

John Wesley's Accountability Discipleship Groups

“Confess your faults one to another and pray one for another..”
“Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ.”

Introduction to Methodist Accountability Discipleship Groups. [Called Methodist Societies, Class meetings, Band Societies by John Wesley]

The heart of Methodism during the life of John Wesley was the Methodist Class Meeting. This was a small covenant discipleship support group where members were accountable to each other. They confessed their faults one to another, prayed for each other, and stirred up one another to love and good works. Here the teachings of the Bible were examined in light of actual personal experience. Here leaders were nurtured and equipped.

The following materials are taken from the writings of John Wesley and his Preachers. For further study see The Works of John Wesley.

John Wesley's Rules for the Band-Societies (drawn up Dec. 25, 1738)

The design of our meeting is, to obey that command of God, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." To this end, we intend,-

1. To meet once a week, at the least.
2. To come punctually at the hour appointed, without some extraordinary reason.
3. To begin (those of us who are present) exactly at the hour, with singing or prayer.
4. To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting.
5. To end every meeting with prayer, suited to the state of each person present.
6. To desire some person among us; to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations.

Some of the questions proposed to every one before he is admitted among us may be to this effect:-

1. Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
2. Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ?
3. Have you the witness of God's Spirit with your spirit, that you are a child of God?
4. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
5. Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
6. Do you desire to be told your faults?
7. Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?
8. Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?
9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?
10. Do you desire that, in doing this, we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
11. Is it your desire and design to be on this, and all other occasions, entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?

*Any of the preceding questions may be asked as often as occasion offers; the four following at every meeting:-

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?

Conditions of Membership into Methodist Society:

There is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into these societies: a desire "to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins:" But, wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation. Thus we say to those who unite with us:

You are supposed to have the faith that "overcometh the world." To you, therefore, it is not grievous:

I. Carefully to abstain from doing evil; in particular:

1. Neither to buy nor sell anything at all on the Lord's day.
2. To taste no spirituous liquor, no dram of any kind, unless prescribed by a Physician.
3. To be at a word both in buying and selling.
4. To pawn nothing, no, not to save life.
5. Not to mention the fault of any behind his back, and to stop those short that do.
6. To wear no needless ornaments, such as rings, earrings, necklaces, lace, ruffles.
7. To use no needless self-indulgence, such as taking snuff or tobacco, unless prescribed by a Physician.

II. Zealously to maintain good works; in particular:

1. To give alms of such things as you possess, and that to the uttermost of your power.
2. To reprove all that sin in your sight, and that in love and meekness of wisdom.
3. To be patterns of diligence and frugality, of self-denial, and taking up the cross daily.

III. Constantly to attend on all the ordinances of God; in particular:

1. To be at church and at the Lord's table every week, and at every public meeting of the Bands.
 2. To attend the ministry of the word every morning, unless distance, business, or sickness prevent.
 3. To use private prayer every day; and family prayer, if you are the head of a family.
 4. To read the Scriptures, and meditate therein, at every vacant hour.
- And:
5. To observe, as days of fasting or abstinence, all Fridays in the year.

These are the General Rules of our societies; all which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written word, the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these, we know, his Spirit writes on every truly awakened heart. If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul as they that must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways; we will bear with him for a season: But then if he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our own souls.
Wesley's Works Vol. 8. pgs 270,271,272-274.

Because the Methodist Societies were not controlled by The Church of England some Priests from the Church opposed them and said they were divisive. John Wesley pointed out that they were not dividing Christians but introducing true Christian fellowship and support where it had not been.

"But it was not long before an objection was made to this, which had not once entered into my thought: "Is not this making a schism? Is not the joining these people together, gathering Churches out of Churches?" It was easily answered, If you mean only gathering people out of buildings called churches, it is. But if you mean, dividing Christians from Christians, and so destroying Christian fellowship, it is not. For,

(1) These were not Christians before they were thus joined. Most of them were barefaced Heathens.

(2) Neither are they Christians, from whom you suppose them to be divided. You will not look me in the face and say they are. What! drunken Christians! cheating Christians! If these are Christians at all, they are devil Christians, as the poor Malabarians term them.

(3) Neither are they divided any more than they were before, even from these wretched devil Christians. They are as ready as ever to assist them, and to perform every office of real kindness towards them.

(4) If it be said, "But there are some true Christians in the parish, and you destroy the Christian fellowship between these and them;" I

answer, That which never existed, cannot be destroyed. But the fellowship you speak of never existed. Therefore it cannot be destroyed. Which of these true Christians had any such fellowship with these? Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone, is Christian fellowship: But alas! where is it to be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please: Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of the parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connection is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What watching over each other's souls? What bearing of one another's burdens? What a mere jest is it then, to talk so gravely of destroying what never was? The real truth is just the reverse of this: We introduce Christian fellowship where it was utterly destroyed. And the fruits of it have been peace, joy, love, and zeal for every good word and work."

Wesley's Works Vol. 8. pgs. 251, 252-

True Christian Discipline

"True Christian discipline, whereby all the living members of Christ are knit together in one, and all that are putrid and dead immediately cut off from the body; this order I reverence, for it is of God... Are you Rector of a parish? Then let us go no farther. Does this order obtain there? Nothing less. Your parishioners are a rope of sand. As few (if any) of them are alive to God; so they have no connection with each other, unless such as might be among Turks or Heathens. Neither have you any power to cut off from that body were it alive, the dead and putrid members. Perhaps you have no desire; but all are jumbled together without any care or concern of yours. It is plain, then, that what order is to be found is not among you who so loudly contend for it, but among that very people; whom you continually blame for their violation and contempt of it. The little flock you condemn is united together in one body, by one Spirit: so that "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one be honoured, all rejoice with it." Nor does any dead member long remain; but as soon as the hope of recovering it is past, it is cut off. Now, suppose we were willing to

relinquish our charge, and to give up this flock into your hands, would you observe the same order as we do now with them and the other souls under your care? You dare not; because you have respect of persons. You fear the faces of men. You cannot; because you have not overcome the world. You are not above the desire of earthly things. And it is impossible you should ever have any true order, or exercise any Christian discipline, till you are wholly crucified to the world, till you desire nothing more but God."

Wesley's Works Vol. 8, pg. 225

Testimonies to the Effectiveness of the Methodist Societies:

Thomas Walsh testifies in Wesley's Veterans Vol. 5, pgs 30,31: "He was now appointed a class leader. 'My business,' says he, 'was,

(1) To see each person in my class once a week; and if any were absent, to inquire into the cause;

(2) Whenever we met together, to sing psalms or hymns, and to pray with them;

(3) To examine how their souls prospered, and what progress they had made the preceding week in the way of the Lord.'

And 'Oh,' adds he, 'how wonderfully did we experience the power and love of God, whenever we made prayer and supplication to Him! We had a heaven amongst us; a paradise within us! The Lord poured such peace and joy into our hearts, we were often so happy, that we did not know how to part. We lived as brethren, and strove together for "the hope of the gospel." We were of one heart and of one mind in the presence of God. And is not this the communion of saints?'"

"So dear the tie, where souls agree

In Jesu's dying love;

Then only can it closer be

When all are joined above!"

Duncan Wright shares the help he found when he began attending the Methodist Class Meeting and the blessing of Accountability and Support:

"At length that serious man, Mr. Thomas Secombe, took notice of me; and when he was about to leave Limerick desired Sidney Hoey (a mother in Israel she was to me and many of the soldiers) to get acquainted with me. She brought me to her house, and the same day to a class meeting, which was a day of gladness to me; for I had often found Solomon's words fulfilled, 'Woe to him that is alone when he falleth.' For when I fell into perplexities and temptations I had no one to help me, but now I found the real benefit of having fellowship with a loving people.... It was of uncommon advantage to me to be among the Methodists at a time when both the preachers and people loved all our discipline, and practised it. I saw the blessed consequences, for few cared to stay among us but such as retained their fervor for the whole of religion. False brethren especially were soon tired, and went to the Independents, Anabaptists, or Moravians."
Wesley's Veterans Vol. 2, pgs. 23,24

Testimony of John Pickard:

"Immediately I joined the society [at London], and the first night of meeting the class I thought it the greatest emblem of heaven of any meeting I was ever in. My soul was much humbled under a deep sense of my great unworthiness, and of being permitted to sit and hear such as feared God relate His loving kindness to them. I was now united to a happy people, who walked (the general part of them) in the light of God's countenance, and counted it all joy at any time to suffer for His name's sake; where discipline was for walls and bulwarks, and where His doctrine dropped as rain, and His words distilled as the dew.... I saw the best way to be free was to lay the axe at the root of the tree, and to spare neither root nor branch, but cut asunder all the cords which would tie the soul to earth; to deny every temper, passion, and gratification that had the least tendency to indulge the evil nature; seeking, intending, and desiring nothing during by long or short stay in this world but to find in Christ what I lost in Adam-holiness of heart and heavenly tempers, which become those who are called by grace to be children of God and heirs of glory."
Wesley's Veterans Vol. 3, pg. 203:

The Use of Tickets For Admission to help insure those who attended were serious about discipleship:

"As the society increased, I found it required still greater care to separate the precious from the vile. In order to this, I determined, at least once in three months, to talk with every member myself, and to inquire at their own mouths, as well as of their Leaders and neighbours, whether they grew in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. At these seasons I likewise particularly inquire whether there be any misunderstanding or difference among them; that every hindrance of peace and brotherly love may be taken out of the way.

"To each of those whose seriousness and good conversation I found no reason to doubt, I gave a testimony under my own hand, by writing their name on a ticket prepared for that purpose; every ticket implying as strong a recommendation of the person to whom it was given as if I had wrote at length, "I believe the bearer hereof to be one that fears God and works righteousness."

"Those who bore these tickets, (commendatory letters mentioned by their Apostle,) wherever they came, were acknowledged by their brethren, and received with all cheerfulness. These were likewise of use in other respects. By these it was easily distinguished, when the society were to meet apart, who were members of it, and who not. These also supplied us with a quiet and inoffensive method of removing any disorderly member. He has no new ticket at the quarterly visitation; (for so often the tickets are changed;) and hereby it is immediately known that he is no longer of the community."
Wesley's Works Vol. 8. pg 256, 257.

"You do well in insisting on every person showing his ticket. I wonder John. Coussins [assistant the previous year] did not. It is of importance to mind the Select Society; that, I apprehend, he never neglected. If the leaders and the bands are closely attended to, they will do well; otherwise not."
Letter to Thomas Wride Sept. 16, 1785, Wesley's Letters Vol. 7, p. 291.

Results of not following Methodist Discipline,
Testimony of Thomas Taylor:

"My next remove was to Leeds; which proved a trial to my patience, especially the first year. I always find where the reins of discipline are slackened, it sinks the state of vital religion much. I found it so here: and the mischief is, there is in people an unwillingness to be brought into order when they have been accustomed to live without it; and the minister who attempts the reform must bear his cross.... very great care should be taken that men of unblemished characters alone be employed in the ministry of the word. The same care should be taken respecting the class-leaders; and then there is hope that they will labour to make the people like themselves. Indeed, it is natural for the people to take the tinge of their guides.

Wesley's Veterans Vol. 7 pgs. 75,76 & pgs. 35,36:

"My next remove was to Cork. Here a blessed work was begun under that indefatigable servant of God, Mr. Penington. It did not decrease during my stay, but increased more abundantly. I preached abroad in every part of the city. Prayer-meetings were regularly kept up. I met the class-leaders every Saturday night, and appointed each his work for the ensuing week. Strict discipline was observed. Not a class leader or steward was permitted to enter the society-meeting without producing his ticket; and the work of the Lord prospered on every side. In this agreeable manner things went on, when Mr. James Morgan came to help me. He was the older preacher, though the care of things was, in some measure, committed to me. I could soon see a party gathering against me, who did not like the strictness of discipline. At length he insisted on a person being admitted to the love feasts and society-meetings who would not meet in class. To this I could not consent. I insisted on poor and rich meeting in class, or not to have any privilege of meeting in society. Letters were sent to Mr. Wesley, and his answers were construed in their favour. However, I stood to what I saw was right. They then alleged her husband would not let her meet in class. To cut off this pretence, I went and asked him if he did hinder her. His answer was, 'She is at her own liberty.' Then Mr. Morgan was obliged to submit. This, however, caused a shyness

betwixt him and me, which cast a damp upon the work, Yet I kept up, at all events, the same discipline as long as I stayed at Cork." [Wesley refers to the work done by Taylor and Penington: 'They were zealous men, and sound preachers; full of activity, and strict in discipline, without respect of persons,"

John Wesley's Journal, May 26, 1767]

Examples of John Wesley's Discipline in Action:

Detailed account of those who had left the society: since Dec. 30 was 76:

14 (chiefly Dissenters) because otherwise their Ministers would not give them the sacrament.

9 because their husbands or wives were not willing they should stay in it.

5 because their master and mistress would not let them come.

7 because their acquaintance persuaded them to leave it.

5 because people said such bad things of the society.

9 because they would be laughed at.

3 because they would not lose the poor's allowance.

3 because they could not spare time to come.

2 because it was too far off.

1 because she was falling into fits.

1 because people were so rude in the streets.

2 because Thomas Naisbut was in the society.

1 because he would not turn back on his baptism.

1 because we were mere Church of England men.

1 because it was time enough to serve God yet.

Detailed account of those who were expelled from the society: since Dec. 30 was 64:

2 for cursing and swearing.

2 for habitual Sabbath-breaking.

17 for drunkenness.

2 for retailing spirituous liquors.

3 for quarrelling and brawling.

1 for beating his wife.

3 for habitual, wilful lying.

4 for railing and evil-speaking.

1 for idleness and laziness.

29 for lightness and carelessness.

-Wesley's Works Vol. 1, p. 415 March 4, 1741

The Importance of Discipline:

"Through all Cornwall I find the societies have suffered great loss from want of discipline. Wisely said the ancients, 'The soul and body make a man; the Spirit and discipline make a Christian.'"

Wesley's Works Vol. 2, pg. 204.

"Dear Adam [Clarke], Discipline is the great want in Guernsey; without which, the work of God cannot prosper. You did well to set upon it without delay, and to be as exact as possible."

Wesley's Works Vol. 13, pg. 101.

Two types of People and proper way to help

"As to your Band, there are two sorts of persons with whom you may have to do, the earnest and the slack: The way you are to take with the one is quite different from that of the other. The latter, [slack] you must search, and find out why they are slack; exhort them to repent, be zealous, do the first works. The former [earnest] you have only to encourage, to exhort to push forward to the mark, to bid them grasp the prize so nigh! And do so yourself. Receive a thousand more blessings; believe more, love more: You cannot love enough. Beware of sins of omissions."

Letter to Miss March, Wesley's Works Vol. 12, pg. 278, May 13, 1782.

Re-establishing Class Meeting Discipline in Societies:

"On examining the society [Colchester] I found, that out of the hundred and twenty-six members I had left in October, we had lost only twelve; in the place of whom we have gained forty: And many of these, whom we left in sorrow and heaviness, are now rejoicing in God their Saviour." March 5, 1759-

"I rode to Norwich. I inquired into the state of affairs at the Tabernacle, and found the society, once consisting of many hundred members, was mouldered into nothing. Of the fifteen or sixteen hundred subscribers, not twenty, not one, was left; but every one that pleased went into the galleries without any questions asked. So that everything was to be wrought out of the ore, or rather out of the cinders. Surely whatever help is done here, God must do it himself.

"In the evening I desired that those who were willing to join in a society would speak with me the next evening. About twenty did so; but the greater part of these appeared like frightened sheep: And no marvel, when they had been so long accustomed to hear all manner of evil of me."

"On Saturday and Sunday about forty more gave in their names. On Sunday, in the afternoon, I met the society, after ordering the doors to be shut, which they had not been for two years before. Thirty or forty more spoke to me on Monday. I think two-thirds of those I have yet seen have had a clear sense of God's pardoning love. Doth he not "send by whom he will send?"

"March 26...I spoke to as many of both societies [Norwich and Forncet] now united together, as had leisure and inclination to come. The whole number is about four hundred and twenty; of whom I do not think it improbable two hundred may continue together."

"March 29...I divided the Norwich society into classes, without any distinction between them who had belonged to the Foundry or the Tabernacle."

"Sun. April 1...I met them all at six, requiring every one to show his ticket when he came in; A thing they had never heard of before. I likewise insisted on another strange regulation, That the men and women should sit apart. A third was made the same day... ordered none to be admitted, but those who desired to communicate.

"The society now contained about five hundred and seventy members; an hundred and three of whom were in no society before, although many of them had found peace with God. I believe they would have increased to a thousand, if I could have stayed a fortnight longer [14 nights]. Which of these will hold fast their profession? The fowls of the air will devour some; the sun will scorch more; and others will be choked by the thorns springing up. I wonder we should ever expect that half of those who "hear the word with joy" will bring forth fruit unto perfection."

Wesley's Works Vol. 2, pgs. 468-470.

John Wesley would not employ time on people if they would not meet in the Class Meeting:

May 26, 1759..."I found the little society which I had joined here two years since had soon split in pieces. In the afternoon I met several of the members of the praying societies: and showed them what Christian fellowship was, and what need they had of it. About forty of them met me on Sunday the 27th, in Mr. Gillies's Kirk, immediately after Evening Service. I left them determined to meet Mr. Gillies weekly, at the same time and place. If this be done, I shall try to see Glasgow again: If not, I can employ my time better."

Wesley's Works Vol. 2, pg. 482.

"Those who will not meet in class cannot stay with us."
Wesley's Letters Vol. 7 pg 154; Dec. 7,1782.

Wesley's Testimony about when God began to make him effective in his ministry:

1. "From the year 1725 to 1729 I preached much, but saw no fruit of my labour. Indeed, it could not be that I should: for I neither laid the foundation of repentance nor of believing the gospel; taking it for granted that all to whom I preached were believers and that many of them 'needed no repentance.'

2. From the year 1729 to 1734, laying a deeper foundation of repentance, I saw a little fruit. But it was only a little; and no wonder: for I did not preach faith in the blood of the covenant.

3. From 1734 to 1738, speaking more of faith in Christ, I saw more fruit of my preaching and visiting from house to house than ever I had done before: though I know not if any of those who were outwardly reformed were inwardly and thoroughly converted to God.

4. From 1738 [which is the year he was born again, and also the year he began the band societies] to this time, speaking continually of Jesus Christ; laying Him only for the foundation of the whole building, making Him all in all, the first and the last; preaching only on this plan, 'The kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel,' -the 'word of God ran' as fire among the stubble; it 'was glorified' more and more; multitudes crying out, 'What must we do to be saved?' and afterwards witnessing, 'By grace we are saved through faith.'" Wesley's Works Vol. 8, p. 468; letter to Thomas Church, June 1746.

Necessity of Godly Leaders; Letters Vol 4 p 3, To George Merryweather

"No person must be allowed to preach or exhort among our people whose life is not holy and unblameable, nor any who asserts anything contrary to the gospel which we have received. And if he does not own his fault and amend it, he cannot be a leader any longer."

The True Marks of Godliness - Letters Vol 4, p 31, To Dr. Free

""They hunt,' say you, 'for extraordinary marks and revelations whereby to know the state of the soul.' The marks by which I know the state of any soul are the inward fruit of the Spirit-love, joy, peace, and meekness, gentleness, goodness, long-suffering, temperance, patience, shown, not by words only, but by the genuine fruit of outward holiness."

Letters Vol 4, pg 33, To Samuel Furly

"Every preacher whom God has sent will have a message to some souls who have not been reached by any other. And the more persons attend his preaching the better; the more room there is for God to work.