

ramental practice and in their carefully balanced sacramental doctrine, as much as in their evangelical practice and emphasis, have much to teach the universal Church—much that, rightly understood, might yet serve to reconcile many, if not all, the tensions within Christendom. To the ecumenical movement we may yet hope to contribute it, but first we must ourselves possess our possessions and seek to enter, not only academically but also devotionally, into their spirit.

## 9

The Discipline of Life  
in Early Methodism Through Preaching  
and Other Means of Grace

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The Methodist movement, from its beginnings, has been concerned with the discipline and nurture which are essential to the new life given through grace by faith. Our task today is to discover the necessary engagements of the ongoing life of those who have become convinced of the truth of the gospel and who in penitence receive the forgiveness of their sins and seek to lead a new life following the commandments of God.

What was the nature and purpose of discipline for Wesley and the early Methodists? How was it structured, and how was it engendered and enforced through preaching and the means of grace? Wesley, in responding to an inquiry from the Vicar of Shoreham (1748) concerning the "people called Methodists," said that "they had no previous design or plan at all; but everything arose just as the occasion offered. They saw or felt some impending or press-

ing evil, or some good end necessary to be pursued. And many times they fell unawares on the very thing which secured the good, or removed the evil." <sup>1</sup> This would seem to be the very opposite of discipline and order in the Christian life. Such an accidental and purely planless approach to the life of Christian belief and behavior hardly describes and surely does not account for the central and original attention which Wesley and his followers gave to the forms and the fact of discipline in devotion and action in the rise of the Methodist movement. Methodism arose, as Albert Outler correctly calls to our attention in the opening chapter, as an enterprise in evangelical mission, with the central attention focused upon witness, discipline, and nurture.

As Wesley had bound himself to the demands of a rigorous pattern of devotional discipline, so he called upon all who would be made perfect in love to give themselves to the daily discipline of obedience. "All who expect to be sanctified at all," he wrote in a letter to Dorothy Furly, August 19, 1759, "expect to be sanctified by faith. But meantime they know that faith will not be given but to them that obey."

This implied more than a haphazard experimentalism. It is the recognition of one of the grounds of growth in faith and grace through obedience. Here is the real basis of the kind of adherence to the forms of discipline which both elicited the epithet "Methodist" and gave a characteristic image to the people who took their religion in dead earnest. Preaching and discipline were the benchmarks of the early Methodist movement. We have not left off preaching, but what has become of our discipline?

The importance of our inquiry into the historic meaning of "the discipline of life" in our tradition does not stem from any failure to retain the term "discipline." It is rather that we have permitted the term "discipline" and its connotation to move into an almost purely institutional and legal realm. We have seen our "disciplines" disappear with the passing of the class meeting and other means of

<sup>1</sup> "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists."

grace, either in fact or in form, from their original intention and usage.

The development of the term "discipline" in Methodist parlance discloses various levels of reference. In Wesley's own early life and usage it meant the acceptance of a pattern or order in the practice and exercises of the devotional life. As the Methodist movement took form and spread it became apparent that the increasing numbers of persons must be organized into societies and classes in order to provide spiritual leadership and discipline for the members. Both instruction and oversight in matters spiritual and moral were included in the administration of discipline, which was the responsibility of the leader. Continuance of membership in the society was contingent upon the individual member's obedience to the "rules," which became the instruments whereby the organization maintained a consistency of life and behavior on the part of its members.

With the convening of conferences the term "discipline" came to be used for the ordered agenda of the conference sessions. The work of the conference was carried on by asking and answering questions regarding the organizational life and development of the movement. Step by step "discipline" has passed over into a highly legal and constitutional denotation until in the "Glossary" in the *Discipline* of The Methodist Church in the United States (1960), it is said to mean, "The official and published statement of the Constitution and laws of The Methodist Church, its rules of organization and procedure, the description of administrative agencies and their functions, and the Ritual." <sup>2</sup>

However, in the Episcopal Greetings which form the introduction to the same volume, there is a clear recognition of the earlier meaning and importance of discipline in Methodism. Discipline, it is noted, was instrumental to, as well as a record of, "the successive stages of spiritual insight attained by Methodists under the grace of Christ." <sup>3</sup> The class meeting "soon revealed its fitness for religious

<sup>2</sup> Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1960, p. 725.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. I.

nurture and took that work as its chief aim." <sup>4</sup> The episcopal statement then calls the reader to share in an attitude toward the organizational life of the church which is designed to recover the instrumentality of the church in the work of the Holy Spirit and the life of grace. "We reverently insist that a fundamental aim of Methodism is to make her organization an instrument for the development of spiritual life. . . . We do now express the faith and hope that the prayerful observance of the spiritual intent of the *Discipline* may be to the people called Methodists a veritable means of grace." <sup>5</sup> In a period when the church has become so preoccupied with the institutional demands of her organization and program that she is in danger of becoming just another circle of operation for "the organization man," or with definition to the point where we may be in danger of a new "Gnosticism," a call to a recovery of the discipline of life may not be out of place, and if heeded could result in a reopening of the lives of Methodists and the life of the church to the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. Henry Carter, in *The Methodist Heritage*, notes the results of discipline in early Methodism in these words: "The quality of fellowship in the Methodist class-meetings and the effectiveness of Methodist discipline in the lifetime of the Wesleys upheld the apostolic teaching, and went far to ensure that the profession of the individual was tested by collective Christian experience." <sup>6</sup> Here was a means of strengthening the experience of community among Christians under the disclosing light of the gospel.

The following review of the development of the discipline of life in the life of John Wesley and the early Methodist societies is undertaken with the hope that in the recovery of discipline we may be led onward in the expectation and realization of the purity of life and the fullness of holy love which Wesley saw to be the responsibility which follows upon receiving the gift of forgiveness and justification. To this end the gathering of the congregation of faithful men and women, the preaching of the Word of the

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951, p. 66.

gospel, the administration of the sacraments and the employment of the historic means of grace, may find their rightful instrumentality, and the church may achieve a new and unifying power unto man's salvation. To the first level of meaning of "discipline" in the Methodist movement we shall direct our attention, with the earnest desire that a recovery of discipline in these terms may serve to correct and displace ecclesiastical legalism, and to cleanse the church anew for her rightful role in the salvation of man and society.

Happy the souls to Jesus joined,  
And saved by grace alone;  
Walking in all his ways, they find  
Their heaven on earth begun.

The Church triumphant in thy love,  
Their mighty joys we know:  
They sing the Lamb in hymns above,  
And we in hymns below.

The holy to the holiest leads,  
And thence our spirits rise;  
For he that in thy statutes treads  
Shall meet thee in the skies.

In these lines from Charles Wesley's hymn "The Kingdoms One" the emphasis upon salvation as a gift of grace and the responsibility of man through the Holy Spirit to walk in Christ's ways are placed together in a way which was characteristic of John Wesley's conjoining of faith and works. It is in and through the church that man is enjoined to tread in the divine statutes under the vocation to holiness and the hope of heaven.

#### Personal Discipline of John Wesley

The practice of personal discipline was instilled early in the life of the founder of Methodism. Of the home experience in the rectory at Epworth, Carter observed: "The quality and ordering of the family life made deep and lasting impression on the sons and

daughters of the household. Not only was the home religious and scholarly, but also firmly disciplined."<sup>7</sup> The Lord's prayer, the collects, the catechism, portions of the scripture, and a weekly conference period with Susanna, their mother and mentor, were the earliest of the regular devotional means within the Wesley family. To these were added, when an appropriate age was reached, attendance upon the offices and services of the church, in worship, preaching, and the holy communion.

When the Wesley sons proceeded to Oxford they found a new urgency to disciplined attention to devotional practice. Charles wrote to John during a period of his absence from Oxford that "Christ Church is certainly the worst place in the world to begin a reformation in. A man stands a fair chance of being laughed out of his religion at his first setting out, in a place where 'tis scandalous to have any at all."<sup>8</sup> Yet it was here that these young men of disciplined purpose and practice formed "The Holy Club" and were thereupon derisively called "Methodists," because of the precise and methodical manner of their lives as well as of their studies and formal religious observance. As John recorded his development in his *Journal*, he traced the beginning of his rigorous ordering of every hour to an advice given by Jeremy Taylor in his *Rules for Holy Living and Holy Dying*. The *Imitation of Christ* and Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* also entered determinatively into Wesley's experience during the Oxford days. It is suggested in a description of the Oxford Methodists attributed to William Law:

That this society think themselves obliged in all particulars to live up to the law of the gospel. That the *Rule* they have set themselves is not that of their own inventions but the Holy Scriptures, and the orders and injunctions of the Church, and that not as they perversely construe and misinterpret them, but as they find them in the holy canon. That, pursuant to these, they have resolved to observe with strictness not only all

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by His Letters* (Wesley Historical Society Lectures, No. 14; London: The Epworth Press, 1948), p. 11.

the duties of the Christian religion according to their baptismal engagements, but the fasts, the prayers, and sacraments of the Church; to receive the blessed Communion as often as there is opportunity; and to do all the good they can, in visiting the sick, the poor, the prisoners, etc., knowing these to be the great articles on which they are to be tried at the last day; and in all things to keep themselves unspotted from the world. . . . These are the *Rules*, this the *Method*, they have chosen to live by.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this discipline, Wesley wrote to Richard Morgan, January 15, 1734, was to achieve "a constant ruling habit of soul, a renewal of our minds in the image of God, a recovery of the divine likeness, a still-increasing conformity of heart and life to the pattern of our most holy Redeemer." He was seeking holiness, Christian perfection. Whatever he knew to be hurtful or evil, he eschewed. Whatever he knew to do him good he resolutely embraced. The sermon "On The Duty of Constant Communion" records his finding together in the grace given through the Lord's Supper the strength to perform his duty and the leading of the soul on to perfection.

The disciplines of Oxford were carried to Georgia and, after Wesley's return to England, into the ordering of his life's further quest. The absence of a "sure trust and confidence in God," which he sensed as a lack of faith, was not, he discovered, to be relieved by the energetic, if not frenzied, application of himself to the discipline of doing good. His awareness of the necessity for complete self-surrender and total trust deepened until, under the guidance of the Moravians and the witness of the spirit in his Aldersgate hour, the justification for which he longed was given through faith with assurance. He saw his former striving to be "fighting continually, but not conquering." He had been "striving with, not freed from, sin." When he came to seek faith as an instantaneous gift of grace, by renouncing all dependence upon

<sup>9</sup> "The Oxford Methodists," quoted by Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936), pp. 214-15.

his own works of righteousness, he found it. He did so "by adding to the constant use of all the other means of grace, continual prayer for this very thing, justifying, saving faith, a full reliance on the blood of Christ for *me*; a trust in Him, as *my* Christ, as *my* sole justification, sanctification and redemption."<sup>10</sup> The assurance of justification through faith alone was experienced first at Aldersgate. The atonement, seen to be the sole and adequate ground of man's justification, was accepted in that moment as God's gracious gift. This legacy of the Reformation here entered into Wesley's life and preaching, never to be surrendered. George Croft Cell, noting the importance of the atonement in Wesley's preaching, said: "He was immovable in the belief that an objective atonement is the life principle of the Christian message and the all-inclusive differential of genuine Christianity."<sup>11</sup> Atonement remained for Wesley as the central issue between Deism and Christianity.

Yet the possession of this "instantaneous blessing" resulted in "rather an increase than a decrease of zeal for the whole work of God and every part of it."<sup>12</sup> For himself and all who entered into the life of the Methodist movement Wesley sought to enforce "the *gradual* work" of sanctification beyond the first fullness of forgiveness and justification. Not only must the guilt of sin be atoned and the sinner forgiven, the power of sin was to be broken and its roots completely destroyed; this by continuing growth in grace through the discipline of life by the power of the Spirit.

Reliance upon the grace of God was, for Wesley, not permitted to dull the edge of conscience nor to dim the eye of the soul to the imperious expectation of purity and perfect love. "I have found," said Wesley, "that even the precious doctrine of *Salvation by Faith* has need to be guarded with the utmost care or those who hear it will slight both inward and outward holiness."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Journal* (May, 1738), "A Review of Life."

<sup>11</sup> *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), p. 338.

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Charles Wesley, June 27, 1766.

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Cell, *op. cit.*, 342.

### Discipline in the Societies

The discipline of life, which Wesley found to be continually instrumental to growth in grace for himself, was bound upon those who came to him for counsel to the end that the image of God might be restored<sup>14</sup> and that man might be made perfect in love. He did not indulge in a puritanical resort to negations or self-justifying denials. There were, he commented, no hair-cloth shirts or bodily austerities. Neither was there any desire to achieve a pale and barren harmlessness, such as would elicit no negative reaction from fellow citizens or contemporaries. Nor were the Methodists to be content with the mere externals of doing good in works of piety and charity, nor with formal reliance on the established means of grace. Rather he insisted that those who came to him for guidance should seek "the mind that was in Christ," should desire earnestly to have the image of God stamped upon their hearts. The goal was "inward righteousness, attended with the peace of God; and 'joy in the Holy Ghost.'"<sup>15</sup> Discipline was regarded as instrumental to the fruits of faith. All who attached themselves to the movement were expected (1) to rejoice in God, (2) to walk as becomes the gospel, (3) to be fruitful in good works and evangelism, (4) to mutually strengthen one another in love, and (5) to share the expectation of entire sanctification. Obedience is useful "to provoke those who have peace with God to abound more in love and good works."<sup>16</sup>

### *The Objective of Discipline*

Wesley regarded the methodical disciplines which he required of his converts as instrumental to growth in grace and godliness. The discipline, like the law of God, was not an end in itself. The end to be sought was final justification and glorification in heavenly

<sup>14</sup> See "The New Birth," *Sermons*; cf. Piette, *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism*, p. 440.

<sup>15</sup> "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists."

<sup>16</sup> "The Character of a Methodist."

bliss. Those who had been born again into new life, being justified by faith, yet faced the necessity of spiritual growth.

Discipline was not regarded as a merely human enterprise in pleasing God by good works after justification. It was itself a gift and means of grace received under the direction and dynamic of the Holy Spirit.

The objective of discipline was, as has been shown, the opening of the heart to the perfecting work of the spirit unto sanctification. The fulfillment of the demands of pure love and holiness was the moral counterpart and outcome of the new life which had been received through faith.

#### *The "Rules" of Discipline*

In his "Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," Wesley recounts the history of the establishing of "a society." He shows the purpose of the institution of the "Rules" to be for the discipline of those who "united themselves 'in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other work out their salvation.'" In the life of the society many were strengthened in rejoicing unto God; "disorderly walkers" were detected, of whom some turned from the evil of their ways, and others were expelled from the fellowship. Wesley himself entered periodically ("at least once in three months") into conversation with the members of the early societies to inquire "whether they grew in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." This quarterly visitation and the "ticket" which was issued to the earnest and faithful provided a method of excluding the undisciplined member. For the members of the societies "the war [with temptation] was not over, as they had supposed; but they had still to wrestle both with flesh and blood, and with principalities and powers." The more earnest seekers were organized into "bands" for intimate mutual confession and strengthening.

The chains were broken, the bands were burst in sunder, and sin had no more dominion over them. Many were delivered from the temptations

out of which, till then, they found no way to escape. They were built up in our most holy faith. They rejoiced in the Lord abundantly. They were strengthened in love, and more effectually provoked to abound in every good work.

In addition to the meetings of the societies and bands, there were the love feasts, the watch nights, the letter days, and the intimate and select company of the backsliders who, having found the way again, shared testimonies and confessions which were not to be repeated. There were rules for the leaders, the stewards, and the assistants. Special attention was paid to the sick and the indigent. Employment, loan funds, and gifts to the needy who were unable to work were expressions of the concern of all for each one in the fellowship.

The "Rules" of discipline were almost invariably threefold. The "Directions Given to the Band Societies, December 25, 1744" call attention to the supposition that all in the Band Society "have the faith that overcometh the world." This faith was to be expressed in works of obedience. Therefore all the members were admonished: (1) "carefully to abstain from all evil," (2) "zealously to maintain good works," and (3) "constantly to attend on all the ordinances of God." Under each heading a list of particulars makes the members' duty clear. The proscriptions of "needless ornaments, such as rings, ear-rings, necklaces, lace, ruffles"; and, "needless self-indulgence, such as taking snuff or tobacco, unless prescribed by a Physician," may seem overmeticulous. But the admonitions "to be at church and at the Lord's table every week," "to attend the ministry of the word every morning," "to use private prayer [and family prayer] every day," "to read the Scriptures, and meditate therein, at every vacant hour," and "to observe, as days of fasting and abstinence, all Fridays in the year," reflect the requirements of obedience to the divine ordinances and to the "Rules."

#### *The Means of Grace*

That the disciplines which we have been considering were regarded by Wesley to be "means of grace" is clearly shown in his

question to the "Helpers" in the "Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others from the year 1744, to the year 1789":

. . . Do you use all the means of grace yourself, and enforce the use of them on all other persons?

They are either Instituted or Prudential:—

I. The *Instituted* are,

- (1) Prayer; private, family, public . . . .
- (2) Searching the Scriptures by,
  - (i) Reading . . . .
  - (ii) Meditating . . . .
  - (iii) Hearing . . . .
- (3) The Lord's Supper . . . .
- (4) Fasting . . . .
- (5) Christian conference . . . .

II. *Prudential means* we may use either as common Christians, as Methodists, as Preachers, or as Assistants.

- (1) As common Christians. What particular rules have you in order to grow in grace? What arts of holy living?
- (2) As Methodists. Do you ever miss your class, or Band?
- (3) As Preachers. Do you meet every society; also the Leaders and Bands, if any?
- (4) As Assistants. . . . do you make a conscience of executing every part of [your office]?

Then follows an even stronger and more specific word of watching against the world, the devil, and self. Self-denial and temperance in both food and drink were urged. The closing question places the foregoing specific admonitions in their relation to divine grace. "Do you endeavor to set God always before you; to see his eye continually fixed upon you? Never can you use these means but a blessing will ensue. And the more you use them, the more will you grow in grace."

The instituted means were seen to center in the sacramental act of partaking of the Lord's Supper. Wesley held that this sacrament was ordained by God as a means to "preventing," "justifying," or "sanctifying" grace, according to the individual person's need. The

sermons on "The Means of Grace" and "The Duty of Constant Communion" make it clear that obedience to God's ordinances is a mandate, not an option. "Because God bids, therefore I do." That the Lord's Supper was to be received through the offices of the church is the clearest evidence of his stand against individualism, enthusiasm, or antinomianism. Even the much disputed ordinations designed to provide discipline, order, and the sacraments for the Methodists in America were undertaken in the context of the usages within the historic Christian Church, not apart from it. "Let us never make light of going to church, either by word or deed."<sup>17</sup> There was to be no substitution of the Methodist services for the "Church Service." "When the Methodists leave the church, God will leave them."<sup>18</sup> Attracted as Wesley had been to the Moravians he could not accept their rejection of the ordinances and offices of the church. "No works, no law, no commandments," he called the wellspring of the great error of the Moravians. "The imagination that faith supersedes holiness is the marrow of antinomianism."<sup>19</sup> Obedience to the "law of God" Wesley likewise saw to be the necessary counter emphasis to the Solfidianism of the Lutheran doctrine as he knew it. Faith in Christ no more delivers man from obedience to the law than it delivers him from holiness and heaven. Wesley's confidence in the meeting of persons together at fixed times for confession and prayer stemmed from his conviction that such Christian conference was a part of the order of God's law. "How dare any man deny this to be (as to the substance of it) a means of grace, ordained by God? Unless he will affirm (with Luther in the fury of his Solfidianism) that St. James' Epistle is an epistle of straw."<sup>20</sup> Thus discipline, ecclesiastical and moral, appears as a responsibility of man in obedience to the spirit's leading, enabling, and sanctifying power. Apart from the disciplined life the faith which is given in life-renewing power at justification dies.

<sup>17</sup> "Minutes of Several Conversations."

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Journal*, VII, 316 f. (Cf. *Compend*, 167).

<sup>20</sup> *Journal*, April 4, 1739.

### Preaching

Preaching was not included in the lists of the "means of grace" which have been cited. Yet preaching was an essential instrumentality for awakening sinners and for guiding the lives of the reborn.

The importance of preaching as a distinguishing mark of Wesley's own work and of the Wesleyan movement can hardly be overestimated. Records and journals of the early Methodist leaders abound in references to preaching in homes, in the fields, in meetinghouses, in prisons, and in the shadow of the gallows at public hangings. One statistically minded researcher has estimated that John Wesley himself "preached no less than 52,400 times between 1738, when he returned from Georgia, and 1791, when he preached his last sermon eight days before he died."<sup>21</sup> So closely was preaching associated with the ministers who were first called "Methodist" that David C. Shipley, in a paper on "The Ministry in Methodism in the Eighteenth Century," could say graphically that "History has united, genetically, the terms 'Methodist and preacher.'"<sup>22</sup> The Methodist preachers, clergymen and laymen alike, were those whom the spirit of God "called" in a special way to proclaim "remission of sins through Jesus Christ."<sup>23</sup> It will be remembered that Wesley admonished his preachers to "Preach abroad as much as possible. . . . Try every town and village."<sup>24</sup> This he gave as the answer to the question, "What can be done to increase the work of God . . . ?"

The method of preaching which Wesley recommended was four-fold: "(1.) To invite. (2.) To convince. (3.) To offer Christ. (4.) To build up."<sup>25</sup> Its function is thus seen to be to bring sinners to a conviction of their lost state and to offer them Christ and his salvation. Wesley told his preachers not to preach too much of the

<sup>21</sup> Oscar Sherwin, *John Wesley, Friend of the People* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> *The Ministry in the Methodist Heritage*, edited by Gerald O. McCulloh (Nashville: Board of Education of The Methodist Church, 1960), p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> John Wesley, letter to the Lord Bishop of London, June 11, 1747.

<sup>24</sup> "Minutes of Several Conversations."

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

wrath, but much of the love of God.<sup>26</sup> Preaching did not stop there, however. Wesley, it has been suggested, was not an evangelist in the meaning which that term has later acquired. He did not preach without building up the lives of his converts through relating them to the offices of the church and the discipline of life in the societies. Wesley warned against "preaching Christ" as a fond alternative to "practical preaching." In the sense in which he recommended it as a method of building up the hearers, preaching itself was a part of the discipline. He advised that sermons deal expressly with "Sabbath-breaking, dram-drinking, evil-speaking, unprofitable conversation, lightness, expensiveness or gaiety of apparel, and contracting debts without due care to discharge them."<sup>27</sup> Preaching was further a means of guarding the hearers against errors in doctrine and the deadliness of formality either in worship or good works. Wesley's own sermons, such as "The Original Nature, Property, and Use of the Law," "Self-Denial," "The Cure of Evil-speaking," "The Use of Money," "The Reformation of Manners," "The Danger of Riches," "On Dissipation," "On Public Diversions," and the like, show him to have acted on his own advices. On an occasion such as the preaching of "The Almost Christian" in Saint Mary's (Oxford), the reader can feel what must have been the rousing and cumulative indictment as the forms of godly observance customary in that celebrated church were declared to be "almost" but not "altogether" Christian. Then the invitation was offered the hearers to go on into love to God, love to neighbor, and to faith. He said:

Are not many of you conscious, that you never came thus far; that you have not been even *almost a Christian*; that you have not come up to the standard of heathen honesty; at least, not to the form of Christian godliness?—Much less hath God seen sincerity in you, a real design of pleasing him in all things. You never so much as intended to devote all your words and works, your business, studies, diversions, to his glory.

The hearers were castigated. Yet in other sermons, such as "The

<sup>26</sup> "Minutes of Some Late Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesleys and Others."

<sup>27</sup> "Minutes of Several Conversations."



Wilderness State" and "Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations," Wesley's mood was entirely different. He was tender and understanding. The loss of love, of faith, of joy, and of God by those who through sin have become lost in the wilderness, or through cumulative temptation in "numberless circumstances" have found their hearts heavy within them brought forth from the preacher a gentle but insistent affirmation of the forgiving love of God. To these there is the proffering anew of the life of love, and joy, and holiness through sanctifying grace. Wesley's preaching was designed to proclaim and interpret the gospel to the various needs of men for salvation.

Although preaching was unmentioned among "the means of grace," yet we must regard it as such in the uses to which it was put by Wesley and his preachers. In the preface to "Sermons on Several Occasions" he declared his intention to be:

First, to guard those who are just setting their faces toward heaven, (and who, having little acquaintance with the things of God, are the more liable to be turned out of the way,) from formality, from mere outside religion, which has almost driven heart-religion out of the world; and, Secondly, to warn those who know the religion of the heart, the faith which worketh by love, lest at any time they make void the law through faith, and so fall back into the snare of the devil.

Preaching, so regarded, was instrumental to growth in knowledge and grace, a discipline of the life wherein desire is fixed upon perfection in obedience and love to God.

Preaching was seen to have its limitations. It was not a "harangue unto holiness" without the involvement of the hearers in the other practices of discipline. Wesley suggests that persons awakened by preaching alone are only half awake. "I determine," he wrote in his *Journal*, "by the grace of God, not to strike one stroke in any place where I cannot follow the blow." (March 12, 1743.) He did not, as did George Whitefield, the evangelist, merely "preach and hope for the best." Organization of societies, supervision of group discipline, and pastoral visitation were required of the Methodist

preacher. Of the inadequacy of preaching alone Wesley wrote in his *Journal*:

I reached Colcester. I found the society had decreased . . . and yet they had had full as good preachers. But that is not sufficient. By repeated experiments we learn that, though a man preach like an angel, he will neither collect nor preserve a society which is collected, without visiting them from house to house. (December 27, 29, 1758.)

The Methodist preacher had to be more than a preacher. It was demanded of him that he "watch over souls, as he that must give account."<sup>28</sup> The account included the overseeing of the daily walk in obedience, in righteousness, in faith, and in holy love.

Nearly all that has been said here would find its parallel in the annals of the American Methodist societies. Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury, in their *Notes to the Discipline*, urged the establishment of the band societies in the new land. "There is nothing we know of," they said, "which so much quickens the soul to a desire and expectation of the perfect love of God as this." Then after giving the "rules" of discipline they added, "Thus does our economy . . . tend to raise the members of our Society from one degree of grace to another."<sup>29</sup> Asbury set the pattern of American Methodism in his preaching, his organizing and disciplining of the societies, and his pastoral oversight of both preachers and people. One of his first acts in taking over the leadership of the society in New York was to "keep the door," admitting only the qualified members. Such an action made him unpopular with those who had become accustomed to laxity of discipline, but he would not surrender his determination to bring the Wesleyan rules to the societies in America. The purpose of the American Methodist circuit rider, though his distances were longer and his traveling terrain somewhat rougher than those of his British counterpart, was to

<sup>28</sup> "Minutes of Several Conversations."

<sup>29</sup> Cited by John Leland Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 94.

"spread scriptural holiness throughout the land," and "to watch over souls, as he that must give account."

In the middle of the following century (1841) Bishop Elijah Hedding published a *Discourse on the Administration of Discipline*, which shows the continuing place of discipline in the American branch of the church. He traced the responsibilities of the bishop, the presiding elder, the preacher in charge, the local preacher, the class leader, and the lay member in the maintenance of the laws and observances of the Methodist order. He said:

The great work of discipline is to instruct, educate, and govern the people, and thus help them on toward heaven: to restrain and keep them from evil, or warn, reprove, and reclaim them when they may have erred, or fallen into sin. To accomplish this, the pastor is to labour "publicly, and from house to house;" "to be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine." The sick, the aged, the bereaved and sorrowful, are to be visited, admonished, encouraged, and comforted, as their condition and wants may require. The youth and the children are to be the objects of the care of the faithful shepherd. To perform these important and benevolent duties, he must avail himself of all the helps under his control. His colleague is his assistant in this work, and has his portion of care and labours, as well as the preacher in charge. The local preachers are to be associated with the itinerants in these services.

A minister is bound to take heed to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made him an overseer.<sup>80</sup>

Was this discipline a part of the work of the church or apart from it? This question serves to indicate the relation of this consideration to our general theme of "The Doctrine of the Church" and to point to a wider concern for an understanding of Methodism's part in the ecumenical movement. Does emphasis on this kind of discipline—particularly that of an intimate fellowship or band—tend to take its adherents out of the church, or does it prove to be an essential element in what the church can provide and must

<sup>80</sup> Reprint (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1861), pp. 39-40, 53.

in fact be? Neither the question nor its implication is new. In Wesley's words it was asked thus: "Is not this making a schism? Is not the joining these people together, gathering Churches out of Churches?"<sup>81</sup> His answer was given with something of the fire of an apologete. He acknowledged that it was gathering people out of buildings called churches, but it was not dividing Christians from Christians. It was providing Christian fellowship for the lonely, Christian joy for the wretched, and Christian strength for the weak. It was introducing the strong band of fellowship in place of the "rope of sand" which was the formal tie of the parish. "And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work."<sup>82</sup>

In utter realism Wesley confesses in another connection that he had feared that the disciplined and intimate fellowship of the Methodists would result in "a narrowness of spirit, a party zeal, . . . that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among ourselves."<sup>83</sup> He then went on to describe a part of the discipline itself which was designed to provide the safeguard.

I thought it might help against this, frequently to read, to all who were willing to hear, the accounts I received from time to time of the work which God is carrying on in the earth, both in our own and other countries, not among us alone, but among those of various opinions and denominations. For this I allotted one evening in every month; and I find no cause to repent my labour. It is generally a time of strong consolation to those who love God, and all mankind for his sake; as well as *breaking down the partition-walls* which either the craft of the devil or the folly of men has built up; and of encouraging every child of God to say, (O when shall it once be!) "Whosoever doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother."<sup>84</sup>

In this statement we find conjoined our concern for Christian unity, centered in our study of the Ephesian letter, and our Wesleyan

<sup>81</sup> "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists."

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, italics added.

heritage of openness and attention to a disciplined doing of the will of the Father.

### Conclusion

We have noted that the relationship between Wesley's insistence upon an objective atonement wherein is justification and the subsequent discipline of life as instrumental to growth in obedience, Christlikeness, and pure love, is the very crux of his system of spiritual oversight. It is the nature of the Gospel, he said, "to save men not in sinning, but from sin." Cell has commented that

when the Grace of God is seen only in the light of a transaction within the relation of God and Christ and not equally as a principle of holiness in the justified, such apprehension of the atonement has in the popular mind often fatally dulled the edge of conscience, dimmed the eye of the soul to the majesty of the moral law, weakened the moral will, covered the highest spark of divinity in man, namely, the moral recoil against all sin and unrighteousness, with the dead ashes of indifference.\*\*

This pitfall Wesley strenuously avoided. In scripture and in experience he found the vocation to sinless perfection to be the corrective to the peril of faith without works, of religion without morality. Faith in the atonement was "the first principle of holiness and never a compensation for the lack of it."<sup>36</sup> The regimen of devotion, obedience, and service was insisted upon as instrumental to the restoration of the divine image and the fulfillment of perfect love. Wesley said: "God, whose judgment never can be contrary to the real nature of things, never can think me innocent or righteous or holy because another is so. He can no more, in this manner, confound me with Christ than with David or Abraham."<sup>37</sup> In these words Wesley commented on the Pauline statement: "He who through faith is righteous shall live." (Rom. 1:17 R.S.V.) The discipline of life through the means of grace is man's way of going forward in righteousness and true holiness. Wesley's insistence

\*\* *Op. cit.*, p. 338.

\*\* *Ibid.*, p. 342.

\*\* Wesley, *Notes on the New Testament, Romans I*, 17.

upon both justification and sanctification has been said to be his original and unique synthesis of the Protestant ethic of grace with the Catholic ethic of holiness. The latter was purged of all merit and self-righteousness by Wesley's insistence that it was accomplished as the work of the Holy Spirit. In this Wesley was Arminian perhaps more even than he knew, for in his thought is seen the parallel of the famous trilogy of the Dutch "apostle of grace." In prevenient grace is the commencement of salvation; in enabling grace is the continuance of salvation; in sanctifying grace is the consummation of salvation.<sup>38</sup>

The recent renewal of interest in Reformation theology has re-emphasized man's sinful plight and the necessity of justification by faith. Perhaps through our research in Wesleyan studies we can contribute to ecumenical Christianity an awareness of the responsibility which rests upon man for the discipline of life through the many and varied "means" of grace. We may profitably call attention to the necessity for sanctification by grace, manifesting itself in obedience, personal and social righteousness, and in holy love to God and fellow man, wrought in the life by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>38</sup> James Arminius, *Writings* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), I, p. 253.