

“To Serve the Present Age: Shaping Faith, Working Through Love”

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This paper will explore the nature of discipleship and Christian formation in the Wesleyan tradition. We will look at the shape and nature of the early Methodist societies to learn what they have to teach us about Christian formation in “this present age” of the 21st century.

The paper will have two major sections. The first will explore the character of discipleship through the lens of John and Charles Wesley, their writings and ministry. The second part will make an argument for essential elements that must be present in the life and ministry of a congregation that seeks to help Christians to live out their baptismal covenant as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and for the congregation to, in the words of Charles Wesley, “serve the present age, our calling to fulfill.”

Part 1: Who is a Disciple?

The English word, disciple, is derived from the Latin, *discipulus*, meaning “a learner or pupil; one who accepts and follows a given doctrine or teacher” (*The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1:845). A disciple of Jesus Christ, therefore, is a person who accepts and follows his teachings. All who are baptized in the name of the Triune God and confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord are Christians and, by definition, disciples.

The Wesleyan tradition gives some further help answering the question “Who is a disciple?” John Wesley did not use the word, “disciple,” the way it is used in the church today. The term he used to describe what we mean when we call someone a disciple is “Christian.” In one of his early sermons he distinguished between the “almost Christian” and the “altogether Christian.”¹ For the purpose of this paper, we will apply the contemporary nomenclature of “disciple” to Wesley’s “Christian” nomenclature.

In one of his early tracts, “The Character of a Methodist” (1741) Wesley provides a helpful definition of a Christian, who happens also to be a “Methodist.” Today such a person is called a “disciple:”

¹ See Sermon 2: “The Almost Christian” in *Sermons I*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler in *The Bicentennial Works of John Wesley*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 131-141.

A Methodist is one who has ‘the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him’ (Rom. 5:5); one who ‘loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength’ (Mark 12:30). God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul; which is constantly crying out, ‘Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee! My God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever’ (Psalm 73:25-26)!²

Because in Wesley’s thinking a Methodist is a Christian who has accepted the discipline of the Methodist societies, we can say today that a disciple is a person who has faith in Christ and who gives evidence for that faith and desire for salvation through keeping the General Rules: doing no harm by avoiding evil, doing good to all as often as possible, and practicing the instituted means of grace (prayer, worship, the Lord’s Supper, reading and hearing Scripture, fasting/abstinence).³

All this is to say that the Wesleyan tradition held up the ideal of Christian discipleship as being “active faith that lives within.” Charles Wesley beautifully expresses this sentiment in one of his hymns for use at the Love Feast:

Plead we thus for faith alone,
Faith which by our works is shown;
God it is who justifies,
Only faith the grace applies,
Active faith that lives within,
Conquers earth, and hell, and sin,
Sanctifies, and makes us whole,
Forms the Saviour in the soul.⁴

Wesley understood faith to be a living, relational trust in God who is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Faith is received as a gift from God; a gift, rather like a pair of shoes or a bicycle, a gift meant to be used. Its purpose is to help the wearer or rider to get to a destination. And, in the process, through regular walking, running, and riding the gift builds and strengthens the body of the one who received the gift. “Faith which by our works is shown.” A disciple is a Christian who accepts the gift of faith from God who comes in the

² John Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist”, in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, vol. 9 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976--), 35.

³ John Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies...”, in *Works*, 9:70-73.

⁴ John Wesley, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of The People Called Methodists* in *Works*, #507.3, 7:698.

person of Jesus Christ and then uses the gift to walk with Christ in the world. “Active faith that lives within” means that as the Christian journeys with Christ in the world, faith comes alive within. Character is changed. The damage and distortion of the soul caused by sin is restored to wholeness by Christ being formed in the soul of the believer. “

Such “active faith” requires discipline and practice. The General Rules provided the discipline. Small groups for mutual accountability and support for discipleship encouraged regular practice. The General Rules were for all who sought to be Christians. They were a simple, general, guide for living in the world as followers and friends of Jesus Christ. They were and are a *rule of life* intended to help Christians to be mindful of the basics of loving God, loving neighbors and loving one another. They help disciples to attend to all of the teachings of Jesus and not only those that suit their temperament.

Two Orders of Christians⁵

John Wesley provides some help with identifying types of discipleship in his sermon, “The More Excellent Way.” Here he reflects on the nature of Christian discipleship. He acknowledges a long held belief that there are two kinds of Christians:

The one lived an innocent life, conforming in all things not sinful to the customs and fashions of the world, doing many good works, abstaining from gross evils, and attending the ordinances of God. They endeavoured in general to have a conscience void of offence in their outward behaviour, but did not aim at any particular strictness, being in most things like their neighbours.

The other sort of Christians not only abstained from all appearance of evil, were zealous of good works in every kind, and attended all the ordinances of God; but likewise used all diligence to attain the whole mind that was in Christ, and laboured to walk in every point as their beloved Master. In order to this they walked in a constant course of universal self-denial, trampling on every pleasure which they were not divinely conscious prepared them for taking pleasure in God. They took up their cross daily. They strove, they agonized without intermission, to enter in at the strait gate. This one thing they did; they spared no pains to arrive at the summit of Christian holiness: 'leaving the first principles of the doctrine of Christ, to go on to perfection'; 'to know all that love of God which passeth knowledge, and to be filled with all the fullness of God'.⁶

⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 89, “The More Excellent Way,” ¶ 5, in *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of *Works*, 3:265.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The first group composes the vast majority of Christians. They attend worship in varying degrees of frequency, give money to the church, may attend a Sunday school class, send their children to Sunday school, and do their best to be good, decent people. Their appearance and behavior is virtually indistinguishable from that of their non-Christian and non-religious neighbors. These are the majority of disciples Christians present in any given congregation.

The second kind of Christians described by Wesley are those women and men who have made an intentional, deeply personal commitment to following and serving Jesus Christ in the world through loving obedience to his commandments. They are more disciplined in practicing the means of grace, both the works of piety and the works of mercy. These are disciples of Jesus, are deeply committed to Christ and exhibiting a way of life living that leads to holiness of heart and life.

Wesley is very clear in this sermon to say that both groups are equally “saved.”⁷ They all are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). Each is following Christ in the way that best suits them at the time. That being said, Wesley also asserts that it is the responsibility of the community of faith and its leaders to encourage and equip the first type of Christians to desire to mature and move toward the second.

I would be far from quenching the smoking flax, from discouraging those that serve God in a low degree. But I would not wish them to stop here: I would encourage them to come up higher, without thundering hell and damnation in their ears, without condemning the way wherein they were, telling them it is the way that leads to destruction. I will endeavour to point out to them what is in every respect a more excellent way.⁸

He wants them to know that there is more to Christian discipleship and that God wants them to become fully the persons God created them to be. The “more excellent way” is the way of whole-hearted love (Mark 12:30-31), self-denial and discipleship (Luke 9:23) that leads to holiness of heart and life, to having the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5), which is perfection in love (1 John 4:17-21).

⁷ Ibid., ¶ 6, 3:266.

⁸ Ibid., ¶ 7, 3:266.

The Apostles & The Crowd

Is there Scriptural support for this two-tiered discipleship? We find it in the gospel accounts of Jesus and his relationship with the disciples and the “crowd.” One of the clearest examples is found in the accounts of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Look, for example, at Mark 6:30-44.

We see in this story the two types of disciples . The first is represented by the crowd who were drawn to Jesus and his disciples. They came to be healed and to hear the good news of the coming kingdom of God. They need to hear the good news that sins are forgiven, that God loves them unconditionally, that God will give them the faith needed to heal them of their brokenness (body, mind, spirit, and relationship). Jesus has compassion on them. He gives them all that he has to offer. They come to him with an emptiness in their lives that the world cannot fill. Only Jesus can satisfy their longing for hope, healing, and meaning in their lives.

The second type of disciples are represented by the “apostles.” They are the ones who have committed their lives to walking with, following, and serving alongside Jesus in the world. They are also the ones whom Jesus equips to feed, care for, and heal the crowd. Jesus takes what they give him and multiplies it in order to meet the needs of the others who come for healing, forgiveness of sins, to hear the good news of the coming kingdom of God, and to be fed.

Baptized & Professing

This model of discipleship, what Wesley calls “two orders of Christians,” is also found in our understanding of baptism and membership in The United Methodist Church. We now have two types of members: Baptized and Professing. The roll of the Baptized contains all those persons who have received the sacrament of Baptism. God has marked them as God’s own children and welcomed them into God’s household, the Church. The Church, in turn, promises “to surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness.” It promises to “do all in its power to increase their faith, confirm their hope and perfect them in love.”⁹

⁹ *The United Methodist Hymnal : Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 35, 38.

The Professing members are those persons who have accepted God's gift of forgiveness, acceptance and faith. They promise to follow and serve Christ in the world as his faithful disciples and to support the ministries of the church through their prayers, presence, gifts, and service. The expectation is that Professing members are those persons who "profess their faith in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; in Jesus Christ his only Son and in the Holy Spirit. Thus, they make known their desire to live their daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. They covenant together with God and with the members of the local church to keep the vows which are part of the order of confirmation and reception into the Church (see "Baptismal Covenant I", *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 33-39)."¹⁰

The task of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We do this as we share the gospel with others, welcome all people who are seeking a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, nurture them in that faith and life, and to support and equip them for growth in holiness of heart and life.

Part 2: Making Disciples of Jesus Christ

How are disciples made? The mission of The United Methodist Church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ." The Church teaches that the local congregation is the context of disciple-making. Congregations are present in towns, neighborhoods, cities, and communities as outposts of the Church. God is worshiped, sacraments are celebrated and administered, and the gospel is proclaimed in mission and ministry in the world through the lives and witness of the people (baptized and professing Christians). The local congregation is the place where disciples are made because it is where Christians are equipped and sent into the world, to witness to Jesus Christ, and follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

If disciples are *made* then it seems that we can say with some certainty that there is a process for making them. In other words, one does not become a disciple by accident. Making something implies intention and planning. But it does not imply something like a manufacturing process or an assembly line. For John Wesley disciples are made the same way children are made. Disciple-making is, therefore, a process of birth, nurture,

¹⁰ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2004*, ¶ 217 (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 136-137.

development, growth, and maturation.¹¹ This model of disciple-making encompasses the whole person, body, soul, and mind.

Wesleyan disciple-making, therefore, involves both mystery and intentionality. There is mystery because the whole process begins and is sustained by God through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is God who brings about the new life, equips the church to “give birth” and to help the new life to grow to maturity. This life and process of growth is pure gift. It is the work of grace: prevenient, justifying and sanctifying.

Intentionality is a necessary part of this process because God is love (1 John 4:7-21). Grace is free gift. It is also co-operant. Because God is love, God will not impose God’s self upon God’s beloved. Rather, God invites the beloved into relationship and new life. Like any relationship that is important and life-giving, we must participate in it with all that we are and all that we have been given. The good news is that in Jesus Christ God has given us all we need to join in the relationship and to help one another to grow to maturity in faith, hope, and love. Disciple-making, therefore, is a process in which the church cooperates with the dynamic of grace and equips God’s children in God’s household to participate in the relationship Wesley and Scripture call “salvation.”

An appropriate, metaphor for the church’s role in disciple-making is that of learning to make music. Listening to music has helped me understand Christian discipleship. I have loved and enjoyed music all my life. I have even made efforts at becoming a musician by playing around with my guitar.

Making music, like discipleship, begins with love. People become musicians because they are drawn to and learn to love music. The music attracts them to an instrument such as the piano, guitar, horn, violin, or drums. Then they find a teacher who will help them learn how to make music with their instrument. People become musicians by apprenticeship to other musicians who are seasoned and who know how to share their love of music with others who want to learn. Like discipleship, music and music-making are personal and social. It is personal but not private.

A person seeking to become a musician very soon learns the importance of study, discipline, and practice. No matter how much natural talent God has given, all musicians understand the necessity of learning and practicing the basics over and over and over again. They know that discipline and practice sets them free to make music. I know a man who is a

¹¹ Wesley, Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” § II.4, *Works*, 3:192-193.

gifted trumpet player. He plays with various groups around town and often plays in church worship services. In a conversation with him I learned he had been playing the trumpet for over thirty years. He also taught trumpet at a local university. When I asked him “At this point in your life, how much do you need to practice?” his response helped me understand the link between making music and discipleship. He told me “I know from experience that if I’m going to play to the best of the ability God has given me, I need to practice at least an hour every day. If I’m preparing for public performance, I need to practice two hours a day.” This musician understands that discipline and practicing the basics every day set him free to allow the music God has given him to play.

Making music, like discipleship, requires listening, accountability and support. The purpose of discipline and practice is to prepare the musician for public performance with other musicians. Whether music is played in small groups or a large orchestra it is essential that the players listen to one another and follow the leader.

Jazz is the music that has taught me the most about discipleship. Jazz is always played with at least two players and as many as 50 or 100. Jazz helps us understand discipleship because it is an expression of freedom and new possibilities. A typical performance begins with the band playing a familiar melody, each playing a distinct part. After two or three times through the song, one of the players begins to improvise on the melody. As he or she plays with the theme, each of the other members of the band play supporting parts. As each player takes a turn at improvisation, he or she is supported by the band. All this requires skilled and close listening to one another. This process of listening and mutual support sets each player free to play with the music and see where it can lead them. The goal is to allow the music to take them to new places and new possibilities. All the practice, discipline, listening, and mutual respect for the music and one another allows the musicians to get out of the way and allow the music to play them.

In the waters of baptism God calls us into discipleship. Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is very much like becoming a musician. Certainly, God does not give everyone the gift of making music. However, because we are all created in the image of God, we are all given the same gift: the capacity to give and receive love. The goal of discipleship is to develop this gift to its fullest capacity. Along the way our character, which has been damaged by sin, will be restored to wholeness into the image of Christ. As we grow and mature in loving God

with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves, love becomes a natural response and way of life in the world.

Making disciples, like making musicians, does not happen by accident or happenstance. It is done with intention born of love for God and love for those whom God calls into God's household in baptism. The Baptismal covenant provides the compass headings for how to make disciples. In it United Methodist congregations will find guidance for developing an intentional process, or system, for making disciples of Jesus Christ. Such a system will be immersed in the grace of God from which all of the respective pieces emerge. The goal of the system is a community whose form and witness in the world are defined by holiness of heart and life.

Today's Reality

If the typical United Methodist congregation were inspected today by the heavenly equivalent of Child Protection Services it would likely be found guilty of "child neglect and endangerment." Certainly, there are some congregations that faithfully keep the baptismal covenant and do a good job of caring for souls in a way that nurtures growth in holiness of heart and life. However, there are many more that abuse the baptismal covenant by dispensing what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace:"

Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament; grace as the church's inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit. It is grace with out a price, without costs. ...

Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.¹²

These congregations provide minimal preparation for baptism and preparation for discipleship. Once a person becomes a member they find very low expectations and obligations. All that is asked of them is to make a financial commitment to help the church

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. by Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, Vol. 4 in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 43-44.

pay its bills and to show up for worship when it is convenient. Any other commitments, such as daily prayer and Bible reading, participation in a small group for support and faith development, or service with the poor in the community are optional. The congregation does not expect, nor is it equipped to “do all in [its] power to increase *their* faith, confirm *their* hope, and perfect *them* in love.”

Such “low expectation” congregations dispense “cheap grace.” They have become what John Wesley feared when he wrote in 1786:

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.¹³

It is fair to say that most, certainly not all, United Methodist congregations are “Methodist” in name only. I say this because the doctrines, practices and structures that at one time distinguished the Methodists from other Christian denominations were jettisoned long ago. For example, very few United Methodists are part of a small group that meets weekly for mutual fellowship, accountability and support for discipleship; participate in the Love Feast, Watch Night or Covenant Renewal; serve as lay pastoral ministers (similar to Class Leaders); are able to articulate the meaning of key theological terms such as prevenient grace, sanctification, holiness, or Christian perfection; sing Charles Wesley hymns whenever they gather for worship, conferencing, or business meetings. Most United Methodist congregations, without regard to size, are communities of Christian people who gather for worship, fellowship, and to observe life events such as weddings, baptism, confirmation, and funerals. They are good people striving the best they know how to be responsible stewards of the church and of one another.

Such congregations have become captive to the dominant culture in which they live and seek to do ministry. Consumerism and individualism are two powerful characteristics of the culture that are reflected in the life of the local congregation. An example of this is the baptismal practice and reception of members. Persons are baptized and received as

¹³ John Wesley, Thoughts upon Methodism, ¶ 1, in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design* ed. Rupert E. Davies, Vol. 9 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 527.

members with the promise that their “needs will be met.” The emphasis is upon the congregation’s, particularly the pastor’s, promise to celebrate, support, and nurture the person offering him or herself for membership. Little mention is made of Christ’s call to serve with him in the world; to “deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow” him as he works to prepare all creation for the coming reign of God.¹⁴ The emphasis is upon membership and its benefits rather than discipleship and its call to obedience. In this contemporary model of church, the unstated purpose of the church is to serve the perceived needs of the members. Discipleship is offered as an optional program for those who are interested.

Church growth and marketing have replaced the historic, biblical call to holiness of heart and life. Joining a church is easier than joining a civic organization such as the Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions. While the church will accept anyone as they are (as it should), it does so irresponsibly. I say irresponsibly because once the typical member joins they discover the very low expectations of membership. Consequently, they learn that there is little or no cost to being a Christian; that church membership means very little because very little is expected. If you are a Rotarian or Kiwanian, if you habitually miss meetings, do not participate in or support the organization’s mission and neglect to pay your regular dues you will be visited by a fellow member who will remind you of the commitment you made when you joined. He or she will also inform you that if you are not able or willing to live up to your membership promises, your membership will be discontinued. Very few congregations are willing to hold members accountable to their membership vows for at least two reasons:

1. They do not provide the means for keeping the vows. Low expectations means no expectation or requirement that members participate in a small group that will provide support and accountability for discipleship. In most congregations such groups, if they exist, are purely voluntary. They are offered to members and non-members alike who share an interest in discipleship.
2. Congregational leaders fear that holding members accountable to keeping their promises to Christ and his Church will put people off and cause them to withhold their money, thus causing a decrease in income. The decreased income will make paying the bills and staff salaries more difficult. Keeping people happy and paying the bills is more important than faithfulness to the baptismal covenant and the mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ Luke 9:23

Consequently, discipleship is presented as simply another program rather than an expected outcome of church membership.

This reality is a consequence of a deadly misunderstanding of the nature of God and God's grace that says: "It costs us nothing. It is given freely by God who is our loving parent. Because grace is free and freely given, God is an indulgent parent who freely accepts us and forgives our shortcomings." Faith becomes nothing more than assent to belief in God, as God is understood or experienced by the believer. Therefore, all who profess belief in God and take the vows of church membership are regarded as "disciples." Being baptized is equated with being a disciple of Jesus Christ. This is what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" (see above) and John Wesley called a form of "enthusiasm:"

"One general inlet to enthusiasm is, expecting the end without the means; the expecting knowledge, for instance, without searching the Scriptures, and consulting the children of God; the expecting spiritual strength without constant prayer, and steady watchfulness; the expecting any blessing without hearing the word of God at every opportunity."¹⁵

"The first sort of enthusiasm which I shall mention is that of those who imagine they have the grace which they have not. Thus some imagine, when it is not so, that they have 'redemption' through Christ, 'even the forgiveness of sin'. These are usually such as 'have no root in themselves', no deep repentance or thorough conviction. Therefore 'they receive the word with joy.' And 'because they have no deepness of earth', no deep work in their heart, therefore the seed 'immediately springs up'. There is immediately a superficial change which, together with that light joy, striking in with the pride of their unbroken heart and with their inordinate self-love, easily persuades them they have already 'tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come'.¹⁶

"A third very common sort of enthusiasm (if it does not coincide with the former) is that of those who think to attain the end without using the means, by the immediate power of God."¹⁷

This delusion becomes a major blockage to grace and puts the future of the church and its people in peril.

¹⁵ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1952), 89.

¹⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 37, "The Nature of Enthusiasm," ¶ 13, in *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 2 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976--), 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ¶ 27, 56.

I say that this misguided understanding of the dynamic of grace is deadly and puts the people and church in peril because it will lead to spiritual death. The people will be deluded into Christianity divorced from the cross and the church will be nothing more than a social club with very low expectation membership with a veneer of religion. The Wesleyan tradition believes in the relational nature of salvation. Wesley describes this by quoting St. Augustine: “he that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves.” Wesley then goes on to explain: “[God] will not save us unless we ‘save ourselves from this untoward generation’; unless we ourselves ‘fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life’; unless we ‘agonize to enter in at the strait gate,’ ‘deny ourselves, and take up our cross daily’, and labour, by every possible means, to ‘make our own calling and election sure’.”¹⁸

In other words, salvation is in peril when people neglect their relationship with Christ by neglecting the practices that sustain the relationship (works of piety and works of mercy). Over time they gradually move away from God. If nothing changes they become indifferent at best, alienated at worst. In any case, the outcome is the same: separation from God that leads to spiritual death. Another way to express this is to say that because salvation is pure gift and nothing we can do will ever earn it, once we receive and accept the gift we must work it out if we are to keep it.

The “working out our salvation”¹⁹ is allowing Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to work in us by regularly making ourselves available to him through practicing the means of grace (works of piety and works of mercy).²⁰ If congregations fail to communicate this essential truth and equip Christians to “work out their salvation” then they short circuit the gospel Christ by blocking his grace.

The challenge for every congregation is to provide a community that equips its members for faith and provides the means for their faith to grow and mature. John Wesley identified the marks of a Christian (one who is “born of the Spirit”) as faith, hope, and

¹⁸ John Wesley, Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” § III.7, in *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976--), 208.

¹⁹ Philippians 2:12-13

²⁰ See Scott Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 187-191.

love.²¹ In baptism we are “given new birth through water and the Spirit.” How, then, does a congregation order its life to nurture those who are “born through water and the Spirit” from infancy through adolescence to maturity in faith, hope, and love? The answer is to direct all of the congregation’s resources, gifts, and energy toward carrying out its mission to “make disciples of Jesus Christ.” When congregations diligently form disciples of Jesus Christ who witness to him in the world and follow his teachings through practicing the means of grace (acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion) under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they do their part in Christ’s work of transforming the world in preparation for his coming reign.

A Disciple Making System

The Wesleyan tradition provides fruitful guidance for congregations that strive to “make disciples of Jesus Christ.” Sondra Higgins Matthaei has recognized this and offered an excellent interpretation of the Wesleyan model for disciple-making in her book, *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Using two of the three questions that guided the conversation at the first Methodist conference, as recorded in the Large Minutes (“What to teach?” and “How to teach?”), she identifies and catalogs the process of faith formation along with the essential expectations, practices, and structures that must be present in a congregation striving to make disciples of Jesus Christ.²² Matthaei also deals with the important question: “Who shall teach?” She provides helpful reflection and guidance on leadership and leader formation for Christian formation in the church.

Randy Maddox’s essay, “Wesley’s Prescription for ‘Making Disciples of Jesus Christ’: Insights for the Twenty-First Century Church”²³ looks through the lens of one of Wesley’s later sermons, “Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity (Sermon 122), and identifies three necessary elements for disciple-making: essential Christian doctrine, Christian discipline (practice of the means of grace, referred to by the Wesleys as “works of mercy” and “works of piety”), and self-denial. Maddox explains that Wesley’s view of doctrine was practical

²¹ See John Wesley, Sermon 18, “The Marks of the New Birth,” in *Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 1 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976--), 417-430.

²² see Sondra Higgins Matthaei, *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 166-170.

²³ see Quarterly Review, Volume 23, Number 1, Spring 2003. (Nashville: The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and The United Methodist Publishing House), 15-28.

rather than theoretical. This means that for Wesley “doctrine” is simply the good news of God given to the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the whole good news revealed when Christ is proclaimed in all his offices: prophet, priest, and king. And it is teaching and preaching salvation being justification and sanctification: what Christ does for us on the cross and what Christ does in us through the Holy Spirit.

Teaching and preaching Christ in all his offices leads to faith, and faith is nurtured and lived through good works as Christians practice the means of grace. For Wesley salvation is “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). The outcome and expression of Christian discipline is self-denial:

On the whole, then, to deny ourselves is to deny our own will where it does not fall in with the will of God, and that however pleasing it may be. It is to deny ourselves any pleasure which does not spring from, and lead to, God; that is, in effect, to refuse going out of our way, though into a pleasant, flowery path; to refuse what we know to be deadly poison, though agreeable to the taste.²⁴

Maddox reminds us of Wesley’s belief that “The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian.”²⁵ Self-denial is, for Wesley, an expression of Christian discipline. When Christians engage in deliberate practice of the means of grace, balanced between the works of mercy and the works of piety, they learn to seek the will of God rather than their own wants and desires. In other words, they seek to “have the mind of Christ” (Philippians 2:5) and go on to perfection in love. This, for the Wesleys, is the goal of Christian discipleship.

John Wesley describes the process of “disciple-making” in sermon 92, “On Zeal:”

In a Christian believer *love* sits upon the throne, which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all *holy tempers*: long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, temperance—and if any other is comprised in 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus'. In an exterior circle are all the *works of mercy*, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real *means of grace*, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed *works of piety*: reading and hearing the Word, public, family, private prayer,

²⁴ John Wesley, Sermon 48: “Self-Denial”, § I.6, in *Works*, 2:243.

²⁵ Maddox, page 9ff.

receiving the Lord's Supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one—*the church*, dispersed all over the earth; a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation.²⁶

We see here that “disciple-making” is an intentional process of character formation. The goal is to form people whose character, their inner and exterior motivation is love. This love is a reflection of the divine love given to the world in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Wesley’s words, these are people who “have the mind of Christ.” This love is the fruit of the formation of “holy tempers” or habitual ways of responding and behaving named by the apostle Paul as “fruit of the Spirit:” love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). These are outcomes of “faith working through love (Galatians 5:6). Wesley understood through pastoral experience that the “holy tempers” were formed in persons through disciplined practice of the means of grace. The means of grace are both the works of piety and works of mercy. The works of piety are how Christians love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. The works of mercy are how Christians love their neighbors as themselves. Wesley understood that making disciples is an intentional process of character formation. In other words, it does not happen by accident or happenstance. Rather, making disciples requires both the Spirit and discipline within the context of the church.

Making disciples happens within the Christian community in which people receive accountability and support for becoming faithful, fruitful followers of Jesus Christ. The church is the crucible of character formation in which disciples are made. The Holy Spirit leads the community to discern the character of discipline required to form “the mind of Christ” in the lives of its members. We can look to the Wesleys and early Methodism to identify the essential elements of a disciple-making system for any congregation.

Basic Elements of the Disciple-Making System

The process of making disciples of Jesus Christ is very much like making musicians or athletes. It is a process designed to form habits, attitudes, and character (holy tempers). At the heart of the process are relationships formed in community, a set of practices (the

²⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 92: “On Zeal,” § II.5 in *Works*, 3:313.

means of grace), and a system of mutual accountability and support. The goal is to form Christ-centered congregations that are sign-communities of the coming reign of God.²⁷ These congregations help their members to learn and practice holy habits that form holiness of heart and life. They teach and interpret essential Christian doctrine, provide a community for the practices of Christian discipline, and help persons to grow in love of God and neighbor through self-denial. As sign-communities they point beyond themselves toward Christ and his coming reign. They also witness to Christ in the world and help the world to see where and how Christ is alive and working to “bring good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and bringing liberation to the oppressed.”²⁸

Here, briefly, are the basic elements of such a congregational disciple-making system:

- **Clear Expectations:** The mission and ministry of the congregation are directed toward making disciples of Jesus Christ and equipping members to be his witnesses in the world. It is expected that members will, according to their ability, follow Jesus’ teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The congregation’s vision is to become a Christ-centered sign-community for the coming reign of God. To that end, it is striving to be
 - **Missional:** “A missional church faces outward toward the world, not like a porcupine stands against its enemies, but like water fills every container without losing its content. . . . The church is measured, not by its seating capacity, but by its sending capacity.”
 - **Relational:** The gospel is all about the formation of community. The individualistic ‘meet my needs’ orientation is seen as antithetical to the ministry of Jesus. The African word *ubuntu* is used, which means ‘I am because we are.’
 - **Incarnational:** means Christianity does not go through time like water in a straw. It passes through cultural prisms and historical periods, which means that Christianity is organic. And like with any living thing, in order for things to stay the same, they have to change. The church is a living, breathing, moving, changing organism that lives in, with, and for the world.²⁹

²⁷ David Lowes Watson, *Forming Christian Disciples*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002), 37-64.

²⁸ Luke 4:18

²⁹ Leonard Sweet, “‘God Sent a Person, Not a Proposition’: A Conversation with Leonard Sweet”, *George Fox University Journal Online*, by Tamara Cissna (<http://www.georgefox.edu/journalonline/archives/fall05/emerging.html>).

John Wesley understood the importance of clear expectations to the process of “disciple-making.” This is why he developed a “rule of life” for the Methodist societies. “A rule of life is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness. ... God calls us to be holy as God is holy, to grow into greater intimacy with the One we are created to resemble (see 1 John 3:2). A rule of life allows us to cultivate and deepen this growing likeness. It fosters gifts of the Spirit in personal life and human community, helping to form us into the persons God intends us to be.”³⁰ Wesley created his rule of life to set clearly before the people who desired to join the Methodist societies the expectations for the life of Christian discipleship. He believed that the evidence for salvation is shown by a new way of life guided by the teachings of Jesus Christ, summarized by him in the Great Commandment:

‘... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these (Mark 12:30-31, NRSV).

Wesley’s rule of life is “The General Rules.” It is simple and practicable. In it the community finds a common set of expectations and practices that guide its life and its individual members. The General Rules provide the means by which persons exhibit “evidence of their desire for salvation,”

First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind ...

Secondly: By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all [people]. ...

Thirdly: By attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are:

The public worship of God.

The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.

The Supper of the Lord.

Family and private prayer.

Searching the Scriptures.

Fasting or abstinence.³¹

The General Rules provided a framework around which the community was organized. Its goal was to cooperate with the dynamic of grace (prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying) to form persons in holiness of heart and life. Congregations today, therefore, must adopt a simple, coherent *rule of life* to guide its life and ministry in the world. The General Rules provide a good model. They are found in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*³² as the denominational rule of life. They are intended to be taught and applied in each local congregation.

³⁰ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 138.

³¹ John Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies”, in *Works*, 9:70-73.

³² *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2004*, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 72-74.

A contemporary adaptation of the General Rules is available today. It is the *General Rule of Discipleship: To witness to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.*³³

Disciple-making begins with expectations and trust in Christ and his grace. A congregational rule of life is the historic way congregations set before the people the expectations of discipleship. The rule of life then guides the congregation in organizing itself to help members live and grow toward the goal of holiness of heart and life.

- **The congregation provides an intentional “disciple-making” system designed to provide the means for persons and the congregation to live the Baptismal Covenant and grow in holiness of heart and life.** This system includes practices and structures through which the congregation cooperates with the dynamic of grace and leads to the formation of “holy tempers” (see Galatians 5:22-23):
 - An interconnected, intentional system of small groups for mutual support and accountability for Christian formation. The congregation will provide groups that meet people where they are—seekers, new Christians, growing, and mature Christians—and help them to grow in holiness of heart and life. The small group system of early Methodist societies provides an excellent model.³⁴ Such a system is how the congregation will cooperate with the dynamic of grace that seeks to draw people to Christ, awaken them to who and whose they are, accept the gift of God’s love through faith, and live and serve as daughters and sons of God who are channels of grace for the world.
 - Worship that is sacramental and evangelical in which Christ in all of his offices (prophet, priest, and king) is proclaimed. By sacramental I mean worship that is directed toward the triune God and offers direct access to Jesus Christ, his very body and blood. The mystery, majesty, righteousness and justice of God are lifted up through prayer, Scripture, proclamation, ritual and sacraments. Evangelical means that worship conveys the good news of God given to the world in the person, life and work of Jesus Christ. This good news is conveyed through word, hymns, praise songs, sermons and ritual that invite congregational participation. Finally, the congregation worships the whole Christ in all his offices because Christ saves and redeems the whole person. Therefore, liturgy and proclamation must proclaim Christ as prophet, priest and king.³⁵
 - Every member participates in a curriculum for Christian initiation and formation. This is integral to the small group system discussed above. The “entry level” groups will focus on catechesis, similar to the early Methodist class meeting. The leaders for this catechetical process will be seasoned, responsible Christians who can be trusted with the care of souls. An essential element of the catechesis will be teaching and

³³ Ibid., ¶ 1118.2, 532-533.

³⁴ Henry H. Knight, III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 95-116.

³⁵ for more on the importance of this please see John Deschner, *Wesley’s Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), 73-77.

- encouraging the practice of the means of grace: works of piety (prayer, Scripture, worship, the Lord's Supper, fasting or abstinence) and works of mercy (feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, visiting prisoners, caring for the sick, peace-making, and witness to Jesus Christ in the world). The goal of catechesis is to form persons as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ who witness to him in the world and follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Mission and ministry in and with the local community and the world, especially with poor and marginalized people. This mission and ministry both meets physical and material needs while also sharing the good news of God in Jesus Christ in ways that they receive it as good news. This acknowledges that Christians are commanded by Christ to do good to their bodies and to their souls.
 - Practice evangelism that is Biblical and invitational. The congregation and its leaders understand that evangelism is the responsibility of the whole people of God. It is not a program that is delegated to “professionals.” The congregation understands that evangelism is witnessing to the good news of God given to the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “To evangelize is one way of bearing witness to what God has done in Christ and is doing through the Holy Spirit today to convey the good news. One shares the message in both word and deed.”³⁶ The evangelical task and responsibility is to share the good news of Christ in ways that those who receive it receive it as good news indeed and they desire a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Mark 6:30-44 gives a helpful window to discipleship. In this powerful story we see that the disciples are close to Jesus. They had responded to his call to “Follow me” (Mark 1:17). They traveled and shared meals with him. They learned from him and obeyed him when he sent them out in pairs to proclaim the good news of repentance and the coming kingdom of God. Because of their obedience, Mark tells us, they were able to cast out demons and healed the sick (Mark 6:13). The disciples accepted the gift and responsibility of friendship with Jesus.

John tells us that equally important as the relationship with Jesus is their relationships with one another. Jesus tells them, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Therefore, according to Scripture and Wesley, the marks of discipleship are loving God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength; loving others as you love yourself; and loving one

³⁶ Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God & Neighbor: A Theology of Witness & Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 15.

another as Christ loves you (Mark 12:30-31; John 13:34-35). This love is revealed in a life shaped by faith that equips one to “deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow [Christ]” (Luke 9:23).

Disciples are also apostles. They obey Christ’s command to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God: “As you are going, therefore, disciple all the 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). They strive to order their lives in such a way that they walk with Christ in the world and work alongside him in his mission to “bring good news to the poor; proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). It is, therefore, the responsibility of disciples to help with Christ’s work of making disciples.

Jesus is also concerned with the many people who met him and his disciples in that Galilean field. They came to him for many reasons. Some were sick and came hoping that Jesus would heal them. Some were lost and hoped that Jesus would help them find their place and way in the world. Some were seeking God, hoping that Jesus could help them to see God. Others were simply seeking and curious about this strange Galilean preacher. They wanted simply to hear what he had to say, not expecting anything extraordinary to happen. For what ever reason, all of them came to Jesus and his disciples that day. And Jesus had compassion for them. He accepted them for who they were and as they were. He asked no questions. He excluded or rejected no one. Jesus opened himself to all of them because all of them were created by God, in God’s image. He shared with them the good news of God’s reign. In the teaching and proclamation of that good news, he healed, and fed them.

When it was time to feed the crowd Jesus turned to the disciples. He told them to bring him whatever they had brought with them. He took what they had, blessed it, broke it, and told them to distribute it to the people. When the feeding and eating were over, the disciples collected twelve baskets of leftovers. Here we see that Jesus gives the disciples responsibility for caring for the needs of the crowd. When they tell him that they do not have what it takes to do the job, he tells them to simply give to him what they have. He will multiply their meager gifts and equip them with all they need to do their work. What disciples must do is to trust and obey Jesus. In their trust and obedience he equips them to serve the people who come to him with their multitude of needs.

This story illustrates the reality of the church. In every congregation we will find faithful, seasoned disciples of Jesus Christ along side the wounded, weary, curious, sin-sick seekers who come every day and week. In this paper I have attempted to describe a process and system that will help the local congregation to accept everyone at every stage and degree of faith. But the church has a responsibility to do much more than accept everyone. It must also nurture and equip persons into faith and towards holiness of heart and life. This does not happen by accident or happenstance. Christ calls the church to nurture persons toward holiness, as they are open, available, and able.