

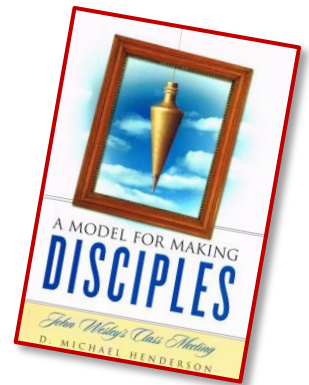
A Model for making disciples – John Wesley’s class meeting

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Introduction

The heart of Wesley’s movement was a powerful and effective educational method – hence the derisive label ‘Methodism,’ which originally came from its detractors. The method combined several interlocking group techniques, constructing a ladder of personal spiritual improvement. Any Christian could work up the latter from one level of spiritual maturity simply by faithful participation. The rungs were small interactive groups – the class meeting, the band, the select band, the penitent band, and the society. Each group was designed to accomplish a specific developmental purpose, and each had its own carefully defined roles and procedures to ensure that the objectives were accomplished.



The heart of this revolutionary system was the class meeting – a cell group of 6-8 people who met weekly to give an account of their personal spiritual growth, following Wesley’s rules and procedures. It proved to be an effective tool for radical personal change, and led ultimately to the moral and spiritual transformation of England and, later, America. In helping people to cope with the social and spiritual chaos of the industrial revolution, it helped spare England from the kind of bloody revolution which ravaged other nations on the continent.

Wesley based the class meetings on the small groups of catechumens formed in the early church, and saw this as an application of the Great Commission to make disciples (Matt 28.18-20), a focus which had been lost, recovered periodically in the church’s history, lost again. We need to recover some of these things; creeds have replaced convictions, meetings have replaced fellowship, information has replaced discipleship.

1. The Wesleyan Revolution

The 18th century saw industrialisation, a widening gulf between rich and poor, and an undercurrent which in France led to violent upheaval. Here the revolution took the opposite course: it was spiritual, and it was led by John Wesley. His goal – ‘to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land’. Dean Swift lamented ‘hardly one in a hundred among people of quality or gentry appears to act by any principle of religion; great numbers of them do entirely discard it, and are ready to own their disbelief of all revelation in ordinary discourse. Nor is the case better among the vulgar, especially in the great towns.’ Wesley chose to work not top down, but bottom up. He was disillusioned with the emptiness of ‘paper religion’, especially the theology cum philosophy prevalent in Oxford. He was influenced towards this by George Whitefield, one of his former students, preaching in the open air to thousands in London and Bristol, who in turn had noted Howell Harris doing this with miners in Wales. Whitefield started in Kingswood, Bristol, a mining area. He invited Wesley to join him, and there Wesley preached his first outdoor sermon. Whitefield popularised mass evangelism to the unchurched, but Wesley organised the movement and brought it under systematic management. He put the new converts into small groups, later called classes. It became the primary means of bringing millions of England’s most desperate people into the liberating discipline of the Christian faith.

2. The formation of Wesley’s method

It started with his own upbringing. Susanna believed in mastery of the child’s will as the key to character formation, and in giving individual time each week to each child to attend to his spiritual progress. She also pioneered community education, running a school for servants and children in her kitchen. As a tutor at Oxford Wesley led a small study group which they called The Holy Club, which soon began to practice spiritual disciplines and to minister to the poor. As a missionary in America he established two levels of participation for his congregations, open groups meeting for instruction and correction, and more intensive training for the more committed at his house on Sunday afternoons. He also began to see his own missionary role not as an evangelistic entrepreneur or international servant of the Church, but as a vehicle for his own spiritual growth. Mission became the context of discipleship. He also noted the teaching of French Catholic De Renty, who also focussed on personal growth through ministry to others; most Anglican groups at the time focussed on personal growth through careful attention to themselves. The Moravians too were important, with their concept of salvation through new birth, accompanied by an experience they called the ‘witness of the Spirit’. Wesley experienced this for himself at a Moravian meeting in Aldersgate St in London: the experience of personal conversion, when his heart was ‘strangely warmed.’ He found that the Moravians divided people into ‘bands’ or classes, for different groups of people.

The Moravians believed in the separation of instruction from edification, which was to become one of the hallmarks of Methodism. They had instructional meetings called 'choirs' given over just to teaching. They had 'bands' for personal encouragement, where no teaching was allowed, only sharing, confessions and reporting of personal spiritual experience. Most religious education weaves these two together; the Moravians and then Wesley kept them separate, devising specific methodologies for each function. The Moravians also believed (like Luther) that the way to revitalize ecclesiastical organisation was the proliferation of independent renewal groups within the official framework of the larger organisation – known as 'ecclesiolae in ecclesia' by the pietists. Wesley recognised this as the way to bring new life to the stagnant structures of the CofE.

Back in England he formed the Fetter Lane Society, 40-50 people, mostly German, meeting for prayer and encouragement on Weds nights in London, sharing the leadership with a Moravian. It brought together the strengths of the Anglican Religious Societies (cognitive instruction) and the Moravian bands (personal devotion and the cultivation of a radical lifestyle) – but kept them separate. **They met on Weds eves for collective instruction and inspiration – in lecture format. And they formed themselves into bands of 5-10 people of the same sex to meet twice weekly for personal spiritual growth, fostered through a set of predetermined questions. These bands were peer led (no clergy), which made them more open.** Membership of the society involved signing up to 33 articles of group conduct, and all new members had to be approved by existing ones.

Wesley wanted above all to find a remedy to the moral ills of his time and nation – hence his watchword 'to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land'. Preface to one of his vols of sermons: *'I design plain proof for plain people; therefore, of set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scripture. I labour to avoid all works which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and, in particular, those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in Bodies of Divinity; those modes of speaking which men of reading are acquainted with, but which to common people are an unknown tongue... My design is, in some sense, to forget all that ever I have read in my life. I mean to speak, in the general, as if I had never read one author, ancient or modern (always excepting the one inspired). I am persuaded, that, on the one hand, this may be a means of enabling me more clearly to express sentiments of my heart, which I simply follow the chain of my own thoughts, without entangling myself with those of other men; and that, on the other, I shall come with fewer weights upon my mind, with less of prejudice and prepossession, either to search for myself, or to deliver to others, the naked truths of the Gospel.'*

In 1739 he established the Foundery Society, in which he completed the development of the format of group instruction which would remain constant throughout Methodism. One change was tickets – **new members of the society had to have a ticket issued by the combined bands, and even then they were on 3 months trial. Tickets had to be renewed every 3 months.** What was measured was not doctrinal agreement or even moral perfection, but the willingness to cooperate with the group guidelines for participation. This ensured the quality of participation. Another was that **each society member was required to give a penny a week to finance the ministry** – with the leaders collecting, and paying themselves for any who had real difficulty. Class leaders were required to assess the lives of members – and disorderly ones corrected or ejected. Finally, **each leader was required to visit each of his members weekly** to exhort, advise and encourage them, and to see what they are willing to give by way of poor relief; and to inform the minister of any who are sick or disorderly. This would become the class meeting, and it would fill the gap between the society and the bands.

3. Wesley's system of interlocking groups

This system stayed the same for the next 50 years.

1. The society – cognitive mode. Included all Methodists in a given area. Included all members and any who attended open meetings. This was the umbrella group of the organisation; all other groups came under its jurisdiction. Wesley: 'a society is no other than 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 own salvation.' **Its primary function was cognitive instruction; the method was large group presentation and corporate hymn singing, and the environment was the Methodist chapel.** The main meeting was Sunday evenings, but it met during the week as well. Usually a meeting was based on a message from scripture on some practical aspect of Christian lifestyle. Cultural needs were also catered for – each a Saturday Watchnight celebration to replace the pub.

	BAND	SOCIETY
PURPOSE:	overt behavioral change	cognitive acquisition
LEADERS:	lay leadership	professional leadership
LEADERSHIP FUNCTION:	leader as enabler	leader as instructor
METHODS AND TECHNIQUES:	personal interaction 5-10 members one sex active participation confession of struggle every person spoke subjective emphasis appointed membership	lecture/sermon 50-100 members both sexes passive response biblical presentation only the leader spoke objective emphasis membership by choice
PHILOSOPHICAL/THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS:	Moravian precedents priesthood of all God as immanent faith as experiential	Anglican precedents priesthood of elite God as transcendent faith as inferential

2. The class meeting – behavioural mode. The most influential instructional unit. Simple but effective. Penny collections tested people's motivation and became combined with pastoral visitation. **Every Methodist became a member of a class, a group of 10-12 people meeting weekly for personal supervision of their spiritual growth. The meeting was a tool for the alteration of behaviour.** The Rules listed behaviours to avoid, to embrace, and practices to maintain. The classes were mixed in age, social standing and spiritual maturity. It was the point of entry and provided a forum for free expression in an accepting environment for people from different social backgrounds – unique at the time. Each meeting began with a hymn, followed by the leader stating the condition of his/her spiritual life, and then giving a testimony of their week with progress/challenge/failure, and then by class members. The subject matter was personal experience, not doctrinal ideology or biblical information. Class leaders had pastoral oversight of their groups, and this was the basic leadership role in Methodism – every leader at any level had to lead a class. The assumption was that faith began not in a sense of past misconduct but in a consciousness of present want – Wesley's theology focussed on grace as a remedy for corruption and unhappiness, not as a relief from guilt (Alexander Knox). For Wesley, the locus of the gospel was in experience or behaviour, not in verbal or printed statements (as it was to most of the Reformers). Class members had tickets. Every class was visited quarterly by Wesley or an associate, and every member was interviewed personally to check they had attended regularly and living by the Rules. They did not hesitate to expel people from groups.

At the centre of the transforming methodology of Methodism was the class meeting. It provided the following key elements toward the success of the entire system:

1. It furnished the environment in which cognitive concepts could be experimentally or experientially tested.
2. It served as a purging or pruning instrument to keep "dead wood" out of the society.
3. It was a training ground for leaders.
4. It was a point of entry capable of incorporating large numbers of new people quickly.
5. It financed the movement through penny collections.
6. Its accounting system provided a constant and immediate record of the strength and size of the movement.
7. It forced 100 percent mobilization and participation of the membership.
8. It gave every member a voice in the affairs of Methodism.
9. It allowed people to practice speaking their inner feelings.
10. It provided the milieu for resolving conflicts within the society by immediate face-to-face confrontation.

3. The band – affective mode

A homogenous grouping, by sex, age and marital status. Voluntary cells of people who desire to grow in love, holiness and purity of intention. The society aimed for the head, the class for the hands, and the band for the heart. In 1900 William James, father of modern psychology, proclaimed for the first time that actions precede, rather than follow, changes in attitude – 150 years after Wesley devised a system for correcting behaviour first and feelings/attitudes later! **The society meetings aimed at cognitive instruction, the class meeting provided an environment for behavioural change, and the band facilitated affective redirection.**

Rules of the bands:

1. To meet weekly
2. To come punctually
3. To begin on time with singing or prayer
4. To each speak in turn of the state of our souls, with faults and temptations
5. To end with prayer
6. To ask one member to speak first, and the rest to ask questions.

There were starter questions to help – what sins have you committed since our last meeting, temptations, how were you delivered, what have you thought/done/said which you are unsure about, and is there nothing you desire to keep secret? Bands were not as popular as classes. People could only join after answering a searching set of questions.

4. The select society – training mode. The uppermost group, a hand picked group of those training for leadership, the standard bearers of the movement.

5. The penitent bands – rehabilitative mode. Designed for those who lacked the will power to live up to the behavioural demands of the class meeting but did want to overcome their problems.

4. Why was Wesley's system so effective?

It was based on 8 foundational principles:

1. Human nature is perfectible by God's grace.
2. Learning comes by doing the will of God. (Methodism was an experiential system; many church leaders were telling people what they ought to do, while Methodists were telling each other what they *were* doing. There was no discussion allowed which was theoretical, hypothetical or speculative.)
3. Mankind's nature is perfected by participation in groups, not by acting as isolated individuals. (Christian perfection is a group experience, not a solitary quest)

4. The spirit and practice of primitive Christianity can and must be recaptured. (Every great religious movement is characterised by a return to simplicity in doctrine – Harnack)
5. Human progress will occur if people will participate in "the means of grace"
6. The gospel must be presented to the poor.
7. Social evil is not to be "resisted" but overcome with good.
8. The primary function of spiritual/educational leadership is to equip others to lead and minister, not to perform the ministry personally.

Group strategy

1. Each grouping within the system was related to the ones above and below it, although their functions were different. The leading members of one group were always participants in the next group up the ladder – eg a class leader was always a band member, whose leader was a member of the select society.
2. The point of entry to all this was behavioural change, followed by affective, aspirational and rehabilitative functions.
3. The locus of authority was not Wesley but a set of Rules, with each group having its own; this was the standard against which all policies and actions were measured. This impersonal system is easier to accept than authority vested in an individual leader.
4. Groups were graded by readiness – people's progress was measured, they were reported on monthly by the class leaders, interviewed quarterly by the minister, and admitted to bands only on self evaluation.
5. Participation and mobilisation. All were required to speak and participate.
6. Instrumental group activities – class meetings and bands were structured through questions
7. Exclusion for non compliance
8. Individualised care – every Methodist was under someone else's supervision.
9. Multiple accountability
10. Separation of cognitive, affective and behaviour functions. Class meetings altered behaviour, societies presented information, bands perfected affections.

Leadership principles

Lay leadership was key. Leaders were appointed not elected. They were recognised and trained but not made – there were no 'qualifications' for leadership, and no course qualified people to be leaders. They were, or they weren't. The primary qualification was faithfulness – not education. This remains true of leadership in developing nations, where there is an inverse correlation between theological level and evangelical dynamism.

The style of the Methodist preachers might be compared to that of Greek orator Demosthenes, described thus by a contemporary: 'when his rivals speak, the audience applauds. When Demosthenes speaks, the Athenians cry in unison: let us march on Philip!'

Supplementary instructional aids

1. Concept formation by hymn singing.
2. Penny collections - gave a sense of ownership
3. Cheap mass publications
4. Primary schools for poor children
5. Economic development projects for the poor

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Appendices

- A – Chronology
- B – Orders of a religious society meeting in Fetter Lane
- C – Preface to the 1739 hymnbook
- D – 12 rules of a helper