

The Methodist Method

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*"I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out."
- John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Methodism," (1786)*

Introduction

One of the keys to the success of early Methodism was the organizational structure, or *method* that John Wesley instituted in the early stages of the revival to ensure that Methodists "watched over one another in love" and supported one another as they sought to become "altogether" Christians. Experience led Wesley to believe that it was essential to unite Christians together, believing that "holy solitaires is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness." (Preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739)

The Society Meeting

In the "General Rules" Wesley defines a Society as "a company of men "having the form, and seeking the power of godliness", united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation'." (*BE*, Vol. 9, 69)

The condition of admission into a Society was a "desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins." (70) This will be shown by its fruits.

The Society meeting is loosely analogous to a contemporary local church. It was the broadest level of organization. In many ways it resembles a worship service, with a hymns, Scripture readings, a sermon, and prayer.

The Question: Do you desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved of your sins?

The Goal: Awakening and Repentance

The Class Meeting

The class meeting was the first way that the society was subdivided. One of the purposes of the class meeting was to hold members of the Society accountable for keeping the "General Rules".

Background: The class meeting originally came about as a strategy for retiring the debt for the building Methodists had built in Bristol, England. Captain Foy suggested that the Society in Bristol be divided up into 12 members, with each member donating a penny a week. One result of this was that the leaders, when they went from house to house to collect the penny, realized that many people were not practicing the "General Rules."

Wesley wrote in “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists”:

“It struck me immediately. ‘This is the thing, the very thing we have wanted so long.’ I called together all the *Leaders* of the *Classes* (so we used the term then and their companies), and desired that each would make a particular inquiry into the behaviour of those whom he saw weekly. They did so. Many disorderly walkers were detected. Some turned from the evil of their ways. Some were put away from us. Many saw it with fear, and rejoiced unto God with reverence.” (261)

The class meeting became so important that for a period of time one could not attend the Society meeting without a ticket that was given, and renewed, at the class meeting. Classes were divided based on geographic location, between five to twelve people, with both women and men being in the same class.

The Question: How does your soul prosper?

The Goal: Justification or the New Birth

The Band Meeting

The band meeting was derived from the Moravian Christians who influenced Wesley in many other ways. The band meeting preceded both the class meeting and the “General Rules.” Wesley chronicles the way that the band meeting came to fit within the broader Methodist method, or organization in “A Plain Account”:

“By the blessing of God upon their endeavors to help one another, many found the pearl of great price.... These felt a more tender affection than before to those who were partakers of like precious faith; and hence arose such a confidence in each other that they poured out their souls into each other’s bosom. Indeed they had great need so to do; for the war was not over, as they had supposed. But they had still to wrestle both with flesh and blood, and with principalities and powers; so that temptations were on every side; and often temptations of such a kind as they knew not how to speak in a class, in which persons of every sort, young and old, men and women, met together.

These therefore wanted some means of closer union: they wanted to pour out their hearts without reserve, particularly with regard to the sin which did still ‘easily beset’ them, and the temptations which were most apt to prevail over them. And they were the more desirous of this when they observed, it was the express advise of an inspired writer, ‘Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed’.

In compliance with their desire I divided them into small companies; putting married or single men, and married or single women together.” (266-267)

The band meeting was essentially confessional and was the most invasive piece of the Methodist structure. In order to be admitted you had to first answer a series of very direct questions such as “Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?” After admission, the band meeting involved a weekly meeting where each person

confessed any sins they had committed since their last meeting to the group. Wesley consistently ground this practice in James 5:16, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” (*TNIV*)

The Goal: Sanctification or Growth in Holiness

The Question: What sins have you committed?

Offshoots of the band meeting were the **Select Society** which was aimed at Christian perfection, or entire sanctification, and the **Penitent Society** which was aimed at backsliders, or those who had fallen into habitual sin.

Supplementary Reading:

The following primary source readings give more detailed background into the early Methodist organization:

- “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists” Vol. 9 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, 254-270
- “Thoughts Upon Methodism” Vol. 9 *BE*, 527-530
- “Rules of the Band Societies” Vol. 9 *BE*, 77-78

All quotations that are only noted by a page number refer to Vol. 9 of the *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*.