wesleyan Quadrilateral, The,” The United Methodist Church (Abingdon Press, May 26, 2015), <https://www.umc.org/en/content/glossary-wesleyan-quadrilateral-the>.

innermost circle. This will take time to accomplish. The process of the previous pillar, vulnerability, is a process that very much helps this pillar in building relationships. By the sharing of testimonies and confessions, trust is built among the members of the class. Deeper relationships, along with deeper confessions and permissions to engage from the group/leader, will be the outward signs of the maturity of these relationships.

I want to note something here that come from people being individuals. This kind of relationship will come at different speeds for people. Some people are more inclined to building relationships than others. Some people may have been hurt in the past by those they felt were their closest friends, and they will be more reticent to build the relationships that will be needed in order for the class to mature to its end goal. The leader's responsibility will be to learn how and when to push and how and when to show grace and understanding. This process will be difficult, but through prayer and grace, it can be accomplished.

The individual relationships, as they begin to grow and deepen, will translate into the community that this pillar is building to. When the whole class is in deep relationship with each other, the community will be built. This community is one that brings reason to the body. As the old saying goes, 'two brains are better than one'. As the testimonies and confessions come pouring in and the members are at liberty to speak truth to each other something amazing will happen, they will begin to truly walk with each other and build the Kingdom with each other. As stated before, the modern church has placed its focus on the wrong thing. We don't need to build evangelists. We need to build communities of disciples; disciples will always be evangelists because they will compel each other to live into all of Christ's commandments.

When the class is operating well, then there is a harmony that is struck in this pillar. The individual relationships continue to grow and build which creates a stronger and more intentional

community, and the community continues to grow and build which increases their capacity to love not only their neighbors but each other as well. As one grows and strengthens, it grows and strengthens the other, in a beautiful circle of faith and grace.

### **Pillar #3: Tradition**

This pillar only has one step, but it grows and blossoms with the class as the other pillars make their way through their steps. However, this pillar will also bring the entire class to destruction if it not maintained. When tradition is spoken of in the Wesleyan quadrilateral, it means that we must acknowledge and give respect to the “development and growth of the faith through the past centuries and in many nations and cultures.”<sup>102</sup> This means that we give space for the traditions of not only our own perspective, but that we give space for the traditions of everyone who comes. We look to the way that faith has moved over the millennia since the early believers began them.

This does not mean that we cannot change or reinterpret traditions that no longer fit. As we continue to read and interpret the Scripture’s and God’s will, we must always remember that traditions were inspired by God but created by humans. We must not demonize the men and women of the past; they were doing the best that they could with what they had. But we must not be beholden to tradition for tradition’s sake, or else we might miss the movement of the Spirit. This pillar however is named for tradition because it is a tradition that comes from the very beginning of the church; that is accountability.

Taken from the book of Proverbs, we have the wisdom statement that says as, “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another” (Proverbs 27:17). There are many verses within the New Testament that speak of accountability among believers. When dealing

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

with being the target of a sinful act by a fellow believer, Jesus instructs us to “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one” (Matthew 18:15b). Paul teaches us in his letter to the Galatians that if you find someone living in sin then it is the responsibility of a fellow believer to, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Paul also tells us through his letter to the Ephesians that believers are to, “put[ting] away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another” (Ephesians 4:25). These should tell us that part of the tradition of the faith is to help each other through the burdens of this life and to keep each other, as best as we can being flawed ourselves, from sin.

Accountability goes beyond just the confession and absolution. Accountability is the ability to walk with someone through the pitfalls, pain, and struggle that is living in this world. We cannot walk the journey of faith alone. This pillar is one that starts with the leader and extends to the rest of the class. Each member relies on the leader at first to hold the class together. The leader is there to ask the questions of the meeting and to be the first to open and give the example. It will become the leader who asks the probing questions that lead to confessions but also lead to great healing of the souls in his/her charge. As the class grows and deepens the class members become accountability partners for the leader as well. Being able to ask the questions of them in the same way that the leader asks the questions of the members.

To be sure, accountability requires the other pillars to be present. A deep relationship is needed, else the person will feel attacked and judged by those who are attempting to help carry the burden. Vulnerability is needed, else the person will recoil from the questions, prying, and intrusion that will come from those trying to hold them accountable. However, without

accountability, the class ceases to be a class and instead becomes either a Bible study, Sunday school, or some other small group that does not have the purpose of building disciples.

Accountability is a two-way street that requires something from both parties. It is something that cannot happen with just one person, it must be done within either a partnership or, at its best, is done within a community. The person who is being held accountable, either silently or verbally, promises those with whom they are journeying with that they will not give up. To continue to fight and struggle is necessary and shows the commitment and love that the member has for their fellow classmates who are supporting them. While that promise holds, the members who holding the other in accountability promise to do so in grace and in power. They are promising to never cast out nor give up on the member that they are helping. In this way, both parties act as two side of an archway, they hold each other up and can continue in significant strength.

This pillar is of vast importance to the class meeting for many reasons that have already been stated, but above all reasons is the reason that we know that the lack of this pillar meant the original decline of the class meeting. “[T]he first priority was ensuring that an accountability be exercised for these works of obedience and for the means of grace without which it could not be sustained.”<sup>103</sup> Without the accountability that holds the members to a high standard then everything falls apart.

If the leader does not push the members to dig deeper and to truly divulge inside the group, then that person will be allowed to let sins fester inside of them and inside their life. The shame of sin will close the mouths of the members so that the answers that are given within the

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<sup>103</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 145.

meeting will be “a pious lot of platitudes which meant nothing to them or us.”<sup>104</sup> The purpose of the class meeting, put succinctly, is this:

Christians meeting week by week to give an account of their discipleship will inevitably be aware of what God is doing in the world, and will respond to those gracious initiatives with service which is attuned to the needs of the world in which they live.<sup>105</sup>

Without the accountability of the members and the leaders, the real relationships will become shallower and shallower, the community will become just a group of people, and the testimony will be without the Spirit.

### **The Class Meeting in The World**

The final chapter of this dissertation will expound upon the experiment of reclaiming the class meeting within a local congregation that I currently serve. However, I took inspiration for that reclamation from several different sources, and not just from the class meetings from 1760 to the mid-1800's. These groups range from historical to modern, from religious to secular. Each of the groups have different purposes, but all the groups rely on the pillars listed previously. Each group expects vulnerability, builds community, and holds its members accountable to the standards of the purpose of their group. While none of the groups that are listed are class meetings, they all prove that the bones of the class meeting are of great benefit to the greater realm of society in general. In this way, if these pillars and foundation are good for the society, and the universal church is the greatest gift for the society in general, then the logic would dictate that if the church could incorporate these pillars and foundation into its DNA, then this would culminate in the greatest good for all of humanity. To be sure, all these groups are powerful agents of change and goodness in their areas. Each has carved out a niche to make the

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<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, 147.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, 147.

world a better place in their respective areas and do good work for their members and society. My desire to use them as examples is not to say that they should change, rather that they have something to teach us so that we can overcome the pitfalls that put the class meeting into decline in the first place.

### The Ancient Catechumenate

I want to begin looking at groups that will help to define the resurrected class meeting by going back into the history of the church and finding some principles that have been part of the tradition of the church since the very beginning. In this light, I reach back to the Catechumenate of the ancient church. The Catechumenate is a process by which an unbeliever is brought into the family of faith through many different methods that range from teaching the basics of the faith, learning the Scriptures, and understanding the vows that are going to be required of the catechumens to requiring of renouncing heresies and joining the life of being a Christian through love of God, love of self, and love of neighbor. This process is still carried out, much to the same specifications and processes, in the modern Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. This statement speaks to the longevity and power behind it, as something that has lasted so long with minimal changes must be of great importance to the formation of members and disciples within the body of Christ.

Just like in the modern day, membership classes might vary from church to church, the ancient church did have some variations in how a person became a believer. However, the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem give us insight into the way that the ancient church truly took great care, “from the beginning bestowed on the instruction and training of converts, before

admitting them to the privilege of Baptism.”<sup>106</sup> I take Cyril of Jerusalem’s writings as “a peculiar value as the earliest extant example of a full, systematic, and continuous course of such instruction.”<sup>107</sup>

Archbishop Cyril goes into great detail about what is required of catechumens who embark on the path of becoming disciples. He explains very early on using the story of Simon in Acts 8:13, “he was baptized, but was not enlightened; and though he dipped his body in water, he enlightened not his heart with the Spirit: his body went down and came up, but his soul was not buried with Christ, nor raised with Him.”<sup>108</sup> This is to educate the members as they embark on this journey that it is not for the faint of heart; this journey will require everything from them.

In the ancient days of the faith “the word *ekklesia* was more than just a mere name.”<sup>109</sup> The word *ekklesia* is Greek meaning “Any public assembly or gathering of people in a political, religious, or informal sense.”<sup>110</sup> Cyril believed that the catechumens were called to be there by God.

Thou wast called a Catechumen, while the word echoed round thee from without; hearing of hope, and knowing it not; hearing mysteries, and not understanding them; hearing Scriptures, and not knowing their depth. The echo is no longer around thee, but within thee; for the indwelling Spirit henceforth makes thy mind a house of God.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> E.H. Gifford, *S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 7 (New York, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1894), xii.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, xii.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, 1.

<sup>109</sup> Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: a Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), pg 42.

<sup>110</sup> Seal, D. (2012, 2016). *Ekklēsia*. In *Faithlife Study Bible*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

<sup>111</sup> Gifford, E.H. *S. Cyril of Jerusalem* pg 2.

We also see this kind of lesson from Christ, as he instructs the people what being a disciple will mean, culminating in His lesson that “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). This lesson is one that means that we must give up everything, even our lives, if we are to follow Christ. It is understandable from this statement from Christ that the ancient church had a much more severe understanding of what it meant to be a member of the *ekklesia* than the modern-day church, where membership is simply claiming it. To the ancient believers the *ekklesia* “carried with itself the expectation that the content of the meeting would be claiming the entire life of its participants” and “radically reinterpreting their world.”<sup>112</sup>

If this is how the ancient believers saw membership into the family of faith, it is no wonder that the process to become a member was both involved and time consuming. The ancient catechumenate took about three years to complete, and during this time the members were being mentored and trained to make sure that the baptism, communion, and vows that they would take at the end were both understood and were full of power to solidify the change in lifestyle that was required of all believers. These groups of those who desired to become members would be expected to attend the worship services and receive the Word of God from the leaders of the church through the sermons, they would also receive teaching through small group lessons.

While the teaching of the catechumens was basic in nature, the purpose of the Catechumenate was not to give the members a memorized faith. The purpose of this group was to transform the members into persons who were already on the path towards living the Christian life and witness in preparation for baptism and communion that would mark the culmination of the Catechumenate. This was accomplished certainly through the learning and opening of the

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<sup>112</sup> Lathrop, *Holy People*, 42.

Scriptures, but it was also done through mentoring. Members of the *ekklesia* would be put into service to love their neighbor, and in doing those members would help the catechumens to become essentially Christian apprentices.

When thinking of the Catechesis process, it is easier to see it in a list format, and we can get that list from Dr. Gordon Lathrop. He tells us that the order for making Christians comes from the order of the Catechumenate and has many sources from the third century on.<sup>113</sup> The list is as follows:

- inquiry about willingness to change conduct;
- hearing the Gospel/teaching the words for faith;
- prayer (and fasting);
- washing;
- the meal;
- “mystagogy,” the learning of the mysteries in which one was now participant;
- and the resultant weekly assembly, witness and care for the poor.<sup>114</sup>

While all of these are important for the creation of a disciple and were all utilized within the process of the Catechumenate, we are focusing on the bones that have made it through time and lend themselves to the class meeting. In this, we find that the first and the last of the points are important for us to focus on.

The inquiry is what we have discussed in the pillar of vulnerability. The mentors would ask in both the group as well as individually the hard and penetrating questions to make sure that the catechumen was doing everything in their power to change their life and conduct to that of a disciple. On top of this, the weekly meeting was important for witness and mission work. All this work was geared towards the catechumen finally reaching the baptismal font and becoming a true member of the family of faith. This took so long within the church because “the baptismal

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<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, 140.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, 140.

life not only involved holy living and Christian love, but also worship and fellowship, witness and instruction... and with one accord they bore their testimony to Jesus.”<sup>115</sup>

While the Catechumenate was not a lifelong group, the process set up the Christian to be part of the family that was like it. The members of the early church believed that the church was “a real assembly of people, gathered in a real place, face-to-face, to carry out the agenda of the *ekklesia*.”<sup>116</sup> The early church also was much different in its makeup from our modern-day configuration. “The basic cell of the Christian movement was the individual household-based group, the nucleus of which was often an existing household.”<sup>117</sup> Today, most existing churches are far larger than the early church. While most churches in the modern day are trying to bring about small group ministry, the power of the early church was found not just in study, but that Christian disciples, “whatever the stage of their spiritual pilgrimage, [would] have a means of mutual support.”<sup>118</sup>

I include this historical group in this list because it teaches us that accountability and community have been part of the Christian tradition since the very beginning. It highlights the need for small group ministries inside the church, or what is known as *Ecclesiola in Ecclesia*, and that we must take the vows that we make, either to God or to the membership of our local congregation, seriously.

#### Alcoholics Anonymous

Moving into the modern day, I want to first highlight a group that has found its home within many United Methodist congregations. Many of the churches that I have been part of,

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<sup>115</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 219.

<sup>116</sup> Lathrop, *Holy People*, 43.

<sup>117</sup> David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 1.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, xi.

and many others that friend and colleagues have been part of, have been host sites for groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Gamblers Anonymous. In all there are a total of thirty-five (35) groups bearing the name of \_\_\_\_\_ Anonymous. The original group was Alcoholics Anonymous (AA); therefore, we will focus on them in section, but it is worth noting that the vast number of groups that adhere to the twelve-step program initialized by AA have done tremendous good and brought incredible healing to people and families who have struggled with so many different kinds of addictions that are found in our broken and fallen world.

The purpose of this group is quite simple and direct. Taken from their website they define their purpose in one sentence, “A.A.’s primary purpose is to help alcoholics to achieve sobriety.”<sup>119</sup> The members who attend an AA meeting are there for a single purpose and come because of a single cause, they are addicted to alcohol. Within this group, the meetings can be attended by any who are in the area, there are no dues to be collected, no educational requirements to have, and no special ceremony or ritual to be undergone to come. The participant must only acknowledge their addiction and have a desire to overcome it with sobriety. Truly sounding like Wesley’s words that the only requirement to be a Methodist were for “a desire to flee from the wrath that is to come, and to be saved from their sins.”<sup>120</sup>

AA is a group that relies on a process and structure that is found within the twelve steps. The twelve steps are important to move the members of the group towards the goal, sobriety and control over their addiction. The steps are as follows:

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<sup>119</sup> “What Is A.A.?,” Alcoholics Anonymous, accessed February 3, 2022, <https://www.aa.org/what-is-aa>.

<sup>120</sup> Manskar, *Accountable Discipleship*, 93.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.<sup>121</sup>

These twelve steps “When practiced as a way of life, they can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to recover from alcoholism.”<sup>122</sup>

Once in the meeting, the members are encouraged by the leader of the meeting to share testimony of their struggle. You will hear people tell stories of great triumph when they proclaim that they have been sober for an extended period of time, and in the same meeting hear from another who fell to their addiction the day prior. In both situations, the group will converge on the member with joy and grace to either celebrate or lift in strength. When I attended a couple of meetings in seminary, as a student in solidarity and in desiring knowledge of how these groups functioned, I was fascinated how the high standards of the group that should have condemned those who had fallen off the path were not shown condemnation. The members of

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<sup>121</sup> “The Twelve Steps,” Alcoholics Anonymous, accessed February 3, 2022, <https://www.aa.org/the-twelve-steps>.

<sup>122</sup> “What Is A.A.?,” Alcoholics Anonymous, accessed February 3, 2022.

the meeting did not accept or tell the person that their transgression was alright, but neither did they cast them out or speak down to them. Instead, there was a feeling of forgiveness and grace that pervaded the room and the person was made to feel that while their failure was just that, a failure, it was not a definition of who they were. Truly, I have found no better real-life example of ‘hating the sin and loving the sinner’ than I did in that room.

Honestly, AA, if it were not specific to the sin of alcoholism, would be a great reclamation of the Wesleyan class meeting, even if the founders had no idea about class meetings when they started the first group back in 1935. Members are held accountable by both their meetings and by a personal mentor, they give testimony of their lives, inviting others to speak truth and love into their decisions and choices, and they meet on a regular basis to be able to walk with each other through the highs and lows of this world. Even the twelfth step has a component of evangelism in it where it calls the member to seek out other alcoholics and bring them to sobriety as well.

This group teaches us that in order to overcome our sinful nature, we need to have a trusted group of people who will walk with us and hold us accountable to the standard of Christian discipleship. Unfortunately, this group does not create disciples. It creates sober men and women. But this group does teach us that this kind of relationship and accountability is able to be accomplished in our modern society. This should give us great strength to build up the true discipleship life as a standard, as we reclaim the class meeting for the modern church.

#### Valor Ministries

The next group that I want to highlight in the modern day that utilizes the bones of the class meeting to build community through relationship building, accountability, and testimony is a Christian ministry found within many ROTC programs throughout the nation called Valor

Ministries. This is a nationwide ministry that seeks to help, support, and strengthen the men and women that are part of ROTC programs on college campuses. Valor has been around for twenty-six (26) years and has groups at one hundred and thirty (130) campuses nationwide.<sup>123</sup> Valor ministries are very specific in their targeted audience of college students within ROTC programs.

Their purpose is to give military personnel the ability to live out their faith with the knowledge that deployment and moves may not place the individual in communities that are conducive to that kind of life. Ultimately, the Valor desires to make sure that their members are self-sufficient enough to be able to both take care of themselves and spread the message of the Gospel to those that are around them wherever they may find themselves.

The structure of Valor consists in a large weekly meeting of worship and education, followed by small group break out session where the learning can be translated into action. There is also a third component to the structure in personal discipling; here individuals are disciplined by trained leaders to help them navigate and walk the Christian life in the ebb and flow of ROTC life, and looking forward to possible military life as well.<sup>124</sup> In the small group breakout sessions there would be some room for testimony and sharing of faith, but it would also be a time to spread the Gospel message. In my interview with a former participant of Valor at Texas A&M University he recounted an activity that was a popular activity for small groups during his time.

They would break us up and said we were going to go treasure hunting. Basically, we would sit together, pray, and ask God to show you a place to go on campus. And then we would just share the Gospel at that location.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Clayton, Roger G, and Nathan Boe. Valor information session. Personal, February 2, 2022.

<sup>124</sup> Clayton, Roger G, and Cameron Supak. Valor Information Gathering (member). Personal, February 2, 2022.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, February 2, 2022.

This activity was meant to give the disciples a place to practice their faith, strengthen their faith, and learn in the comfort of fellow believers how to showcase their faith to others, in preparation for the possibility of a time that they would be alone.

There was also individual mentoring going on between trained leaders and participants. Cameron spoke of this time quite fondly, as it was his most significant involvement within Valor.

I would meet with Nathan once a week and we would talk about whatever was going on in my life. He had a little notebook, and he would check in on me, recalling what had been talked about the previous week. Then we would read Scripture together.<sup>126</sup>

The intimacy that was on display here would allow for strengthening through prayer and the Word, as well as provide accountability so that Cameron knew that someone cared enough about him to follow up on the struggles that he was having in his life without fear of condemnation for those struggles.

Military life brings many different challenges that may not be present inside the church, but I add this group to our list for the reason of mobility within colleges and within the military. In Wesley's day, most people did not move. It was easy to say that a class could stay together for very long periods of time because the members were not going anywhere until they died. In today's world we have a population almost constantly on the move. Whether they move for business, pleasure, or necessity, people move to different places all the time. There is also the phenomenon of moving churches as well. Gone are the days where people will remain members of a church because their parents and grandparents were members of the church. The reclamation of the class meeting will need to take into account the mobility of the members if it is to thrive in the modern world, and I believe that Valor's way of training leaders and allowing

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<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*, February 2, 2022.

for groups to be less formal is important. It is how they are able to continue to bring people to Christ and build disciples on a college campus where the entire population changes every four years, and it will help in making the reclaimed class meeting something that will work within the mobile society that we live in.

### Emmaus Reunion Groups

This group and the group in the next section are groups that are found within the Christian church. This group does not have a specific church to which it owes its allegiance or its loyalty. Emmaus is a non-denominational retreat geared towards helping current believers in Christ deepen their faiths over an intensive weekend filled with spiritual seminars and Christian community. These groups are created to help the members after the intense weekend of faith building to retain, internalize, and continue to grow.

The Walk to Emmaus weekend is a spiritual retreat for Christians who wish to not only be renewed in their faith, but to strengthen it in order that they might become stronger disciples for Christ. The initial 3-day retreat is “an opportunity to meet Jesus Christ in a new way as God’s grace and love is revealed to you through other believers.”<sup>127</sup> Without going into the reunion groups, this retreat has all the structure of a class meeting already. The participants of the retreat are called pilgrims, to signify the namesake Scripture reference in the Gospel of Luke wherein Jesus meets with and opens the Scriptures to two disciples after his death. (Luke 24:13-35) During the weekend they will sit in small groups called Tables, led by a Table leader, and receive testimony and instruction from fifteen (15) different believers on theological and social topics. After each talk, the Table leader will engage the Pilgrims at the table with probing

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<sup>127</sup> “About The Walk to Emmaus,” About The Walk to Emmaus (The Upper Room), accessed February 3, 2022, <http://emmaus.upperroom.org/about>.

questions designed to both allow for the talk to deepen the faiths of those at the Table as well as giving space for the Pilgrims to open up their lives to one another in the form of their own testimony, and even confession at times.

The retreat is designed to limit temptations and distractions of the Pilgrims, so that they can remain focused on their faith. Each weekend is staffed, led, and filled by gender, and the Pilgrims will have members of the Emmaus community wait on them hand and foot, they will be required to disconnect from phones and watches, and they will be isolated from the outside world so as to completely focus on God and their relationship to Him and to their neighbor. While the talks and the special events that happen throughout the weekend are life-changing, it is the small group that changes the participants the most. The desire of the Walk to Emmaus is not to create a new fellowship of believers or to create a new church. The purpose of the weekend is to create disciples who will go back to their local congregations renewed in their spirit and equipped to better live the life of a disciple within their homes, offices, and congregations.

Once the weekend retreat is done, the Pilgrims enter what is called the 'Fourth Day'. The fourth day is an encompassing term that means that you have completed a weekend and are now ready to move forward with the newfound faith that you have received through your weekend retreat. The emphasis for all new fourth day members is to join a reunion group. This is the group that I want to focus on. The weekend is a wonderful event and produces amazing spiritual renewals and mountain top experiences, but once the weekend is over then the Pilgrims must go back into the real world. The reunion group acknowledges the need for disciples to need the community of faith and the accountability of fellow believers in order to continue to live the life

of a disciple. The reunion group is a group of “four to six people [who] meet weekly to reflect on their spiritual journey and encourage one another in accountable discipleship.”<sup>128</sup>

In this definition we already see many of the pillars of the class meeting. The reunion groups create a community with the members through a common experience. Since all the weekend retreats are done with the same manuals and scripts, there is very little difference between them; except for the speakers and how they present their testimonies through the fifteen (15) talks. Therefore, the members have a common bond when coming into the group that helps to facilitate real relationships at a quicker rate than a normal small group. Each meeting is setup to have each of the members ask and be asked these questions:

1. Closest To Christ – At what moment this past week did you feel closest to Christ?
2. Call to Discipleship – At what moment during this week did you feel you were responding to God’s call to be His disciple? Where did you participate in being the church this week, the heartbeat of Christ?
3. Discipleship Denied – When was your faith tested this week through failure?
4. Your Plan – What is your plan for spirituality, study, and action for the week to come?<sup>129</sup>

These questions are asked of each member and at every meeting. The part of this group that misses the class meeting is the lack of a leader. The idea is for every member to be open and honest, and to ask probing questions to get the other members to open even more and share their testimonies to their deepest level. However, there is no one leader in the group that has the authority to enforce accountability. It is left to the individual members to follow up and hold each other accountable to their confessions and to help walk with and carry the burdens of their fellow believer when it is needed.

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<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> “Emmaus 4th Day Reunion Groups Card,” Elizabethtown Emmaus Community (The Upper Room - Elizabethtown Emmaus Community), accessed February 3, 2022, <http://www.etownemmaus.org/download/servicesheet.pdf>.

Ultimately, this group shows us the deep need to walk alongside our brothers and sisters so that the calling upon all of us to be disciples can come to an even greater fulfillment. This group meets for as long as its members are willing to be participants, but the lack of leadership has been many reunion groups downfall in my witness of them over the years. When there is not one person who has the responsibility to call the meetings, hold the members accountable, and demand the vulnerability that is needed, the groups eventually disband. Unfortunately, it is for the same reason that many spiritual practices die in the lives of the faithful, we are human, and we get lazy in our pursuit of the holy. However, this group informs our reclamation of the Wesleyan class meeting that a strong leader is of great importance and that commonality of purpose must be ingrained in the members of the class.

#### The Prayer Walkers of Needville UMC

The final section of this chapter will focus on a specific group that started many years before I came to serve the congregation that I currently serve. This group is affectionately called our Prayer Walkers. It is a group of close-knit ladies who come together on a weekly basis to pray for the needs of others. I use this as the final group to show that even without intention, the Spirit moves within the body to create what is needed for growth and the deepening of faith. While the group began as a way to pray for members of the community, for our world in general, and for the members of our congregation from the communal prayer list that is kept up to date; it evolved into a group that prays for each other, walks with each other (both spiritually and physically), and follows the guidelines of the class meeting. The group evolved into this without knowing what the Wesleyan class meeting was, nor that they were creating one.

The origin of this group rests in something that is quite common within congregations, it started with someone who had a passion for prayer ministries and desired to gather a group of

people to pray for the members of the congregation, the church as a whole, the pastor, the community surrounding them, and society in general. The leader who had this passion also wanted the group to make sure that they were taking care of themselves too. So, she organized the group to walk the neighborhood surrounding the church, instead of setting up in a room or in the Sanctuary for their prayer meeting. This decision led to the ability for the walkers to not only socialize with each other and get some good exercise in, but they were also able to practice their faith as they walked. While they walked through the neighborhood, they would meet people and spend time talking and praying for them. There are some members in the congregation now that first came to the church because of this outreach.

As the group continued to meet over the years the same ladies came out and walked, and over time started to be able to voice their lives in the form of prayers to the group. What started out as generic and undetailed prayers started to become filled with personal and private details as relationships deepened within the group. The group meets every week at the same time with the sole purpose to pray for and over the aforementioned list.

This group has never changed its purpose over the years, and there is no leader who demands deeper testimony than any are willing to give. However, that has not stopped the group from being able to walk with each other through many trials so that the members of the group are living closer to Christ than before they began. I bring this group to the list for a couple of reasons.

First, this prayer group utilized prayer to allow for relationships to be built. As I will discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation, this is a tactic that I employed to begin the first class meeting within this same congregation. Prayer can be a great lubricant to relationship

building among Christians because while it is true that the prayer is being offered in front of others, true audience is that of God.

Second, the use of prayer made the group much more informal and inviting to new members. When new people came, they were able to just walk and listen, chiming in seldom as they grew accustomed to dynamic of the group. This also allowed for the group, even though the members had been together for years, to not alienate new members because they felt like they were outsiders. This is important for the reclaimed class meeting to be able to do, since there is a strong possibility that classes will need to be more flexible in the modern church than the early Wesleyan class meetings due to our societies ability to move.

## **Conclusion**

Each of the groups that are part of this list are amazing and were chosen because they are stories of success given their individual purposes. I used each of them in different ways to plan out and inform the experiment that will be detailed out in the next chapter. Learning from groups and systems that are currently working was a great place to start. In many cases, these groups gave me hope and encouragement that the class meeting, with its demand of vulnerability testimony, confession, and accountability, really was something that could work and thrive in the society that we live in. I also tried to find solutions to the problems that forced the original class meeting to decline within these groups. Hopefully, by the grace of God, a powerful reclamation can occur in the modern church that will transform not only the disciples within the classes, but also the world and society around them.

## Chapter 5

### The Modern Class Meeting

#### The Foundation

##### Scripture

This whole paper is a map that leads to the culmination of this chapter. We must start in Scripture because there is nothing greater on this Earth than the Word of God. From the very beginning of creation, God says that humans are not ‘good’ unless they are in community (Genesis 2:18). Throughout the Old Testament, we see that God does not just take one person, but instead creates an entire people to be His. Finally, we see Jesus teach the Disciples, and through them teach us, that community was of vast importance. Not only is community required for the changing of the world and the turning of the world towards God, which is the main point of Christ’s mission, but community is also needed to thwart and engage with the world that is dominated by Satan. Jesus gives us hope beyond hope when He tells us, “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world” (John 16:33)!

However, even He didn’t go it alone. Alongside Jesus was the people who flocked to Him. Not just the Twelve, but men and women who saw Christ for what He was and deeply loved Him. The hope that Jesus gives is connected to the prayer that He prayed for all who would come after in the Garden of Gethsemane. He used His last moments of freedom to pray that His followers would be in a holy community, just like the Trinity is a holy community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the Scriptural basis for that instructs us that the socialness of humanity is something designed and ordained by God. We were not created to be isolated and apart. Without connection, without community, humanity can never hope to live into the great calling that the Creator envisioned for us.

Each community brings great importance and produces great things for the building of God's Kingdom here on Earth. The whole of the body is to be seen throughout the world as an embodiment of grace and hope. Allowing for all the parts to function to their specialty. The local congregation is meant to be a microcosm of the whole body within the local community. Congregations are not supposed to be able to do all things, but instead should be able to be what the community around them needs them to be. In some contexts, shelters, food banks, and financial aid are desperately needed, but other contexts the more pressing need is for grief counseling and basic connection between neighbors. The local congregation is able to work with the local community to build a better community with Christ at the center. Finally, the small group creates the community where the individual's needs are met and the individual is able to grow in their faith and in their humanity. This is where I have felt the greatest pull and need within the congregations that I have served. To create a space where believers are able to work on themselves in grace and hope. When I first began to think about how to bring about this kind of space within the local congregation, I came to the table with the knowledge that a community based on vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith is what the body of Christ needs.

### Tradition

Throughout the history of the church, we see that the understanding of a need for community has been understood. From the ancient catechesis of the early church to the modern iterations like Emmaus groups, and even into the secular world with Alcoholics Anonymous, we find the truth alive and well; humans need community in order to thrive. Within the previous chapters we have explored both secular and Christian groups that have been used to further the members of their groups into healthy and life affirming paths. The ancient Catechesis used the formation of new believers to create a community that could withstand the rigors of the life

changing requirements that were being levied. By creating the community of believers in this way, they were able to not only see that the difficulty was not just an individual difficulty, but also receive help and grace from the other members as they continued to fight the temptations to slide back into their old ways, old habits, and old lives.

In the modern world, both within and without the body of faith, there are multiple iterations of the small group that has vulnerability and accountability as their bedrock. We saw how Alcoholics Anonymous uses the ability for vulnerability and accountability to help their members overcome their addictions through an in-depth twelve step process. Members of these groups are held to their vows by other members, but given grace when they inevitably fall short of the true goal of complete sobriety. Then the community is able to pick that member up and help them start again down the right path, instead of allowing that one set back to spiral into destruction.

Within the body of faith, we found Emmaus Reunion Groups. They were looked at for their ability to bring faith into the community by the utilization of a common experience that allows for a ready-made connection that can be used to foster vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith within the community. A local prayer group was seen for its eventual evolution into a community that had its foundation in vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith. As they began to pray for each other, they started giving each other permission to speak into each other's lives. They would eventually find great power and freedom in the ability to be open to a group of people whom they knew to be both trustworthy and loving.

Finally, we took stock of the Wesleyan class meeting from within the historical context of both the British Wesleyan societies and the United States Methodist denomination. This meeting was at the crux of the growth of Methodists within Britain and helped to create members

who were dedicated to Christ within the clergy-less congregations of Methodists scattered throughout the early years of America. It gave great support for those who were trying to “flee from the wrath to come”<sup>130</sup>, as well as creating communities that could band together for the sake of the outside community.

I saw these groups as even further proof that the modern world is not as different as we would like to think it is. The modern society and the modern church still need these relationships and communities within them to facilitate our overarching goal to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

### **My Journey**

I was raised within a large congregation in the suburbs of Houston, Texas. Even as a youth I started to recognize that the smaller the group that I found myself in, the more I grew as a Christian. While there were always worship services, concerts, and the like that certainly played pivotal roles in my growth and maturation of my faith, I always found myself gravitate towards the small groups in a neighbor’s home, the comradery of a mission team, and the classroom for Sunday school as places where my faith was both tested and built. As I grew, so did my desire for community. In college, as a freshman on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, I was grateful for the community of the Longhorn Band to keep me from becoming just another number within the student body of such an immense campus. And when I wanted to build my faith, I turned to the Wesley Foundation and finally to starting my own Bible study within the Longhorn Band; once again going smaller and smaller in group size to accomplish the end goal of growth and maturation.

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<sup>130</sup> John Wesley and Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley*. 178.

In seminary at Drew Theological School, I found a small group of my peers who were able to help me glean so much more from the lessons of my classes because of our shared experience of growing up in the Southern states of America. It was within this group that I felt free to truly express my opinions, my interpretations of Scripture, and my faith so that I could grow and evolve.

When I graduated and entered into the ministry of local congregations, I found strength within a small group of clergypersons. This group was diverse in its makeup so that I could get perspectives and advice from clergy like me who had very little experience and from those who were veterans and could help me avoid pitfalls that they had fallen in. This group also held me accountable in starting new ministries, keeping healthy boundaries, and pushing me to become the best pastor that I could be.

Throughout all of this is the common thread that small group ministry has played a vital and pivotal role in my formation, not only as a pastor, but as a Christian. It has instilled in me that good worship services, Spirit-filled events, and mountain-top experiences are worthless if there is nothing that can help bridge the gap and grow the individual between those moments. I have witnessed in multiple churches the division between different worship services because there are multiple worship times and therefore, what feels like, multiple congregations worshipping at the same location. I have seen so many visitors come up to the front of the congregation and take the vows of membership, only to be barely present in the church a few months later. I preach so often to my congregations that the way to keep new members engaged and faithful to their vows is through relationship, and I can think of no better way to build relationship than through small group ministries. The vulnerability, accountability, and practical

faith that can be built within small groups is life-changing both for the members, as well as for the congregation that they are a part of.

However, not every small group is going to produce the vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith that is needed. The group must have those as its foundation. When I look to the history of the faith, I see that this has been a staple from the beginning, and when I look into my tradition as a Methodist, I see the Wesleyan class meeting. This is why I chose to make use of the bones of the Wesleyan class meeting to create a way for vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith to change the way that we do church.

### **The Project**

Within the rest of this chapter, I will lay out the entire process of my project with the First United Methodist Church of Needville. I wanted to make a documentary of all the steps taken and note why some of my original premises ultimately failed, how I was able to change my way of thinking, and finally how this project was both received and what it did for the congregation in such a short period of time from its creation. This project is still ongoing and has only produced one class. However, that one class has seen amazing growth in number, it has already produced new leaders within the congregation, and, most importantly, it has solidified and strengthened the faith of the its members to overcome the world and its problems.

Before I begin, I must also give great thanks to Kevin M. Watson for his book, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*. It is an amazing resource that allowed the newly formed class to have a published work to use as we took our first steps in this journey to reclaim the class meeting. It also allowed me to focus on certain aspects that I felt were better in forming the group and facilitating both accountability and vulnerability in a world and society that frowns upon both. Kevin's work was of great importance also, in

giving the members of the class basic understandings of the history and purpose of the original class meeting as put forth by John Wesley, so that the meetings could be more focused on building relationships rather than lecture material.

### Starting The Project

One of the hardest parts of this project lies in how I was to create this kind of small group within an established congregation. I have born witness to a number of congregations that began with small group ministries/home ministries and, therefore, the small group mentality was part of their DNA and a foundational part of the congregational premise. However, in congregations that already have Sunday school classes and small group models that are geared towards Bible study, the creation of something like the class meeting is difficult. As I began to formulate the plan to begin this project I was met with a number of questions and pitfalls at the very beginning.

### Mandatory Classes?

When John Wesley mandated the class meeting for all members of his societies, there were two things that he had going for him. First, he had the unilateral authority to declare that this was mandatory. As the founder and head of the Methodist movement, John Wesley had the authority and ability to make a unilateral decision that was followed by all. I did not have this authority, as I must follow the rules of the current Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, where class meetings are discussed, but never mandated. Second, the movement was brand new. As I said before, it is much easier to start a brand-new congregation on the premise of small group membership. However, as anyone who has ever tried to change a time of a worship service, create a new worship service, or make any change within an established congregation, the process of change is difficult and painful in most cases. John Wesley had people coming into the societies knowing that the class meeting was part of their vow, therefore

if anyone had a problem with the class meeting, they simply wouldn't join. Within an established congregation, this would be a much more difficult thing to accomplish as there are many people who have become members, who would not have become members had they known that this was going to be part of the requirements.

Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that mandatory class meetings would never be able to be part of the life of a congregation. However, I also believed that after many years of successful class meetings, they could become something that was so encouraged by the members of the congregation that many, if not most, of the local congregation would find themselves within a class and that new members would be encouraged to join them as soon as they entered the congregation. I also had to conclude that this was something that would take a vast amount of time and was not a good place to start. Thus, the idea for starting with a couple of classes was decided on, which brought in the idea more of the Wesleyan band meetings. Band meetings were not mandatory meetings, but instead were filled with people who wanted to dig even deeper than the classes went.

### Selecting the First Class

Once the decision had been made to only create a couple classes at the beginning, the next question was how to do this. I thought that there were two ways of doing this; either hand-pick leaders within the congregation that I felt would be willing to make a class, or hand select leaders within the congregation who would be good class leaders, train them in being class leaders, and then have them go out and form their own classes. I started with the idea of creating leaders first.

One of the most foundational parts of the Wesleyan class meeting was the formation of the class leader. It was the class leader that helped John Wesley to recognize the importance of

the class meeting in the first place, and in the Methodist Episcopal Church it was the class leader who helped hold congregations together before the establishment of local pastors. The class leader was the most important part of the class meeting as the focal point for accountability and vulnerability. They would both be a catalyst for these by exhibiting them to the class, and be the beacon of them by being the one who probes the members for deeper answers by asking the pointed and powerful questions. I believed that if I could create a good group of class leaders, then it would translate into multiple classes being started simultaneously, once those leaders were ready to start their own classes.

However, I ran into a problem in my setting with this, and quickly realized that this plan was not the best way for many congregations. When I started to make a list of those who would make good class leaders, I recognized that they were the same list of people that were already making great leaders inside the congregation. They were the chairpersons of committees, heads of ministries, and lead volunteers of programs in the church and in the community. Asking them to add one more item onto their already full schedules, especially something that was going to require a large amount of time when they began their own classes, was not a wise decision. However, I also found that eliminating these persons from my list was also not very wise. There is a reason that they are leadership roles inside and outside the congregation, and those reasons are why they would do very well at being class leaders. I also recognized that my choice was being biased by the congregation members who were already closely tied to the church. What about other members who weren't serving in a leadership capacity? What about newer members who I did not have the ability to assess their leadership acumen yet? This proved fatal to my plan to pick leaders for this project. So, I changed my tactic.

I still felt that my knowledge of the class meeting and my understanding and goal of reclamation should be used for the formation of the first groups. Therefore, I decided to widen my parameters. Instead of trying to pick out people who had the specific skills and talents to be class leaders, I would instead just focus on those who had deep enough faiths to be willing to be vulnerable and held accountable. I started to make lists of people who joined Bible studies, were fixtures in the Sanctuary for worship services, and were passionate members of Sunday school. This did yield more names than my previous attempt, however, I found that I was still limiting myself by quite a large margin. After prayer and thought, I had a longer list than when I tried to select class leaders, but my list still mostly included members who were extremely active in the congregation and outside community.

When I looked at the list that I had made for class leaders and the list that I had made for class members, I came to very important question. Is this how Jesus would have done it? I believe it was the Spirit that led me, but one morning in my daily devotional time, I found myself reading this passage from Matthew “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). It is fairly popular verse and one that I have read countless times for sermons and Bible studies, but it struck me that Jesus cast his net extremely wide. While Jesus specifically called the Twelve to be His disciples, I could not act like Jesus. Instead, I needed to take heed of His lesson here, ‘if *any*’. I needed to take myself out of the equation. I didn’t need to handpick the people to be part of this project, as a matter of fact I believe that if I did, they might only come because the pastor told them to. I needed people who were willing participants. I needed for the members to choose this path of their own free will.

Once I came to this realization, I threw out the lists that I had made. I wrote a letter addressed to the entire congregation and sent it out to every member in our congregation. The letter is appendix A. While my letter specifically talks about this being for my dissertation, the general theme of the letter could be easily reimagined to be a great way to begin to create the class meeting within congregations.

### The Pandemic

It is worthy to note that as I began my process to reclaim the class meeting in the modern church, something catastrophic happened in the world. The pandemic known as COVID-19 struck the world during the first stages of my project. This caused great issues with the formation of the class due to the need for social distancing, elimination of gatherings, and health precautions. In looking at the class that came out of this project, I believe that had the class been formed before COVID-19 came into the world, then the virus would have done very little to impede the growth of the class. I believe the class would have been able to continue to grow in their faith through technological means of meeting. However, because the class had not been formed as of yet, there was a large gap between the plan of selecting class leaders/class members and the sending out of the congregational invitation. This delay resulted in only having eight (8) months' worth of information gathered from the first class.

### Building a Foundation in the Culture Through Preaching

Before the first meeting ever took place and before the letter was ever sent out, I wanted to get the congregation into a place where they would see the benefits of the class meeting in their own lives. I decided that the best way to do this was through a sermon series devoted to creating connections and relationships. The series outline is in Appendix B. Through this four-week series, I went through how relationships are required for living a good and sacred life.

I started the series off by taking an exegetical position from the Scriptures going all the way back to Genesis and the creation of the world. Similar to how the second chapter of this paper utilized Scripture to reinforce that God had created humankind for connection and relationship, I brought the congregation into a realization that nothing in this life can truly be done in isolation. I focused the sermon then around the hemorrhagic woman who touched the hem of Jesus cloak in order to be healed. I used this story to showcase that even in our darkest and most pitiable circumstances, we need to have connection if we are going to survive. The first and most important connection is our connection to God through Christ. Thus, I built the foundation of the desperate need that we all have to have a deep and personal connection to our Creator and Savior.

Next in the series, I had the congregation look to our best and most perfect example, Jesus Christ. Jesus displays for us what it means to be in connection to both God and neighbor. The sermon focuses on Jesus' answer in Matthew's Gospel as to what is the greatest commandment. Jesus' answer tells us that loving God and loving neighbor go hand in hand with each other. In this encounter and throughout Jesus' ministry we are shown examples of how loving God brings us into relationship with our neighbor and how loving our neighbor brings us into relationship with God. When Jesus connected with the world around Him, He did it by allowing the children come to him, He spoke to and interacted with the women of the society, and He healed by touching the unclean. In this sermon, I wanted to get across to the congregation the idea that connection was more than just knowing someone, it was being able to truly affect their lives and allowing for the other person to affect yours. This was to lay the foundation for the authenticity and vulnerability that are required in the class meeting setting.

The next sermon in the series finally drove the point home about connecting to each other within the body of Christ and introduced the class meeting. Up until this point in the series, I had been building the foundation of why connection is needed and that connection is more than just friendship, acquaintance, family, or fellow church member. Connection meant love; deep love for the other person. In this sermon, I bring out what this deep connection is really for. These deep connections give us the abilities to hold each other accountable and keep us on the straight and narrow. I use the research done by Dr. Robin Dunbar to breakdown the kinds of relationships, focusing on the inner circle of 5-8 people. I utilize the Scripture from Matthew, in which Jesus instructs us how to confront and reprove a brother or sister in the faith for their sin. This is also where we get the promise from Christ that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” (Matthew 18:20). I make the connection that Jesus’ promise requires a deep connection between the individuals because a deep connection is required in order for the reproofing process to not come off as judgment.

During the week between the third and fourth sermons, the letter went out to the entire congregation inviting them to be part of the first, class meeting. So, when the congregation came into the Sanctuary, they were already aware of the letter and the invitation. Therefore, the final sermon in the series was an attempt to tear down some barriers that would prevent people from coming to the first meeting. I break down the barriers that many have to this kind of connection and this kind of group into three points. The first point is that Satan wishes for us be isolated; an isolated human is easy to manipulate, control, and corrupt. The second point is pride; pride makes us fear and hate the inevitable reproofing of our sins. The third point is that the society around us continues to pull us apart by means of politics, gender, race, economic status, and the like. These three things promote ‘individualism’, the idea that the ‘I’ is more important than the

‘we’. ‘Individualism’ leads to ‘isolation’, because when ‘I’ becomes more important than ‘we’ the ‘I’ must stand alone. ‘Isolation’ then leads to ‘competition’ where it is no longer enough to look out for the ‘I’, but that the ‘I’ must be better than the ‘we’. I conclude with the fact that a person can never serve another person whom they are in competition with, a person can never love someone without serving them, and a person can never connect with someone without loving them.

This series was designed to lay a foundation for a need for a different kind of small group ministry that did not focus around Bible study. I was building a foundation for a small group that focuses more on how the member lives. Between the congregational letter and this sermon series, I was able to produce the results that I wanted. The first meeting of people eager to start this reclaimed class meeting was filled with over thirty (30) people wanting to know more about this new kind of small group.

#### The Introductory Meeting

The congregational letter that was sent out asks for members who wish to know more about the Wesleyan class meeting to come for an informational meeting. Thanks in part to the sermon series that coincided with the letter, the meeting was a great success. The meeting brought in over thirty (30) people wanting to know more about the class meeting. This was a significant turnout, as our congregation averages seventy-two (72) in worship. Therefore, our first meeting saw over half of our congregation coming in to take the first step towards reclaiming the class meeting.

The meeting’s purpose was to introduce the participants to the Wesleyan class meeting. This was needed because while the class meeting is within the United Methodist Book of *Discipline* and is covered in many confirmation classes when the history of Methodism is

covered, I realized very quickly that many people within my congregation did not know anything about the class meeting. Some of these members having been Methodists for over eighty (80) years. Reclamation cannot happen if the participants do not know what they are reclaiming. Therefore, I created an introductory meeting that spanned a little more than two (2) hours to help the members understand what the class meeting was, what was so important about the class meeting, and how we were going to be reclaiming the class meeting.

I started with the history of the class meeting from the original desire to raise funds for the New Room in Bristol, and then continued through the history of the class meeting. John Wesley's recognition that this small group had great potential for spiritual growth of its members, the mandate that came from John Wesley for all Methodists to be bound to a class stemming from that recognition, and the eventuality of the class meeting being brought across the Atlantic Ocean into the American Methodist Episcopal Church were all talking points used to both introduce and indicate why this kind of small group was so important.

From that historical education, I then taught the group what happened to this meeting that had done so much for so many within Methodism. I explained that eventually the class leaders were replaced with the creation of the permanent/appointed clergy person, and that the class meetings became Sunday school classes instead.

Finally, I told them why the class meeting was important for the modern church. The first thing that the class meeting helps the modern church to do is to build a community that pushes its members to have deeper and deeper faiths. It is a great thing to see baptisms of new believers and to witness visitors take the vows of membership into the congregation. However, to be born again in the Spirit, is to allow all things to be made new. It means the death of your old life for a brand new one. The journey from one life to another is not an easy one, nor is it

one that can be taken alone. A close, intimate, and personal group allows you to walk with people whom you know, trust, and love.

The other reason for the reclamation project that I wanted them to embark with me on is that the class meeting is a great tool that allows for the church to truly do its main job, create new disciples for the building of the Kingdom. Through accountability and vulnerability, the members of the class meeting will gain practical faith by internalizing the Word of God and truly allowing the Spirit to change their personal lives. This will lead to them following the commandments of Christ, which will lead them to go and make more disciples.

#### The Parable of the Sower in Real Life

The first meeting was well received and I was told by many who attended that it was amazing to learn about something that helped to shape Methodism so much. When the meeting ended, I gave all the participants some work to do before the next meeting. While there was a practical part to the work in buying the book from Kevin Watson that we would use throughout the next weeks as we created the class meetings, there were also questions that I wanted them to answer. The questions were as follows:

1. Would you be willing to be part of a group like this?
2. Would you be willing to be completely open and vulnerable with a small group of people?
3. Would you be willing to give those persons permission to hold you accountable to the goal of becoming better? Including calling you out when you falter and walking with you while you struggle?
4. What would be the hardest part of being a member of one of these groups?

As I gave them the questions, I reminded them that they did not have to answer that they were completely ready for this kind of commitment to vulnerability. Actually, I told them that it would be very natural for them to be apprehensive about such openness, and that over the next coming weeks we would work to build relationships within the classes that would allow for

deeper sharing as the weeks progressed. What was more important than an absolute 'yes' was a spirit willing to try.

Unfortunately, when the next meeting took place, we lost many participants. From the original group, only four (4) came back for the next meeting. While I had some who claimed that they simply could not make the next meeting and assured me that they would be at the next meeting, those words proved to hollow as we continued to only have four (4) members.

In my conversations with those who had come to the introductory meeting, I found that some honestly could not answer the questions that I had posed to them in such a way as to truly put their best foot forward. In this area, I call the introductory meeting a success as having members who were not willing to put in the effort, for whatever reason that might be, discontinue the process would have been hugely disappointing and detrimental to the effort of reclamation. However, there were still others who did the same kind of thing that happens at many churches small groups. The members attended for one session, and then just never came back.

Just like the Parable of the Sower, the seed that was cast out at the introductory meeting was received and produced differently among the members who attended. For some, they did not even heed the letter and did not show up at all. For others, they attended but allowed their regular lives to crowd out their ability to make the next meetings. Still others, attended and heard great reasons, but decided that they were not ready for such a commitment. And finally, there were some who heard the arguments and information and decided that this was a worthwhile project to devote their time and energy to. The last group numbered four (4) and they would become the very first class meeting at Needville United Methodist Church.

## **Becoming a Class**

After the initial meeting, we met again in one week to begin the process of reclaiming the class meeting within a modern congregation. As addressed before, the next meeting saw only four (4) participants return of the original number from the introductory meeting. However, these members were ready to get to work on reclaiming this amazing tool of discipleship. We utilized an already published work from Kevin Watson entitled, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*. I used this resource for two reasons.

Firstly, Kevin Watson is one of the leading experts on the Wesleyan class meeting. His knowledge about the class meeting and his desire to see the class meeting come back into the modern church was incredibly helpful to guide and work through this process of reclamation. Secondly, because the book can be read during the week, it gave us more free time in the weekly meetings to focus on building the connections and relationships, instead of me giving lectures each week. In essence, because of Kevin's expertise on the class meeting, I could allow him, through his book, to give a basic foundation of the class meeting (including the class leader position) and freed me up to focus on a way to help bring the group together in a connectedness that would facilitate the vulnerability and accountability that this new class meeting would need.

### **Boundaries And Prayer**

It is worth noting two things that I decided to do with this first class that I found to be of great help and brought great success. The first thing that I did in this experiment was, as the pastor, I assumed the role of the class leader for this period of time. I was open from the very beginning that this was only temporary and that I would do two things that a class leader would not do. I would not be vulnerable with them, at least not in the same vein of vulnerability that I was requesting from them. Knowing this class as I do, I knew that they would be able to

understand that it would be a breach of the pastoral relationship to divulge certain details. I believe that the pastor cannot be a class leader for this reason. However, even though I would not divulge with them, I was going to probe them anyway. I explained that one of the most powerful parts of the class meeting stemmed from the class leader being allowed to press their members for details and information from the answers that were given, and that this power stemmed from the fact that the leader would always begin the meeting with asking and answering the question to the satisfaction of the class so that it was clear that everyone was required to do this. Since I was not going to divulge and answer the question, I asked for their grace and forgiveness to still ask them and probe their answers. I asked this with the caveat that I am in another class of pastors whom I do divulge these sensitive answers with, and that I made a vow to them that I would continue to be vulnerable with them in lieu of being completely vulnerable with this class of congregation members. Later on, when the class chose the leader who leads them now, he mentioned to me that it was of great help to watch me lead the group so that he had both an example to follow and encouragement to take up the mantle.

The second thing that I did came from my love of and insistence on prayer. In all the churches that I have served and been part of in my life, prayer and prayer requests have been one of the most important pieces for each and every congregation. This congregation at Needville United Methodist Church is no exception. In every worship service we have a time dedicated to lifting up prayer requests where congregation members are given freedom to speak out, individually in service to raise up a concern or joy. The amazing thing about this time is the openness that is displayed. Members will share intimate details about their health, family situations, and personal trials when it is the form of a prayer request. I recognized this and hypothesized that the reason for the openness is because the people in the congregation did not

see it as divulging information to other people, but instead it was seen as a mere verbalization of their internal and personal prayer lives. Therefore, they felt no shame at divulging information because in essence they were only divulging it to God, who knew it already. With this hypothesis, I brought this to the table in the class and made it a large part of the trust building within the group.

At the end of every meeting, I would ask them to bring a prayer request to the table. Each week, I would encourage them to share a request that was personal, but in the first few weeks the requests were only detailed when focused on others. In other words, when the request was about a family member or friend, the details about the request were readily given, but the personal requests were vague and lacked specificity. As the class continued to meet, I started to push back on their prayer requests. In the third week, I requested that they come prepared with a personal prayer request about something that keeps them from the relationship with God that they desire. After that week, I would ask them for more detail about that request each week, until they started to divulge faults that they desired to rid themselves of.

This focus on prayer did amazing and miraculous things for the quickly forming class. Namely, it built trust quickly among the members. The courage and strength that came from offering up requests allowed for deeper and more meaningful requests to be shared. This led to the members trusting each other with more and more secrets as they found that they could trust the other members to honor the confidentiality agreement of the group, as well as find out that the other members would not judge them for their shortcomings. This also had a positive effect as well as it allowed them all to truly see that each of them was flawed and in need of grace, salvation, and help.

## The Six-Week Process

When we met for the second meeting, and I saw that only four (4) people came back, I must admit that I was disheartened. However, it proved to be a blessing from God as I was able to focus on just them and figure out a great way to build the class and connectedness that was needed to reclaim this great tool. We spent six (6) weeks learning, growing, and experimenting, and at the end of the sessions there was a class meeting, a class leader, and a much different group of disciples. Throughout the weeks that we met, this class of four (4), remained faithful to their cause and to each other. Every week I witnessed as each one took new steps towards openness and vulnerability that had eluded them on the previous week.

### Week One

In the very first meeting that this small group had, we were able to talk about the different kind of small groups that are found within the church, utilizing Kevin's book and definitions which are found in detail back in chapter three (3). We spoke about "affinity groups"<sup>131</sup>, "information-driven groups"<sup>132</sup>, and finally "transformation-driven groups"<sup>133</sup>. The four members that made up this class were well-versed in Sunday school curriculum and at once saw the benefits of getting away from that kind of curriculum driven group. Ultimately in that first meeting, the class took Kevin's words to heart when he said that,

A class meeting is a small group that is primarily focused on transformation and not information, where people learn how to interpret their entire lives through the lens of the Gospel, build a vocabulary for giving voice to their experience of God, and grow in faith in Christ.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting*, 5.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

I also added one more thing to this mantra of theirs. I believe that the class meeting can be a tool that truly, and physically, builds the Kingdom of God here on Earth. I told them that if they would allow themselves to fully embrace the connectedness and love that this class could bring to them, that they would become disciples in the same sense as Peter and Paul. In becoming disciples of this order, they would be subject to Christ's proclamation of those who would come after, that they "will do greater works" (John 14:12) than even the ones that are recorded. By holding each other accountable and loving each other in the way that Christ commanded us to love one another, they would be able to do extraordinary things for the God through their faith in the community of Needville.

#### Week Two

In the second week, we focused on the all-important question that was central to all class meetings, "How is it with your soul?"<sup>135</sup> It was an important meeting that helped the class members to start to separate their thinking from previous groups that they had been part of in their lives. We spoke at length about how this question is a very deep question that, if honored and truly answered, would shatter the proudest soul or bring the most wayward spirit back from the brink. I told them that each week they were digging deeper and deeper into this question, and that each week we were building the bonds of trust that were needed to start answering this question with honesty and transparency.

It was in this week that I introduced the focus on our prayers at the end of the meeting. I explained that the question of 'how is it with your soul' could be answered through prayer requests. I likened it to how you will put a toe in the water of a pool or into the ocean to acclimate your body for the temperature of the water, or how you will reach a hand into the

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<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*, 25.

shower to make sure the water is not too hot before jumping in. Prayer requests were a safe and non-threatening way to truly reveal something about yourself, while at the same time protecting yourself while the necessary trust was built. It is worth noting that the first round of prayer requests mirrored the typical ways in which prayer requests were delivered in service and in Sunday school classes. I pointed this out to the class, and had them write down the requests from each person in a journal so that they could track the movement of the Spirit. This tracking was to accomplish two things. It would help to see how far they had come down the road, similar to how someone might take a picture of themselves just before going on a diet or exercise regimen so that after a period of time they could see the results that are not apparent in the daily viewing. I also wanted them to track the requests so that they could see how the Spirit was moving in their lives. It is easier to praise God when you have a ready-made list of all the great things God has already done in your life.

### Week Three

In the third week, we spoke about two theological words that I had never heard in the church except for within the seminary and in conversations with fellow clergy. The class spoke about and defined orthodoxy and orthopraxy as it pertained to them as individuals and how it pertained to them as a class. The definitions of these words allowed us to go deeper into what it meant to hold each other accountable. When we, as Christians, start to realize that being in right relationship with God is more than just a spiritual thing, but that the spiritual is manifested in the physical, then we see our faith in a whole new light. I brought the class to the parables of Christ in this way, highlighting the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and the parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23). I chose these because they make great instruction about the

importance of having an inner connection with God (spiritual), coupled with the outward manifestation of works (corporeal).

In keeping with these instructions from the parables, we came back to the accountability of the class. The class members should desire to produce fruit, both in their own personal faiths as well as in the local church and in the community surrounding them. I told them that as they grew in their faith and in their trust of one another, their time answering the question of ‘how is it with your soul’ would inevitably move them into asking how they were loving their neighbors. This would be a gradual process, and through that long period of time there would be many more opportunities for the members of the class to falter or come up short of their goal. In these times, it would be the comradery and love of the class that will help the member that has fallen get back up and try again.

I wanted to use this week to instill a very important part of the class meeting. The class meeting is a place where the hard questions are asked and the answers may be painful give, but it is never a place where grace does not abound. I encouraged them that sometimes more than anything else that goes on, grace and forgiveness might be the most important thing at the moment. While the class wants to hold accountable its members towards complete and joyful obedience towards God, it would be a curse upon the members if the class became only a place to berate its members for every short coming that they experience. By making sure that grace and forgiveness are always at the forefront of the accountability and vulnerability the class members will both lift each other up and practice the ability to give that same grace and forgiveness to the world that is outside of their class.

## Week Four

In this week, we spent a little bit of time on the differences between Sunday school classes and the class meeting. I highlighted again the important pieces of both, that both were great tools to be used by Christians to further their faith, and that the class meeting was in no way an attempt to overthrow or do away with Sunday school. By this point, the members of the class were on board with this analysis, which made for an easy transition into one of my very few differences of opinion with Kevin's assessment and implementation of the class meeting.

Kevin Watson asserts in the fourth chapter of his book that the class meeting is a "valuable tool for evangelism".<sup>136</sup> Kevin claims that the class meeting should be a place where vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith can be practiced, but also the class meeting is,

a place for people to talk to others who want to grow closer to God about what is happening in their life with God, even if they would not yet consider themselves to be Christian and they just want to explore salvation in Christ.<sup>137</sup>

I believe that Kevin is trying to create a hybrid small group that brings the elements of accountability and vulnerability of the class meeting into the space of a more casual Sunday school class. As I told the class members, the problem with this is that the intimate nature of the class requires intimacy and confidentiality that is broken when someone new is brought in, especially if the new person is not a believer yet.

I explained to the group that the class meeting that I intended to reclaim was a group specifically for members of the Methodist congregation. The hope would be for a person to join a class as soon as they became members, but not beforehand. When the class meeting was made mandatory within the Methodist societies of Wesley's day, the members of the classes were not visitors of the congregation; they were those persons who had taken the vows to uphold the

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<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*, 64.

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, 65.

general rules of the society. I likened it to Paul's lesson in his first letter to the Corinthians when he tells the congregation there that he fed them with milk and not solid food (1 Corinthians 3:2). Bringing a nonbeliever, or even a visitor to the congregation, would be like feeding a steak to an infant. It would do much more harm than good.

However, I still believe that the class meeting is a great evangelistic tool for the church. The class meeting will produce disciples that have practical faith. That practical faith will require the disciple to go out and make more disciples, as Christ commanded us to do. In this, the small group Bible study and the Sunday school are great tools for the visitor or nonbeliever to test the waters, and a class member might be the one to bring them to these groups. In this way the class meeting will be a tremendous evangelistic tool for the Kingdom.

#### Week Five

I took this opportunity in the groups meetings to use this week as our commitment week. In Kevin's book, the fifth chapter gives a life cycle of small groups. My experience with small groups from various congregations supported the stages given by Kevin, so I kept the same language. Kevin says that "[t]hough every group is unique and has its own identity, small groups typically go through the following stages in their development: *birth, establishing a routine, questioning and refining purpose, and maturity.*"<sup>138</sup> I used this understanding to bring the class to the realization that we had already traversed past some of the stages, but that one of the biggest stages was upon us.

The class had already been born. The initial informational gathering meeting and the subsequent meetings that had been occurring on a weekly basis were proof enough that the small group had become a true group with an identity and life. The class had also already established a

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<sup>138</sup> *ibid*, 86.

routine. They had done this both in the sense of a physical meeting, we met every week on Sunday afternoon after church in the Youth Building, but they had also done this by establishing the routine within the meeting. When we met, we would socialize and eat together, then we would open our notes from the reading of the week before, then we would spend the second half of our time enumerating and divulging our prayer requests in an attempt to become more and more vulnerable with each other. I explained to them that since we were still a brand-new class, this was a great first step towards the ultimate goal of vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith, but we still had not reached our goal either.

I also explained that what went hand in hand with our routine was the defining of our purpose. The purpose of this class was two things, currently. Firstly, it was to build the faiths of those in the group so that they might become even better disciples of Christ. Secondly, it was an experiment to prove that the class meeting could be reclaimed into the modern era for the purposes of my dissertation and doctorate degree. This is where I changed the tenor of the meeting because the next step in the life cycle of this group would be to questions and refine their purpose. While the overarching purpose of building the faith of the members so that they could become even better disciples of Christ would never waver or change, the way in which this happened would need to change, the commitment of the members might need to change, and the measuring stick of how well or poorly the class was doing to meet our goals would need to be assessed and evaluated.

Up until this point in the meetings, we had basically been studying the class meeting. We had now all read the history of the class meeting and the downfall of the class meeting. We had read about the pillars and seen the bones of the class meeting that made it such a great tool of disciple making, and we had dipped our proverbial toes in the accountability and vulnerability

needed for this class to become what was intended for it to become. However, this was the last meeting that would be instructional. In the following week they would choose for themselves their class leader, and I would take my leave of the group from the weekly meetings.

Therefore, this was the week that they had a very large question placed on them. This class had matured as much as it could under this guise. They had certainly deepened their faiths and they had certainly opened themselves up to each other over the previous weeks, but now came the time for them to make the commitment to continue or to step away and settle for growth that they had experienced. As we went through our meeting in the usual way and after the prayers had been uttered, which by this point was becoming more a question-and-answer session instead of just a prayer request session, I put the question to them for them to pray on and think about in the coming week. My final question to the members went something like this,

Will you commit yourself to this class meeting for the next year? This commitment means that you agree to meet on a weekly basis, to passionately and honestly answer the questions of faith posed to you, to give permission to your fellow class members to speak truth in love into your life, to be courageous and strong enough to return the favor, and to keep the confidentiality of this class by not divulging any information to anyone outside of the class.

I told them in that meeting that this commitment was something to not be taken lightly. Just like marriage vows, this commitment would mean sticking through difficult times as well as joyous times. Bottom line, this class goes against everything that Satan wants and by becoming part of this class, we place a target on our backs for him to aim. Therefore, I asked them not to make any vow that day, but instead to go home, reread what they needed to, pray in earnest, and come back the following week with their answer. I made sure to remind them that no matter the answer that they brought to the next meeting, they would be loved, and that it was acceptable to recognize that you might not be in a place in your physical or spiritual life that you would be

able to uphold this vow. As we closed this meeting, I read for them this passage from Christ to aid them in their discernment process over the next week.

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace (Luke 14:27-32).

#### Week Six – The Final Week

The final week of instruction had us read the sixth chapter in Kevin's book that outlined the class leader. It was a great relief when we met the following week and all four members returned with the intention of taking this vow upon themselves. We continued our schedule of meetings by eating and talking about the chapter that we had read the week before. After the members verbally and individually claimed their membership within this class and promised to stay for the next year, I entered into the task of leading them to select a member who would become their class leader.

I explained that this person would be someone whom the class would entrust to hold them accountable, to speak truth in love, to ask the penetrating questions, and to push with the end goal being a deeper and more profound faith. This person would be the first to divulge and share, so as to set an example for the rest. They needed to pray and see where the Spirit led them in their decision; this office was not a small decision.

Once we talked about the class leader and their role within the class and outside the class, that they would be a direct link to the pastor, I charged them with selecting among themselves a person who was both willing and called to fulfill this role. Upon charging them with this command, I said a prayer with them for enlightenment, courage, and discernment, and then I left

the meeting. I told them that I was leaving because this choice was not mine to make, nor was it mine to even influence. This was not *my* class, and the person called to this post would not be *my* class leader. I told them I was going home, and that I would be in prayer for them until I heard who had been called into this role.

My final instruction to them was that this class that I had begun through a congregational letter was now theirs to do with as they chose. They had the information and education to build their own class upon the foundation that had been built through the previous six weeks. Once the leader had been selected, they needed to decide where and when their class would meet. Finally, they needed to decide what their goals and purpose were now going to be. I encouraged them to, just as we had been doing, take small steps at first. Building trust and faith was of great importance before anything else could be done, or the class would not have the necessary resources to sustain themselves. After I answered a few more questions, I left the meeting in prayer. In about an hour, I received the phone call with the name of the class leader, the time and day of the week that they would be meeting, and the place that they had chosen to meet at. The first class meeting of Needville United Methodist Church was no longer an infant, but an adolescent that was able to walk and make choices for itself.

### **The Growth of the Needville UMC Class Meeting**

Following this seven-week instructional period, I would make appearances at their new meetings roughly once a month. I would act as a ‘fly on the wall’ allowing for the class leader to truly lead the class, while I sat back and listened. Over this period of time, the class ended up adding two new members to their class through simple word of mouth with congregation members who had joined the church after the initial creation of the class. These members had previous congregations and therefore were already believers when they came to the

congregation. The class members, built relationships with these new congregation members through Sunday worship, Sunday school, and other ministries within the congregation which culminated in them telling them about the class and how it had impacted their faiths and lives. After the explanation, these new members to the congregation wanted to see this class and were invited in.

The class members, both the original and the new members, praise this reclamation project for its ability to deepen their faith, to build a powerful faith-based support system for every-day life, and to change their focus in even small matters throughout the day from earthly pursuits to the building of the Kingdom here on Earth. They were able to bear witness to the power of prayer in detail, as they kept track of each other and watched them grow strong in their struggles. Some members said that they had witnessed that just the thought of having to explain a choice or action to the class was enough to make them change their ways into a more faithful choice or action. The original members proclaimed that they had grown in the faith more over the past six months than any other time in their lives and felt themselves closer than ever to the Spirit of God thanks to the vulnerability and accountability that this class predicated itself on.

At the six-month mark, the class had built a solid foundation of trust and relationship among themselves, and had begun to work on “questioning and redefining” their purpose.<sup>139</sup> This time they wanted to start focusing on the world outside their class. They wanted to start within the congregation by doing what they had already done with the two new members of their class, they wanted everyone to know the power, strength, and grace that they had experienced in this class meeting. This was exactly what I had wanted to hear and helped me in finding the next steps.

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<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, 86.

## **The Next Steps**

Creating one class meeting is a good thing, but it was never the end goal. While I do not think that a mandate to be part of a class, like John Wesley's societies had, is conducive to the modern congregation; I do believe that once people hear the stories and see the power of these meetings, that they will flock to them in droves. Therefore, I took their redefining to mean that they were ready to start helping me create more classes. I have a plan to have another sermon series that circles around the need for small group ministries and participation of all Christians within these kinds of groups. However, instead of my words being the only ones, I have asked that members of the first Needville UMC class to bring their testimonies of this small group.

Just like I did when the first class was born, I will send out a congregational letter asking for all interested members to join me in an informational session. I will ask my established class to not only pray for this new group of classes, but also help to recruit them by talking to people one-on-one to strengthen the power of the letter and sermon series. I have already had some in the congregation that have come up to me asking when I am going to start this process again because they desire to join this time. Some of these members are ones who attended the first informational meeting, but for various reasons decided not to continue. Other members have heard stories and testimony from the current class members of the great benefits of the class meeting and desire to witness the power of the class firsthand. In all of this, I am looking forward to what the Spirit has in store for this congregation through the use of this amazing and powerful tool.

## **Conclusion**

This project was a huge success because it proved that the Wesleyan class meeting still has great power, and is not just a relic that was only good for the moment in time that it

originated from. The members of the class meeting continue to tell me that they never knew that what they both needed and wanted was a space that they could be vulnerable and a group that would hold them accountable in a courageous and strong way. In their love of each other, they have found a deeper love for their family members, spouses, friends, and enemies. This class truly walks with each other in faith and strength. They know each other's lives, they lift each other up in prayer, and they follow up with each other in order that they might manifest the love and unity that Christ both taught and prayed for among His followers. I believe that this new class meeting has the potential and ability to be a spark that ignites the flame of passion within this congregation, and can do the same for so many congregations around the world. The body of Christ is called to be cities on hills and beacons of God's sacrificial and abundant love for His creation. The class meeting is a place where Christ's words find their meaning, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

### **Final Thoughts**

Since my first small group setting in my youth group at Bear Creek United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, I have been fascinated and passionate about small group ministry and the power that is there to transform the lives of the members as well as the lives of all those around. I saw firsthand how the power of the Holy Spirit flowed in the form of courage, strength, and wisdom inside the home group Bible study, the mission trip team, and the Youth Council room. When I became the youth intern for that same church, I would make sure to not only attend every single small group throughout the week, but I also wanted to lead one if not more. The small group is where I have always found my strength and my passion. It is no wonder then that I gravitated towards it when I started pastoring churches as well. From my years as a student pastor, associate pastor, youth pastor, and solo pastor, I have always been motivated and pulled to be part of small group ministries within the congregations that I have served.

As I grew in my responsibilities and gained experience within congregations throughout East Texas, I came to realize that so many who attended church on Sunday had been allowed to simply coast through their faith walks. Many members that I spoke with said that they had not had a great revival of their souls since they were kids. Typically, it was seen as the fact that the worship services on Sunday morning just were not providing the nourishment for the congregation's souls like it used to. It was then that I realized that the biggest need within the modern church was a community of the faithful who sharpen each other, push each other, and grow with each other for the glory of God and His Kingdom.

Being a lifelong Methodist, it was not long before I realized that, apart from the amazing heart language that the Wesley's brought to the faith through theology and music, we Methodists had one other thing that we could and should share with the whole of Christendom. We have the

amazing tool of the class meeting. The vulnerability, accountability, and practical faith that was produced by those classes helped give strength to Asbury and Whitfield to start the Methodist Episcopal Church in the newly formed United States, and it helped that fledgling denomination to grow to be one of the top denominations within this new nation. The class meeting also created a close-knit community of believers that truly loved one another in the Biblical sense. Christ tells us to be cities on a hill so that we can shine the light of God onto all those around us. There can be no better way to heal the communities around us from everything that is happening in our world, than to exemplify a healthy and God-centered community.

I wanted to bring the Wesleyan class meeting in to the modern church to help create a strong and vibrant generation of disciples and to make a community that can start to counter all the darkness that we find our society today. This project proved to me that this not only possible, but that this reclamation project is necessary for the body of Christ as well as for the society that is desperately trying to hold to something in the midst of the storm of politics, war, pandemics, hatred, poverty, and so much more. If the world is to know that God loves them, we must become the community that exudes that grace, so that the rest of the world can see just how much they are loved by their Creator. By building small communities that have their foundation in Scripture, lavished in grace, and driven by a desire to truly be new creations in Christ, followers of Christ can once again become beacons of God's light to a world full of darkness.

## Appendix A

NUMC Family,

As many of you know, I have been working on my Doctorate degree since I started here, and it is now time for me to be working on my dissertation. My focus is on the creation and reclamation of something that is near and dear to our hearts as Methodists, the Wesley class meeting. These small groups were foundational in the early Methodist Movement as it created intimate, personal, and spiritually significant spaces for growth. I want to bring the amazing potential of these groups back into the modern church. And this is where I am going to need your help.

While the dissertation requires a huge amount of writing, it also requires a project to test my hypothesis. I want to invite my beloved church family to journey with me on this and help to create something that will not only help our own local congregation, but could very easily help out countless churches around the globe. I am asking you to come and help me recreate the Wesley class meeting system here at Needville UMC.

Please mark your calendars and come join me on this experience. Our first meeting will be on Sunday, June 6<sup>th</sup>, in the Youth Building right after church. Lunch will be provided. I want all of you to join with me on this adventure, it will be an amazing time of loving, learning, and growing with each other!

In Christ,

Pastor Roger

## Appendix B

### Connections

#### Series Overview:

We live in a world that is growing smaller by the minute it seems. We can learn about news from around the world, we can post a picture and share our lives with thousands of ‘friends’ on Facebook, and we can communicate with anyone in the world instantly. Yet we find ourselves to be one of the loneliest people in human history. It all comes down to whether we simply accumulate acquaintances or seek out deep connections.

Sermon Title: Designed to Connect

Scripture: Mark 5:24-34

#### Synopsis:

The world is full of people who are together, but not connected. We have thousands of friends on Facebook, but no one whom we are truly connected. God created us to be in community, and community means real deep connection. When God designed the Human race, He created us after Himself... our connection should therefore look like His.

Sermon Title: How Jesus Connected

Scripture: Matthew 22:36-40

#### Synopsis:

Love your neighbor as you love yourself is part of love the Lord your God. Jesus taught that connection with others was a part of being in connection with God. You could not have one, without having the other. Jesus then demonstrated this connectivity in the way that he did ministry. For 3 and a half years, Jesus not only taught, but lived how to truly ‘love your neighbor as yourself’.

Sermon Title: Connecting to Each Other

Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20

Synopsis:

Connection is more than just familiarity. Connection is more than just being casual. Connection is much more than acquaintance. In our lifetimes we will only truly be connected to a small handful of people. When Jesus says that He is present when 2 or more are gathered, He means when 2 or more are connected.

Sermon Title: The Separating Forces

Scripture: Galatians 5:16-26

Synopsis:

If we can understand and know that we were created for connection, then why is it so hard for us to connect? We count our contacts as connections and are surprised to find that we do not grow... as our Facebook friend's grow, we find that we are still lonely, and the more we isolate, the further we get from the Kingdom. What stops us from connecting and how do we fight back against those forces?

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