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*Holiness Writers*

# **THE CLASS MEETING AS A MEANS OF GRACE**

By

*Wilson T. Hogue*

*“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without  
which no man shall see the Lord” Heb 12:14*

**Spreading Scriptural Holiness to the World**

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By

**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

Author of

"A Handbook of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology"

"G. Harry Agnew, A Pioneer Missionary"

"Hymns That Are Immortal"

Etc.

"Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name." — Mat. 3:16

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By Wilson T. Hogue

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**DEDICATED**

To  
The Memory Of  
My Father,  
A Devoted Class Leader  
For Many Years

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### **PREFACE**

Of all the prudential regulations established by John Wesley for the unification and spiritual culture of his early Methodist societies none proved more effective in furthering the desired ends than the institution of the class-meeting. Nor has the effectiveness of this prudential means of grace been limited to the country where Methodism was born, or to the early period of its history. All historians of Methodism alike acknowledge the class-meeting to have been among the most potent factors contributing to the success of Methodist bodies in all countries down to the present time. In a very important degree they are the life of Methodist churches everywhere, and their tone and character are the measure of the church's spirituality and fruitfulness.

There are painful evidences, however, that this once effective aid to the accomplishment of the great end for which Methodism was originally raised up — that of spreading scriptural holiness over the world — is not now held in as high regard, even by the people calling themselves Methodists, as it should be; and there is evident danger, too, of its so far falling into disesteem and change of character as to become only the nominal representative of what it once was in reality. In many quarters it is already very far gone from the original type; in other localities it exists, if at all, in name and appearance only; and in some places, it has become altogether a thing of the past.

These are facts to be lamented by all lovers of Zion, since the decline of so valuable a means of grace and so effective an institution for increasing the church's fruitfulness is indicative of vital decay in the church at large as its occasion. There is certainly need of reformation in this matter at once. Restore the class-meetings of Methodism to what they once were, and the power and efficiency of Methodism in all its branches will be incalculably increased. In hope of contributing somewhat to the realization of this end, the following pages have been prepared, and are now given to the public.

W. T. H.  
Evanston, Ill.

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

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### **Chapter 1**

#### **PREPARATION**

The class-meeting came into existence, not as the product of human device or invention, but as the offspring of divine providence. The way was being prepared for its institution for a considerable time before it made its appearance as a part of the economy of early Methodism. As the seed germinates and grows for a season beneath the soil before the blade appears above the surface, so the preparatory stage for the development of the class-meeting idea antedates the organization of Methodist societies, and must be looked for in connection with what was called, in derision, during Wesley's student life in Oxford University, "The Holy Club."

Here began, in 1729, that great revival of pure and undefiled religion out of which Methodism was born. At this period the state of religion and morals in Great Britain was deplorable in the extreme. Infidelity was widely diffused, and had taken a strong hold in particular upon the educated classes. The decay of conscience was general and lamentable, "and public morals suffered from the abandonment of religious principles and from the example of those high in authority." While there were some notable exceptions, the clergy of the Established Church were to a large extent ignorant, and even loose in respect to their morals. Men like Swift and Sterne, though characterized by ability, brought the pulpit into much discredit by unbridled wit and licentious humor, while many of their brother clergymen spent the most of their time in hunting, gaming and drinking.

Doctrinal views were also greatly unsettled, and Arianism and Socinianism found able advocates in such men as Doctors Clarke [not Adam Clarke], Priestly and Whiston, while true, evangelical piety was frowned upon and derided as fanaticism. "Both among dissenters and churchmen," said Dr. Watts, the eminent poet and hymn-writer, "there was a general decay of religion in the hearts and lives of men." Bishop Burnett, Archbishop Secker, the excellent Leighton and Dr. Watts are all quoted in the "Cyclopedia of Methodism" as bearing testimony to the fearful degeneracy of the times which characterized Great Britain generally — to the almost utter decay of religion and virtue within the Established and Dissenting Churches, and to the abounding floods of ungodliness, vice and crime characterizing the unchurched masses.

In the midst of these degenerate times John Wesley entered Oxford University, in the prevailing atmosphere of which he found practically nothing helpful to one who desired to flee from the wrath to come and lay hold on eternal life. Shortly before his return to the university in 1729, according to Dr. O. P. Fitzgerald, some one addressed to him the following words, which appear to have been divinely sent, and which in no little degree helped to give direction to his future career: "Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven; remember you cannot serve him alone; you must therefore find companions, or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion."

During that year the organization which was soon to be nicknamed the "Holy Club" was formed, and with its formation the Methodist revival began. It commenced among a few students in Oxford University, who formed a society to read the Holy Scriptures in the original languages, and to aid each other in mutual spiritual improvement. They sincerely desired to please God and conform their lives strictly to the precepts of His word. They received the Lord's Supper weekly, and fasted twice a week; they systematically arranged their time for self-examination, meditation, prayer and religious reading. They attended scrupulously upon public worship and all the ordinances of the church; they also stimulated each other to active benevolence; they instructed the children of the neglected poor, visited the sick, and the inmates of prisons and almshouses, and gave to them, to the utmost of their power, temporal as well as spiritual aid. Their fellow-students ridiculed their piety, called them Sacramentarians, Bible-bigots the Godly Club and the Holy Club.

"They were young men of more than ordinary intellectual power and culture. John Wesley, who was then twenty-six years of age, was a Fellow of Lincoln College, had been ordained a priest, and had acted as a curate for a short time; he was an accomplished scholar and a forcible writer. His brother Charles was twenty years of age, a Bachelor of Arts and a college tutor, and was then developing that genius for poetry which marked his subsequent life. Mr. Morgan, who died in a few years, was a curator of Christ's church, the son of an Irish gentleman. Mr. Kirkham was a member of Merton College. Of these John Wesley was acknowledged the leader, and was called by those who ridiculed them 'the curator of the Holy Club.' Other students joined them in 1730, and in 1732 Hervey, the author of the 'Meditations,' and Ingham of Queen's College, united with them. The famous George Whitefield joined this company in 1735.

"They were so faithful in redeeming their time and so methodical in attending to all their duties that one of the students, partly from this fact and partly in derision, termed them 'Methodists.' This name had a century before been applied to those who were very earnest on religious topics, and who were plain in their manners. One writer speaks of the 'Anabaptists and plain packstaff Methodists;' and a pamphlet is on record attacking the principles of the 'New Methodists.' This term, though often used reproachfully, and to express enthusiasm or fanaticism, has become the acknowledged name of one of the largest branches of the Christian Church.

"Notwithstanding the purity and regularity of their lives, these students were subject to reproach, persecution, and even indignities. Whitefield was sometimes pelted with stones by his fellow-students, and subsequently some of the most religious students were expelled from the university." <sup>[1]</sup>

As yet these young men were only such as "desired to flee from the wrath to come." They "feared God and wrought righteousness," and so were no doubt "accepted of Him," but accepted as servants rather than as sons, and knew not the blessed witness of the Spirit to the forgiveness of sins and to their adoption into the family of God. Whitefield for a time fell into the error of the "Quietists," neglected the meetings of the Club, and wandered about the fields in solitude, praying alone rather than joining with his fellow-students: but owing to his natural cheerfulness, the healthy character of his religion, his teachable spirit, and the wise counsels of others, he was soon recovered.



John Wesley, too, through the writings of the Mystics, "who substituted reveries for duties, and self-analysis and introspection for social religious labors and enjoyments," and who "so construed the first commandment as to make it exclude the second, which is like unto it," was for a time near being wrecked on the shoals of Mysticism; but, through the goodness and grace of God he was prevented from being effectually carried away with this subtle and ruinous error. How, he could scarce tell himself, and therefore said: "Nor can I at this hour give a distinct account of how or when I came a little back toward the right way; only my present sense is this — all the other enemies of Christianity are triflers; the Mystics are the most dangerous; they stab it in the vitals; and its most serious professors are most likely to fall by them."

With the story of John Wesley's final conversion most people in Methodist churches are more or less familiar, but it will bear another repetition here. He had long been dissatisfied with his own religious state, felt his want of harmony with God and of inward conformity to the divine will, and questioned himself as to the possibility of attaining unto such a state, and as to such attainment, if possible, being a matter of consciousness. These perplexing problems were happily solved for him on Wednesday, May 24, 1738.

As he opened his Testament in the early morning his eyes fell on 2 Peter 1:4, "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." A little later, as about to leave the room, he opened to the words, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." In the evening of the same day he somewhat reluctantly attended a meeting of the society in Aldersgate street. Here a layman was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Galatians. As Wesley listened to Luther's description of the change wrought by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of true believers, the crisis came, and Wesley consciously and instantly passed from death unto life, and became a happy and victorious child of God. His own relation of this experience is so much better than any one else has given of the same that we reproduce it here, as follows:

"I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ — Christ alone — for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. I then began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there, what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, 'This cannot be faith, for where is thy joy?' Then I was taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy which usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of His own will. After my return home I was much buffeted with temptations, but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again; I as often lifted up my eyes, and He sent me help from my holy place. And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting, under the law as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now I was always conqueror." [2]

It will now readily be seen that in all the foregoing experiences of the great founder of Methodism there was a preparation for, and even a foreshadowing of, the institution of the class-meeting, as also of other prudential regulations and means of grace which have figured so largely and effectively in

the development of Methodism as an evangelizing agency. The "Holy Club" at Oxford was to all intents and purposes a class-meeting — the prototype of the fully developed class-meeting of later Methodism — though it had never then been dreamed of as such. The ends for which the Club held its weekly sessions were practically the same as those for which, when the class-meeting idea was fully developed, Methodists were accustomed to meet from week to week in their respective classes. Those student gatherings in Oxford, sneered at, derided and nicknamed as they were, contained the potential life of Methodism, and largely prepared the way for the institution of the class-meeting, which has ever been a peculiar and most effective agency in conserving and promoting the spirituality and fruitfulness of all Methodist bodies.

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### **Chapter 2**

#### **ORIGIN**

While Methodist societies were organized by Mr. Wesley as early as 1739, it was not until 1742 that these societies were divided into classes with regularly appointed leaders, and that class-meetings, in the proper technical sense of the term, were instituted. Of the formation of his "United Societies," Mr. Wesley has left us the following account in his Journal:

"In the latter end of the year 1739 eight or ten persons came to me in London, who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired I would spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come. That we might have more time for this great work, I appointed a day when they might all come together, which from thenceforward they did every Thursday in the evening. To these, and to as many more as desired to join with them (for the number increased daily), I gave those advices from time to time which I judged most needful for them, and we always concluded our meeting with prayer suited to their several necessities. This was the rise of the United Society, first in London, and then in other places."

In January of this year the London society, which was really Moravian rather than Methodist, was composed of about sixty members. Three months later, according to Tyerman, "Wesley went to Bristol, where 'a few persons agreed to meet weekly, with the same intention as those in London;' and these were soon increased by 'several little societies which were already meeting in divers parts of the city,' amalgamating with them. About the same time similar societies were formed at Kingswood and at Bath. These religious communities grew and multiplied. At the beginning of 1742 the London society alone, after repeated siftings, numbered about eleven hundred members."

From the foregoing account it will be seen that Mr. Wesley's "United Societies" partook largely the character of classes, and they appear elsewhere in the writings of their founder to have been designated at times by that name. The gatherings of their members for mutual religious instruction and helpfulness also partook in no small degree the character of class-meetings. The class, therefore, was the original idea — the germ from which the whole organic life of Methodism was developed. As yet, however, there were neither classes nor class-meetings in the later technical sense of those terms, a fact which will presently appear.

Hitherto Wesley and his brother had taken the full pastoral oversight of these various societies, but on the 15th of February, 1742, a very singular providence led to an alteration which Mr. Wesley had in no sense anticipated, and which was to prove of the utmost importance to Methodism, since from it sprang the system of class-meetings, which has ever been a unique feature, a sort of main stay, in all Methodist bodies. Mr. Wesley relates the occurrence as follows:

"But as much as we [members of these societies] endeavored to watch over each other, we soon found some who did not live the gospel. I do not know that any hypocrites were crept in; for there was no temptation: but several grew cold, and gave way to the sins which had long easily beset them. We quickly perceived there were many ill consequences of suffering these to remain among us. It was dangerous to others, inasmuch as all sin is of an infectious nature. It laid a stumbling block in the way of others, and caused the truth to be evil spoken of.

"We groaned under these inconveniences long, before a remedy could be found. The people were scattered so wide in all parts of the town, from Wapping to Westminster, that I could not easily see what the behavior of each person in his own neighborhood was: so that several disorderly walkers did much hurt before I was apprised of it.

"At length, while we were thinking of quite another thing, we struck upon a method for which we have cause to bless God ever since. I was talking with several of the society in Bristol concerning the means of paying the debts there, when one [Captain Foy] stood up and said, 'Let every member of the society give a penny a week till all are paid.' Another answered, 'But some of them are poor, and cannot afford to do it.' 'Then,' said he, 'put eleven of the poorest with me; and if they can give anything, well: I will call on them weekly; and if they can give nothing, I will give for them as well as for myself. And each of you call on eleven of your neighbors weekly; receive what they give, and make up what is wanting.'"

"It was done," says Wesley. "In a while some of these informed me, they found such and such an one did not live as he ought. It struck me immediately, 'This is the very thing; the very thing we have wanted so long.' I called together all the leaders of the classes (so we used to term them and their companies) and desired, that each would make a particular inquiry into the behavior of those whom he saw weekly. They did so. Many disorderly walkers were detected. Some turned from the evil of their ways. Some were put away from us. Many saw it with fear, and rejoiced unto God with reverence.

"As soon as possible, the same method was used in London and all other places. Evil men were detected and reprov'd. They were borne with for a season. If they forsook their sins, we received them gladly; if they obstinately persisted therein, it was openly declared that they were not of us. The rest mourned and prayed for them, and yet rejoiced, that, as far as in us lay, the scandal was rolled away from the society."

Wesley appointed as leaders of his classes "those in whom he could most confide;" and thus, after an existence of three years without them, the Methodist societies were divided into classes, in 1742. "This," says Wesley, "was the origin of our classes, for which I can never sufficiently praise God; the unspeakable usefulness of the institution having ever since been more and more manifest."

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### **Chapter 3**

#### **DEVELOPMENT**

We have already noted how the norm of the modern class-meeting appeared in that small association of Oxford students for mutual religious improvement, which their fellow students in derision nicknamed the "Holy Club." We have also seen how the "United Societies" organized by Mr. Wesley in 1739, though unwittingly on his part, embodied the germ of the later class-meeting in still closer approximation to its ultimate form and character. Then, too, we have with no small degree of interest witnessed the birth of the class-meeting proper, and its permanent incorporation as a part of the economy of Methodism. The stages of its development from its incipient to its final form and place next require at least a passing notice.

It will readily be recalled that the first end proposed in the institution of classes in early Methodism was wholly a pecuniary one. It appears to have been thought of only as a temporary expedient for wiping out the indebtedness of the society at Bristol. It not only succeeded as an economic measure, but proved to be the very means for the mutual edification of the members composing his societies that Mr. Wesley had long been looking and praying for; and so because of both its economic and spiritual advantages he tried it elsewhere until fully satisfied of its general utility, and then made it a universal and permanent part of Methodism.

At the first there were classes without class-meetings. Each leader was required to see all members of his class once a week at the least, for such spiritual advice, reproof, comfort and exhortation as might in each case be needed, and also in order to collect from them whatever they might be willing to give for the poor. He might, however, and usually did, meet them at their homes or various places of employment for these purposes, and then later report the results of his visits and inquiries to a meeting of the ministers and stewards of the society, held for the purpose of hearing such reports from the various leaders.

Referring to this method, its defects, and how it was displaced by the regular weekly class-meeting, Mr. Wesley says:

"At first they [the leaders] visited each person at his own house, but this was soon found not so expedient. And that on many accounts: (1) It took up more time than most of the leaders had to spare. (2) Many persons lived with masters, mistresses or relations, who would not suffer them to be thus visited. (3) At the houses of those who were not so averse, they often had no opportunity of speaking to them but in company, and this did not at all answer the end proposed, of exhorting, comforting or reproof. (4) It frequently happened that one affirmed what another denied, and this could not be cleared up without seeing them together. (5) Little misunderstandings and quarrels of various kinds frequently arose among relations or neighbors, effectually to remove which it was needful to see them all face to face. Upon all these considerations it was agreed that those of each

class should meet all together, and by this means a more full inquiry was made into the behavior of every person. Those who could not be visited at home, or no otherwise than in company, had the same advantage with others. Advice or reproof was given as need required, quarrels made up, misunderstandings removed, and after an hour or two spent in this labor of love they concluded with prayer and thanksgiving." [3]

While the original institution of Methodist classes appears to have been intended only as a temporary financial measure, the scheme succeeded in an economic way altogether too well ever to be abandoned by such a thoroughly practical man as Mr. Wesley. Accordingly the system of weekly contributions was continued, after the liquidation of the chapel debts, and, in most branches of Methodism, is in force until this day. "At first they were paid by the class leaders to the stewards for the poor. Soon the lay ministry arose under the Methodist movement, and the class-meeting became a source of their support. The 'penny a week and shilling a quarter' worked wonders, making a system of church finance never surpassed in simplicity and effectiveness." [4]

In the beginning Mr. Wesley divided the members of his societies into classes numbering about twelve persons each, one of whom was appointed leader. These classes were arranged, so far as was practicable, according to the residence of their respective members, so that they might meet in private houses within their respective neighborhoods. "Sometimes they were arranged for meeting at different hours, according to the employment and opportunities of the various members. They were usually composed of both men and women, but early in the history of Methodism some classes were formed of women only, and others of men only. In some instances women were made the leaders of women's classes, and sometimes of mixed classes, especially for the young. The original number of twelve was, however, soon enlarged, and sometimes from twenty to fifty or even a larger number meet in a single class. Efficiency and activity, however, are promoted by smaller classes, as it is impossible for a leader to keep a careful supervision over a very large number."

In the very nature of the case the clerical leaders in the beginning of the great Methodist movement were itinerants on a large scale. Their work kept them on the move hurriedly over wide stretches of country and into different parts of the United Kingdom. In many places they could spend but a single day or night, and in other places they could tarry but a few hours. Direct pastoral oversight of the societies was therefore impossible for them. Hence this work was assigned by Mr. Wesley to his class-leaders. By their service in watching over the souls entrusted to their care, and in conserving the labors of the chief pastors, Methodism, through its class-meetings, was developed into a system of such efficient evangelization, combined with the most thorough moral discipline, as never appeared before or since.

The next stage in the development of the class-meeting was the institution of the band-meeting as a supplementary aid to the more efficient accomplishment of its work. Like the class-meeting, the band-meeting also had its origin in Bristol. The band was a sort of class within a class. It grew out of a desire on the part of some for closer communion and more thorough heart-searching than was always possible at the meetings of the classes, and for a better opportunity to fulfill the injunction, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed" (James 5:16), than was provided for in the more regular prudential means of grace. Regarding this as a favorable token Mr. Wesley joined them "into smaller companies, putting the married or single men, and the

married or single women, together." The chief rules of these bands or companies, are set forth by Mr. Wesley as follows:

"In order to 'confess our faults one to another,' and pray for one another that we may be healed, we intend: (1) To meet once a week at the least. (2) To come punctually at the hour appointed. (3) To begin with singing or prayer. (4) To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, or word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting. (5) To desire some person among us (thence called a leader) 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."

In order the more effectually to further these ends, and also to increase in the members of these bands a sense of the divine mercies, Mr. Wesley desired all the members of the male bands to meet him together on Wednesday evenings, and likewise all the members of the female bands on Sunday evenings, for instruction, exhortation, prayer and praise; and also that one evening each quarter all the men of the male bands, a second evening all the women of the female bands, and a third evening all the men and women of all the bands, should meet him, "that they might 'eat bread,' as the ancient Christians did, 'with gladness and singleness of heart.' At these love-feasts (so we termed them, retaining the name, as well as the thing, which was in use from the beginning)," says Mr. Wesley, "our food is only a little plain cake and water. But we seldom return from them without being fed, not only with the 'meat that perisheth,' but with 'that which endureth to everlasting life.'"

Band-meetings, however, were never made obligatory in the Methodist societies through being enjoined as a rule of the Discipline, nor were they at any time general in the sense in which class-meetings were general. They were never organized in America to any such extent as they were in Europe, although they were held in a few of the cities and larger towns. At present they are practically unknown in this country. The more modern class-meeting has absorbed some of the features of the band-meetings, and has practically superseded them.

"These rules of the band-meeting throw a blaze of light upon the Methodism of that day," says Dr. Fitzgerald. "How intense was the feeling that thus found expression! How strong and absorbing the religious purpose! The great revival was at its white heat when these rules were adopted, and we need not wonder that in contact with such a spirit formalism and worldliness were swept aside as by the breath of the Lord."

Well may the Methodisms of today sing:

"Oh, for that flame of living fire,  
Which shone so bright in saints of old!  
Which bade their souls to heaven aspire,  
Calm in distress, in danger bold.

"Where is that Spirit, Lord, which dwelt  
In Abrah'm's breast, and sealed him Thine?  
Which made Paul's heart with sorrow melt,  
And glow with energy divine?

"That Spirit, which from age to age  
Proclaimed Thy love and taught Thy ways?  
Brightened Isaiah's vivid page,  
And breathed in David's hallowed rays?

"Is not Thy grace as mighty now  
As when Elijah felt its power;  
When glory beamed from Moses' brow,  
Or Job endured the trying hour?

"Remember, Lord, the ancient days;  
Renew Thy work: Thy grace restore;  
And while to Thee our hearts we raise,  
On us Thy Holy Spirit pour."

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### **Chapter 4**

### **OBJECTIONS**

As in our own time, so in Wesley's, there were many in the church who were grievously afflicted by the adoption of any new measures for carrying on the work of God. Had Wesley listened to and been governed by this class among the early Methodists, class-meetings would never have found a place in the societies he organized. Objections against their introduction were numerous and strong, and not a few of the same objections are felt, if not urged, by those who disbelieve in class-meetings today. It may be profitable, therefore, to let Mr. Wesley speak for himself regarding the objections he met, and the way he treated them. He says:

"But notwithstanding all these advantages [derived from the institution of class-meetings], many were at first extremely averse to meeting thus. Some, viewing it in a wrong point of light, not as a privilege (indeed an invaluable one), but rather a restraint, disliked it on that account, because they did not love to be restrained in anything. Some were ashamed to speak before company. Others honestly said, 'I do not know why; but I do not like it.'

"Some objected, 'There were no such meetings when I came into the society first: and why should there be now? I do not understand these things, and this changing one thing after another continually.' It was easily answered: It is pity but they had been at first. [It seems as if this sentence should read: "It is a pity they had not been at the first." However, it is rendered here just the way it reads in the printed book. — DVM] But we knew not then the need or the benefit of them. Why we use them, you will readily understand, if you read over the rules of the society. That with these little prudential helps we are continually changing one thing after another, is not a weakness or fault, as you imagine, but a peculiar advantage which we enjoy. By this means we declare them all to be merely prudential, not essential, not of divine institution. We prevent, so far as in us lies, their growing formal or dead. We are always open to instruction; willing to be wiser every day than we were before, and to change whatever we can change for the better.

"Another objection was, 'There is no scripture for this, for classes and I know not what.' I answer, (1) There is no scripture against it. You cannot show one text that forbids them. (2) There is much scripture for it, even all those texts which enjoin the substance of those various duties whereof this is only an indifferent circumstance, to be determined by reason and experience. (3) You seem not to have observed, that the scripture, in most points, gives only general rules; and leaves the particular circumstances to be adjusted by the common sense of mankind. The scripture, for instance, gives that general rule, 'Let all things be done decently and in order.' But common sense is to determine, on particular occasions, what order and decency require. So, in another instance, the scripture lays it down as a general, standing direction, 'Whether ye eat or drink, or whatever ye do, do all to the glory of God.' But it is common prudence which is to make the application of this, in a thousand particular cases.

"'But these,' said another, 'are all man's inventions.' This is but the same objection in another form. And the same answer will suffice for any reasonable person. These are man's inventions. And what then? That is, they are methods which men have found, by reason and common sense, for the more effectually applying several scripture rules, couched in general terms, to so many particular occasions.

"They spoke far more plausibly than these, who said, 'The thing is well enough in itself. But the leaders are insufficient for the work: they have neither gifts nor graces for such employment.' I answer, (1) Yet such leaders as they are, it is plain that God has blessed their labor. (2) If any of these is remarkably wanting in gifts or grace, he is soon taken notice of and removed. (3) If you know any such, tell it to me, not to others, and I will endeavor to exchange him for a better. (4) It may be hoped they will all be better than they are, both by experience and observation, and by the advices given them by the minister every Tuesday night, and the prayers (then in particular) offered up for them."

In spite of all objections urged against them at the time of their introduction, class-meetings became an established, if not an essential, part of the primitive economy of Methodism, and such a relation they have continued to hold to it unto the present time. There seems to have been no period in Methodist history when they did not have to contend for their place and for their very existence, against much of indifference, apathy, inward dislike and outward opposition; and yet they have so far found acceptance and favor that they are still integral and highly valued parts of every branch of Methodism with which the writer is acquainted.

Objections to them, and the manifest tendency of our time to underestimate their value, are no new things under the sun; but they are evil things, nevertheless. As a rule those who are spiritual in the church love the class-meeting. Spiritual and loyal Methodists, in all branches of the Methodist family, will declare with one voice the debt they owe under God to this particular means of grace, for spiritual instruction, guidance, comfort, quickening, strengthening and development, as also for innumerable benefits derived more directly from that sweet fellowship of saints to which the class-meeting ministers more effectively than any other social means of grace. Whenever the members of Methodist churches become worldly-minded, aristocratic, cold in heart and backslidden in life, they naturally lose their relish for spiritual things in general, and for all places and religious exercises in particular in which the fervor of devotion glows at red heat, and deep and thorough heart-searching is the order of the hour. This is why they are conspicuous for their absence from the class-meeting, and this also the ground of the objections they urge against it.

Whatever objections any within or without the family of universal Methodism may urge against them, class-meetings have stood the test of more than a hundred and fifty years, and in doing so have fully justified their right to be regarded as second to no other as prudential means of grace. For Methodists they take, or should take, the precedence over all others, inasmuch as, besides that which peculiarly distinguishes and commends them as class-meetings, they combine practically all the helpful features of every other prudential means for culturing the spiritual life.

As a fitting close to the present chapter, the following, from the "Episcopal Address to Class-Leaders," prepared by the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, as directed by the

general conference of 1884, and read before the general conference of 1888, is eminently appropriate:

"The necessity for class-meetings, or for some similar means of grace, is deeply imbedded in human nature. The social principle must have exercise in religious matters. All evangelical Christians in times of religious quickening feel this, and various means of grace akin to the class-meeting have been devised to meet this deep-seated want, such as 'inquiry meetings,' 'conference meetings,' 'young converts' meetings,' and 'experience meetings.' In the class-meeting we have, and have always had, the very thing which can best secure all the ends thus sought, and we look to our class-leaders to restore it to far more than its old-time power."

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 5**

#### **BENEFITS**

From the foregoing account it will be seen that the purpose for which class-meetings were instituted was twofold: first, as a means of providing systematically for the financial aid of the work of God; and second, as a means of quickening, culturing and perfecting the spiritual life of believers. Of course the latter is the more important of the two, and is mentioned last only because the economic end was first in the historical order. At first the institution of classes was wholly a financial measure; but, in the providential way heretofore described, the class-meeting came at length to have for its higher and ultimate aim the spiritual welfare of its members and of the Methodist societies generally.

Nor did any institution ever answer its ends more effectually than has the class-meeting during the one hundred and sixty-five years of its history. Through its simple system of finance Wesley was enabled to pay off all his embarrassing chapel debts, and maintain a well-replenished treasury for his societies, from which to draw at all times for numerous religious and benevolent purposes. The arrangement made all the members of his societies, except such as were known to be too poor to give anything, regular contributors for the general support of the work; and, if we could know the aggregate amount realized from his "penny a week" system of contributions, no doubt it would at first appear wholly incredible. Not that the early Methodist offerings in general were limited to one penny a week, for there were many other offerings than this, as the work grew and its financial demands were increased; but a penny a week was the least amount any were to give, except the very poor, whose contributions were paid by their leaders and others as a voluntary matter.

Through a somewhat similar system, adapted from that of primitive Methodism, later Methodism, in all its branches, has been able to this day so to distribute its financial burdens among its entire membership and provide for weekly, monthly, or quarterly, contributions from all, that even small and poor societies have usually been able to maintain in decency and comfort efficient pastors, and to be in other respects self-supporting; while the same system has also provided liberally for the general religious and benevolent funds of the respective Methodist bodies, the aggregate annual amount now realized being many millions of dollars.

As a means for culturing the spiritual life and edifying believers in all that makes for holy character and efficient service, the class-meeting as a prudential means of grace is unexcelled. Through it the members of Methodist societies generally are brought into closer touch, acquaintance and sympathy with each other, and under more direct, constant, and therefore helpful spiritual oversight and leadership than would otherwise be probable, if possible. When properly maintained and wisely conducted, the class-meeting, like the inspired Scriptures, "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:16).

Mr. Wesley's estimate of its value in the earlier period of its history is recorded as follows: "It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped by this little prudential regulation. Many now experienced that Christian fellowship, of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to bear one another's burdens and naturally to care for each other's welfare. And as they had daily more intimate acquaintance, so they had a more endeared affection for each other. Upon reflection, I could not but observe this is the very thing which was from the beginning of Christianity. As soon as any Jews or heathen were so convinced of the truth as to forsake sin and seek the gospel of salvation, the first preachers immediately joined them together, took an account of their names, advised them to watch over each other, and met these catechumens, as they were then called, apart from the great congregation, that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort and pray with them and for them, according to their several necessities."

Notwithstanding some pro and con discussion, and some differences of opinion, among English Methodists the class-meeting is still considered so important and beneficial a part of their economy that attendance upon it is made a condition of membership in a much stricter sense than it is in American Methodism. Regarding its importance in the land of its origin, it is said, "The character of the class-meeting cannot be lowered, or the glorious, soul-refreshing and powerful vitality of the church will cease to exist." Also that "the value of this integral and essential part of Methodist economy was never more appreciated and valued than it is now, with the experience of nearly [more than] a century and a half." [6]

American Methodist churches, while less severely conditioning membership on attendance upon the class-meeting exercises than does British Methodism, appreciate none the less the great benefits derivable from this institution, and so make it one of the most prominent adjuncts of their church work, enjoining attendance upon its weekly sessions as the duty of all their members, and making gross dereliction in this matter a sufficient ground for disciplinary action.

Speaking of the value of class-meetings the "Cyclopedia of Methodism" says: "They have been a peculiar feature of Methodism, and have accomplished a vast amount of good; both inciting to a higher personal experience and in accustoming the members to religious conversation and labor. They are agencies to develop earnest and active Christian workers. Whenever regularly attended, the entire membership of the church are brought into fellowship with each other, and the experience and the counsel of mature Christians becomes of great service to the younger and less experienced members. As a bond of union their influence can scarcely be overestimated."

Quite in keeping with the foregoing is the following, from John Faulkner, D. D., Professor of Historical Theology in Drew Theological Seminary, in estimating the value of the class-meeting in Methodism's earlier days: "The class-meeting, where Christians speak to each other of the things of God, trained multitudes for effective service, — even women not a few became known for their rich experience, lofty faith and appropriate public utterance. The portrait of Dinah Morris in 'Adam Bede' is typical of many. As the medieval abbots utilized laymen for large service so Wesley restored the private Christian to the place he had in the first age of the Church; when the believers went everywhere preaching the gospel (Acts 8:4). After Wesley, laymen were the founders of Methodism. It was their preaching, their sufferings, their heroism, which turned the tide of immorality and irreligion, and as Lecky well says, saved England from a French Revolution." [7]

The helpfulness of the class-meeting in the culture and development of the spiritual life is attested with one voice by all faithful attendants upon its weekly exercises. Here those uninstructed in the things of the Spirit have had "the eyes of their understanding enlightened, that they might know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe," etc. (Eph. 1:18-23). Here also the timid have been enabled to fulfill the injunction, "Add to your faith courage" (II Peter 1:5), and to develop into such sturdy moral heroes as sing,

"Then I can smile at Satan's rage,  
And face a frowning world."

Here, too, weak and wavering souls have been "strengthened with might by God's Spirit in the inner man," and after much of vacillation and discouragement, have become "steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." Through this precious means of grace thousands of wounded spirits have been soothed and calmed into holy restfulness, and made every whit whole; thousands of despairing hearts have been given "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;" thousands of despairing hearts have been begotten to "the full assurance of hope," and made to "rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." Here multitudes of penitent sinners have found forgiveness of sins, and "the peace of God that passeth all understanding;" and even greater multitudes of justified believers have been sanctified wholly, and thereby enabled to enter and inhabit the Canaan of Perfect Love. If "by their fruits ye shall know them" is as true in application to religious exercises and ordinances as in its application to individual moral character, (and who can deny it?) then the class-meeting would seem to be second to no other among all prudential means of grace in helpfulness and value.

Nor should the value of the class-meeting as a means of church discipline be overlooked. Wesley was as remarkable for efficiency in discipline as he was for skill in organization. From the beginning he "recognized," says Dr. Dobbin, as quoted by Tyerman, "the scriptural distinction between the Church and the world. The men who possessed religion, and the men who possessed it not, were not for a moment confounded. They might be neighbors in locality, and friends in good will; but they were wide as the poles asunder in sentiment. The quick and the dead may be placed side by side; but no one can, for ever so short a period, mistake dead flesh for living fiber. The church and the churchyard are close by, but the worshippers in the one and the dwellers in the other are as unlike as two worlds can make them. The circle within the circle, the company of the converted, Wesley always distinguished from the mass of mankind, and made special provisions for their edification in all his organisms." [8]

As we have already seen, he was looking for some way to keep his society purged of dead branches, and was sorely oppressed by the ineffectiveness of all other means tried to keep out unworthy applicants, and to detect and put away those already in his various assemblies who departed from the way of righteousness and would not be reproved, when the institution of class-meetings for economic purposes disclosed to him the very thing he had been looking for. His system of class-leaders and superintendents was at once decided upon, and thereby he introduced a method of disciplinary oversight and regulation which has never been excelled as a measure for prompt, simple and effective administration of wholesome church discipline toward those who, by

negligence and disorderly walking, dishonor Christ and tend to infect with their own plague the whole body of which they form a part.

There was need, too, among the early Methodists for just such simple and vigorous discipline as this system provided. Good as they were generally, they were not all good. "Then as now some were defective in their attendance at the weekly class," says Mr. Tyerman. "In certain instances . . . some were guilty of the crime of smuggling. Others, in moderation, were addicted to taking drams, and others opium; and it often happened that the oldest societies were the worst offenders. In 1776 both London and Newcastle were thus tainted; and Wesley was determined, with a strong hand, to purge them." <sup>[9]</sup> This work he enjoined upon Joseph Benson, then stationed at Newcastle, in one of the most vigorous of all his admonitory letters, but which is too long to be quoted here. Benson expelled a smuggler, and Wesley wrote, in strongest terms and at some length, commending him for his promptness and firmness, and insisting that he must "tear up this evil by the roots." The class-meeting, with its responsible personal oversight of the individual members by the leader, was the means by which offenders were most readily detected, and then called to account by the preacher in charge and required to amend their ways or separate from the society. In some instances Wesley himself took this matter in hand, saying, "I will either mend or end them," and excluded unworthy members at the rate of dozens and scores at a time from some of his societies. In all subsequent Methodist history the class-meeting has been an invaluable aid to the administration of wholesome discipline in the church.

"It is not claiming too much," says Dr. O. P. Fitzgerald, "to say that to the class-meeting Methodism was indebted more than to any other agency for the vigor of its discipline, the purity of its membership, and the permanence of its acquisitions. It was at once a means of grace and a test of sincerity. It made every class-leader a drill-sergeant in the army of the Lord. By it the church recovered its lost gift of utterance, and where surplined [surplice n. a loose white linen vestment reaching the knees, worn over a cassock by clergy and choristers at services. — Oxford Dict.] state stipendiaries [hirelings] had mumbled printed prayers to sleeping auditors or empty benches, the voices of tens of thousands of men and women, rejoicing in the liberty wherewith they had been made free, were heard telling the wonderful things of God. As in apostolic days, believers exhorted, comforted and edified one another. It was a resurrection of apostolic power and the restoration of apostolic usages." <sup>[10]</sup>

Unspeakably great, then, are the benefits that have accrued to the Church through the institution of class-meetings. Nor has the time come when such meetings should be superannuated or declared out of date. Methodism can never dispense with them and still be Methodism. They are an integral part of its life and effectiveness. Moreover, if Methodism needs the class-meeting it is because individual Methodists in all branches of the Methodist family need it. Upon their fidelity to it and to its claims upon them largely depend the freshness, vigor and fruitfulness of their Christian experience. In its holy and helpful fellowship they should find a most congenial, spiritual sphere of activity, development and fruitfulness, and, "speaking the truth in love, grow up into Him in all things who is the Head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:1, 16).

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 6**

#### **OBLIGATIONS**

Church membership always carries with it obligations and responsibilities. No one has the right to partake the benefits of religious association and organization without helping, according as ability has been given, in bearing the burdens and furthering the ends of the organization with which he is connected. But, alas! how many there are in all ecclesiastical bodies who seem to feel little or no responsibility in these directions. They sing,

"Help us to help each other, Lord,  
Each other's cross to bear:  
Let each his friendly aid afford,  
And feel his brother's care,"

and then go their way to live as indifferently in regard to the burdens and crosses their brethren are daily bearing as if they themselves were so many heathen men and women. Their doctrine, when reduced to practice, is largely that of Cain, who summed up his ethical code in the single question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

These things ought not so to be, in any religious organization, and especially among the people who are called Methodists. They, above all others, should obey the injunction, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Above all others they should compel the unbelieving world to say, "See how these Christians love one another." We who belong to various departments in the great army of Methodism are bound by peculiar ties and obligations to be loyal, and in every possible way helpful, to the body we represent, and to all who are associated with us therein. We are called, not only to declare the doctrine, but to exhibit the grace, of "Perfect Love." Unless we are sensible of and faithful to the obligations resting upon us as a people called "to spread scriptural holiness over the land," we shall give objectors to the doctrine and experience we seek to promote the right to challenge us as to our calling, profession and experience, and to say of us, "What do they more than others?"

There are peculiar obligations upon all members of Methodist churches in their relation to the class-meeting. It has already been noted that the class-meeting was the germinal form of religious association and worship from which Methodism as a whole was developed, and that no other one thing connected with the Methodist movement from the beginning has sustained a more vital relation to the general welfare of the various Methodist bodies in every way than this; also that its relation to the spirituality and efficiency of the church is of as vital importance today as ever. In view of these facts none of us can be indifferent to the class-meeting, or willingly neglectful of it, and at the same time be loyal to the church and faithful to the obligations we voluntarily assumed in uniting with it. Whether, as in English Methodism, attendance upon the class-meeting is a condition of membership



in the church, or, as in most branches of American Methodism, attendance is less compulsory, makes no real difference. The moral obligation is upon every member to attend class and contribute in every way possible to the success of the work for which the class exists, and for which class-meetings are held.

Particularly, every member of a class is under obligation, both natural and moral, to co-operate with the Leader and other members in advancing the spirituality of the class, and of the church as a whole. This is the chief end for which classes, as known in Methodist economy, exist, and have existed from the beginning. The culture of the spiritual life is their fundamental idea. They minister to this end in many ways, but chiefly through promoting "that fellowship of the Spirit" which is absolutely essential to any high degree of individual or collective spiritual life. We are all so constituted that we can not live on high spiritual planes in isolation from our brethren in Christ. Communion with God is enhanced through communion with His people. "I believe in the communion of saints" is a part of the creed of all Christians. It is said that a girl, being catechized by an English clergyman, was asked, "What is the communion of saints?" and astonished him greatly by answering, "A Methodist class-meeting, sir." The girl was right, provided the class-meeting be one of the genuine kind. A good class-meeting affords a means of such inspiring and helpful communion among brethren as makes it a kind of foretaste of heaven.

"Mid scenes of confusion and creature complaints,  
How sweet to the soul is communion with saints!  
To find at the banquet of mercy there's room,  
And feel in the presence of Jesus at home."

"Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do" (1 Thess. 5:11). "This language of St. Paul is good authority for the class-meeting," says the Rev. John Atkinson, M. A: "for that is simply a means by which the end he proposes is secured. It is a regular and very available method for mutual comforting and edifying. It makes this the specific work once at least, each week, of the members of the church." <sup>[11]</sup>

Quite in line with this is the following also from Coke and Asbury in their "Notes on the Discipline," as quoted by Mr. Atkinson: "Christian fellowship cannot be carried on to any considerable advantage without stated times of assembling. The meetings held for this purpose must have a name to distinguish them. We call ours class-meetings. Here we must notice that it is the thing itself, Christian fellowship, and not the name which we contend for."

The class-meeting exists for purposes of mutual instruction, comfort and edification. These ends require faithful attendance, and also constant co-operation on the part of all the members. No matter how wise, holy, and untiring in his labors the Leader may be, he cannot make his class and class-meetings what they should be without the hearty and continued interest and help of his members. Nor can faithfulness on the part of some of the members so far make up for the negligence of others that the church and work as a whole will not suffer from the dereliction of the negligent ones. We can fulfill our obligations to the class-meeting only as we "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27).

It is the duty of the members to co-operate with the leader and with one another not only in the class-meeting exercises, but also in the way of doing all they can outside of the class-meeting for the awakening of interest in the work. In the ideal class, leader and members are all constantly working for the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of believers; in ministrations to the poor, the sick, the troubled, the sorrowing; in untiring efforts to build up the church as a whole, and to increase its power and fruitfulness as an evangelizing agency. Along all these and many other lines the individual members of every class not only may, but should, devote themselves, so far as circumstances will allow, to earnest and prayerful service for Christ and His Church. They should be "all at it, and always at it." The members should not only attend class and take a lively part in its exercises, but should invite others, especially those who are desirous to flee from the wrath to come and such as are groaning to be made perfect in love, to attend, and should do all in their power to make the leader acquainted with such cases and enable him to minister to them wisely and helpfully. "Let him that heareth say, Come."

Then, too, there are financial obligations upon every member of a class which none can honorably ignore. We have already noted how, in the beginning, class-meetings were established as an economic measure, and how, in their later history, they have been a means of distributing the financial burdens incident to the great work of Methodism among the entire membership of the church more evenly than could as well be done otherwise. While nurture of the spiritual life is the more important end for which class-meetings are now held, they are still important channels through which the church's treasury is to be replenished, and every member is under obligation to pay his or her "class-money" regularly, in weekly, monthly or quarterly installments, as may be best suited to each one's circumstances. To ignore this obligation is not only to be disloyal to the class and church, but to suffer grievous spiritual loss as well.

"Now concerning the collection for the saints, . . . upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come," was Paul's advice to the Corinthian church, and the class-meeting affords one of the best means ever devised for carrying out both the spirit and letter of this apostolic direction.

We close this chapter with the following extract from Mr. Wesley's pen, showing how he looked upon the obligations of those belonging to the early Methodist classes, and also how he endeavored to enforce observance of those obligations:

"Whoever misses his class thrice together thereby excludes himself; and the preacher that comes next ought to put out his name. I wish you would consider this. Halt not between two. Meet the brethren or leave them. It is not honest to profess yourself of a society, and not observe the rules of it. Be therefore consistent with yourself. Never miss your class till you miss it for good and all. And when you meet it, be merciful [liberal] after your power; give as God enables you. If you are not in pressing want, give something, and you will be no poorer for it. Grudge not, fear not; lend unto the Lord, and He will surely repay. If you earn but three shillings a week, and give a penny out of it, you will never want. But I do not say this to you who have ten or fifteen shillings a week, and give only a penny! To see this has often grieved my spirit. I have been ashamed for you, if you have not been ashamed for yourself. Why, by the same rule that you give a penny, that poor man should give a pepper-corn. Oh, be ashamed before God and man! Be not straitened in your own bowels. Give in

proportion to your substance. You can better afford a shilling than he a penny. This is more to him than that to you. Open your eyes, your heart, your hand. If this one rule was observed, throughout England, we should need no other collection. It would soon form a stock sufficient to relieve all that want, and to answer all occasions. Many of these occasions are now exceeding pressing, and we are nowise able to answer them; so that the cause of God suffers, and the children of God, and that without remedy." <sup>[12]</sup>

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 7**

#### **DECLINE**

The questions we are forced to consider today relative to the decline and revival of the class-meeting are not by any means new problems in Methodism. One hundred and forty-seven years ago the same problems were subjects of serious discussion, and in a Methodist conference over which John Wesley himself presided the question was raised, "Can anything be done to make the classes more lively and profitable?" "More than fifty years ago John Miley lamented the disposition of the church to turn from the class-meeting and the failure to appreciate its advantages." <sup>[12]</sup> Near thirty years ago Daniel Wise wrote: "That there is a tendency, more or less decided, throughout Methodism to suffer the class-meeting to sink into neglect, it were folly to deny." <sup>[13]</sup>

"The class-meeting, like the church itself," says Mr. Goodell, "has had its revival and declension; but in spite of all efforts to abolish it or to provide for it a substitute it still holds its place, second to none, as a means of grace in the development of noble Christian character."

The decline of the class-meeting always indicates the decline of the church in spiritual life, power and fruitfulness. Whenever the church's pulse beats high with revival intensity you will always find the class-meeting well attended. Whenever the ecclesiastical pulse is spiritually feeble, interest in the class-meeting will be found at ebbtide.

That the class-meeting as now known has seriously declined in the chief body of American Methodism is acknowledged by the Bishops of that body in their "Episcopal Address to Class-Leaders," delivered at the General Conference of 1892, in which they say:

"We cannot look upon the decline of class-meetings without profound concern . . . We sadly admit that no such proportion of our people are regular class-goers as formerly, and that in some places class-meetings have entirely died out or have been displaced by other forms of service, which cannot accomplish the purposes in view. To this fact, in large part, we attribute the increase in the numbers of unspiritual church members, the presence of worldliness in the church, and the lack of more numerous, searching and sweeping revivals. We do not forget that circumstances change, and that incidental phenomena of religious awakening and reformation may be expected to differ from age to age; but it seems to us certain that if the great mass of the members of our churches should meet once a week in class-meetings under competent leaders, who should, as the Discipline directs, '(1) inquire how their souls prosper; (2) advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as the occasion may require,' the essential glory of early Methodism would burst forth anew on every hand; and awe-struck communities would be constrained to say, 'Surely the Lord hath visited His people.'"

Nor is this decline of the class-meeting confined to the foregoing branch of Methodism alone; it appears to be in greater or less degree, true of all the lesser divisions of Methodism as well. That

decline has undoubtedly been exaggerated by some, but it is nevertheless true that the Methodisms of today differ much from Methodism of the primitive type in respect to the life, power, and effectiveness of their class-meetings. This is an evil omen, and it is well that the more thoughtful and influential among the leaders of universal Methodism are awaking to its significance, sounding the alarm, and endeavoring to recall their people to a loftier estimate of and a more faithful attendance upon this precious but much neglected means of grace.

"Neglect of Christian fellowship is an unfailing symptom of the loss of Christian zeal," says Dr. Fitzgerald. "The empty seats at the weekly prayer-meeting are a valid indictment against the absentees. The class-meeting, as it is more directly a searcher of the heart and a revealer of its tendency, while it will be sought by the spiritually-minded, will more surely be shunned by the backslidden and the backsliding. Coetaneous with the decline of the class-meeting there was visible increase of worldliness in the church and laxity in its discipline. The doctrinal standard was lowered, and the practice of the church sunk with it. A cloud of witnesses, living and dead, testify to this fact. When the theater, the ball, and the card-table came in, the class-meeting went out. When the world filled the thoughts of the people they could not be expected to meet to talk about religion.

"As the class-meeting was the normal outgrowth of revived New Testament Christianity, so when that revival ebbed it was left stranded on the sands of worldliness. The day of elegant, written pulpit essays, quartet choirs, and frigid gentility had come, and that of the class-meeting was past. A heaven-kindled light was smothered. The voice of a witnessing church was hushed. But not wholly was the light quenched, or the voice silenced. The holy fire still continued to burn here and there, and living voices, refusing to be gagged, testified of the grace of God, and exhorted, comforted, and edified His people. The class-meeting did not die. It never will die. But it has had a long sickness, and has suffered at the hands of its friends as well as its enemies."

If Methodism in any of its branches would see a genuine revival of religion, would awaken her membership to renew their consecration vows, put on the beautiful garments of holiness, and go forth "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners," to fight the battles of their King and make this sin-cursed world radiant with "the beauty of holiness," then let her class-meeting fires be kindled to a white heat as in the former times, and her class-meeting services made jubilant as in days of yore with songs and shouts of holy victory. Here is the hiding of her power.

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 8**

### **REVIVAL**

While the previous chapter presents a somewhat depressing view of the present-day class-meeting, it is not meant to be a pessimistic view. Notwithstanding the fact of decline respecting interest in and the effectiveness of the modern class-meeting, there is much to inspire hope as to the future of this once strong "right arm of Methodism." The very fact that its decline is so extensively recognized and lamented by the more devout and thoughtful in all branches of the Methodist family is encouraging. When godly men and women generally perceive and sigh over the desolations of Zion it betokens the approaching dawn of a brighter day.

Within the past twenty years [Hogue copyrighted this work in 1907 and it was probably written about the same time, making the period of time to which he refers approximately 1887 to 1907. — DVM] there has been a manifest quickening of interest in the subject of class-meetings. The parent Methodist body in this country in particular has come to recognize more fully perhaps than ever before that decline of the class-meeting means paralysis of her own "right arm" — a paralysis too which will spread over the whole body unless arrested in its progress and overcome in its chief center of operation. Spiritual men throughout all branches of Methodism also are coming to realize that something must be done to restore the class-meeting to its former position of prestige and power in the church, if the church would not lamentably fail of fulfilling the high destiny to which Methodism was called in the beginning. Decline of the class-meeting and the decline of Methodism in spiritual power and glory always go together, and proceed with equal pace. Revival of the class-meeting and the revival of Methodism in spiritual life and power, and as an evangelizing agency, are also equally inseparable.

Regarding the tokens of reviving interest in this invaluable means of grace within the Methodist Episcopal Church of this country, and also throughout European Methodism. "The Drill-Master of Methodism" contains the following: "Indeed, there are indications all about us of a great quickness of interest on the part of pastors, leaders and members. Class-meeting conventions are almost a new thing in Methodism, but they are being held throughout the country, east and west, north and south. Requests have come to the writer from almost every state in the Union, asking him to make addresses or to send literature which may be helpful in stimulating interest in this historic means of grace. In a recent number of the Methodist Review Bishop Vincent gives a most interesting report of the October conventions which were held at his suggestions throughout Europe. More than a thousand of these conventions were held and many thousands of the laity took part in them. The subject of class-meetings was the first of four topics named for discussion. Bishop Vincent says: 'One is glad to know that the class-meeting in Continental Methodism is still a most important factor, and that in English Methodism, thanks very largely to the wisdom and breadth and vigor of ex-President Hugh Price Hughes and the Methodist Times, it is experiencing a genuine and we trust

a permanent revival. For we may be sure that Methodism of the true type goes up or down with the growth or deterioration of the the class-meeting. <sup>[14]</sup>

These tokens of reviving interest in the class-meeting should be an occasion of reviving hope and joy on the part of God's people. Let all beware, however, of taking too much for granted in this matter. Practically the stimulation of new interest is but just begun; and, unless the efforts now putting forth to rejuvenate this time-honored means of grace shall become general and persistent, a relapse will soon occur, and the last state of decline will be worse than the first. A solemn obligation rests upon pastors, leaders and all members of the church, to contribute as much as in them lies to the permanent restoration of the class-meeting to its former prominence and effectiveness. Let pastors and leaders in particular read and ponder well the conclusions reached by Wesley and his brethren when, in conference assembled, they prayerfully and carefully discussed the question, "Can anything further be done, in order to make the meetings of the classes lively and profitable?" <sup>[15]</sup> Then, having become suitably impressed and newly inspired themselves, let them with all possible haste and earnestness go forth to impress these things upon their classes and societies, and to inspire in all a burning and holy enthusiasm for this historic and time-honored means of grace.

In this way the fires of primitive Methodism may be everywhere rekindled and made to glow with more than their primitive intensity, and the class-meeting may be made again the arsenal of Methodism, from whence, in the full panoply of heaven, Methodists will go forth to fight the battles of their King and win victories that will make hell to tremble and heaven and earth to hold joint jubilee.

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 9**

### **PASTORS**

The men in the church most responsible for the success or failure of the class-meeting are its pastors. Let these rightly estimate the importance of this means of grace, and devote themselves to the task of rendering it in the highest possible degree effective, as did Wesley and the early Methodist preachers generally, and there is no power that can defeat its usefulness or cause it seriously to decline in the esteem of spiritual or sensible people. But let the pastors become indifferent to the class-meeting, manifesting no very great interest in it, and although they may still hold it in some degree of esteem or veneration for its historic character and former usefulness, it will soon sicken, go into decline, and finally die. In such a case the proper form of death certificate would be, "Died for lack of pastoral interest and oversight."

The pastor must be held responsible above all others for the classes on his charge, inasmuch as the church Discipline makes him the proper organizer of classes, places at his disposal the assignment of members to the classes in which they are to hold membership, gives him in some bodies the appointment, and in others the nomination, of the leaders, requires him to examine the leaders with respect to their methods and usefulness, and to see that improper leaders are exchanged for those who are more wise, holy and efficient; and gives him a general authority over the classes transcending that of all others with respect to all that makes for or against their greatest spiritual efficiency. While he is not the leader, he is the pastor of the classes, and as such is also pastor of the leaders, who are themselves his assistants or sub-pastors. In the very nature of the case, therefore, no one else sustains such a responsible and vital relation to the class-meeting and all that makes for its success or failure as the pastor does.

As the leaders of the classes are the pastor's assistants, and also form his advisory cabinet, it is highly important that the pastor should cultivate the most confidential fraternal relation with his leaders, and should seek to be in full sympathy with them in all their responsibilities and labors. He should take a special interest in each one separately, inviting the most confidential expression of the leader's personal religious experience, and of the things that concern and burden him with respect to his class, in order if possible to be the more helpful to him, and he should also take deep interest in them collectively, associating them with himself and one another frequently, with a view to mutual counsel, advice, prayer and fraternal fellowship, so that they all may be enabled to instruct, comfort, encourage and edify one another. Having their confidence and fellowship, he should be able also to be very helpful to them, especially to such as are comparatively inexperienced in the line of work to which they have been appointed, in the way of instructing them as to aims, methods, difficulties and embarrassments in their work. As the leaders are the drill-masters of the church, so the pastor should be, unassumingly and inoffensively, the drill-master of the leaders on his charge.



The pastor should take an interest in all the classes, and, as often as circumstances will allow, should attend their regular meetings. This was almost universally observed in early Methodism, and it was largely the deep personal interest of the preachers in charge of circuits in the class-meeting of that early day, and the holy vigilance with which they watched and labored to keep the class-meeting fires burning intensely, that made those meetings the tremendous power they were in kindling, spreading and perpetuating the Wesleyan revival.

Then, too, the pastor needs the benefit of the class-meeting the same as do his members. He is subject to the same temptations that assail the rest of the human family, and is himself a man of like passions with others. Are they weak? So is he. Are they at times cast down? He likewise. Do they have need at times to confess their faults one to another, and pray one for another, that they may be healed? He is not exempt from this necessity. Do they require repeated quickenings lest, having begun in the Spirit, they should end in the flesh? He must have these repeated quickenings, even as they, else his soul also will soon cleave unto the dust.

Do they need the benefits of a more exclusive Christian fellowship than can be found and cultivated in the larger and more promiscuous crowds that attend upon the public ministry of the word? He can no more thrive in spiritual matters without this means of inspiration and edification than can they. Has he become conscious of dullness, and lack of unction, power and fruitfulness in his pulpit ministrations? Let him not ignore it, but enter the class-room, open his heart candidly to his brethren and sisters, speak out the truth concerning himself with trembling voice and contrite heart, and invite a special season of prayer for himself. Then how that class-meeting will instantly thrill with new life! How others, who have been waiting for such an opportunity to make similar confessions, will humble themselves before God and their brethren, and seek and obtain a fresh anointing with the Holy Spirit! How the preacher's heart will begin to glow with unwonted fervor, and his face to shine, like that of Moses on descending from Mount Sinai, with a reflection of the divine glory! Then will he go forth, with quickened spiritual vision and a tongue of fire, to preach in demonstration of the Spirit and in power, the gospel of a free and full salvation.

"If it is objected that the pastor has no time for this, because of so many other religious and semi-religious duties, we answer that we shall not fear for the class-meeting if the pastor will settle upon his knees the relative spiritual importance of his duties and take them up in their order. It ought to be said that the pastors of the largest churches are also class-leaders. If they can do this with a thousand or more members on their hands, it ought not to be impossible for the average pastor. Hugh Price Hughes gives great credit to the class-meeting for the success of his work, and says there are now fifteen hundred people actually meeting in class in West End, London." [16]

Again, the pastor should awaken and stimulate interest in the class-meeting by publicly explaining the nature and objects of this means of grace, commending it heartily, and urging general and prompt attendance. Many stay away from class because of misapprehension regarding its character. They look upon it as something similar to the Romish confessional where the privacy of personal life is invaded, and where every one present must speak whether so disposed or not. Others regard it as too much of a compulsory affair, and object to it on the ground of its supposed restraint on personal liberty, not having learned its spiritual advantages and to regard attendance upon its exercises in the light of a most valuable spiritual privilege. Let the pastor from time to time seek to remove these

false conceptions regarding the nature and purpose of class-meetings, and he can thereby do much to lift the class-meeting to a higher plane in the public esteem, to interest his people generally in attendance upon its exercises, and to enhance its effectiveness in every way.

Moreover, the pastors should all recognize the value of the class-meeting as a means to completing their own pastoral oversight of those entrusted to their care, and should, as much as possible, seek to magnify its spiritual value in connection with their pastoral visitation. No other public means of grace contributes so directly and so largely to simplifying and facilitating complete and effective pastoral oversight as this. It was the discovery of this fact that made John Wesley's heart rejoice, and led him to make the class-meeting an integral part of all his United Societies. The class-meeting also enables the pastor who has any kind of generalship to utilize all the membership of the church, and all the kinds and grades of talent therein, for whatever requires attention and combined effort in the direction of revival work, evangelistic enterprise, missionary service, and all kinds of charitable and benevolent activities. It is his best field for training all his people, and especially the young, for the various departments of Christian service.

Most earnestly do we appeal on behalf of the class-meeting to the pastors, with whom chiefly is the making or unmaking of this institution as a means of the church's edification in all that makes for holy character and effective service. Through all its history the class-meeting, when properly treated, has proved itself the pastor's best ally. It has been the making of Methodism, and so vital is its relation still to Methodism of the genuine type, that no branch of the great Methodist family can ever disregard it or treat it lightly with impunity. Every pastor throughout universal Methodism who would prove himself a loyal Methodist should place a lofty estimate upon the class-meeting, seek to inspire a like conception of it in his people, and exert himself in every possible way to invest it with its primitive dignity and effectiveness.

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 10**

### **LEADERS**

The office of class-leader is a unique feature of Methodist economy. It came into being as a natural product of the evolution of the class-meeting. There might have been such a thing as the class-meeting without the lay class-leader, but it would never have answered the purpose for which class-meetings are now maintained. By the employment of lay leaders the church's advantages for the spiritual oversight, discipline and edification of her membership have been greatly multiplied, and the results of preaching and pastoral service on the part of her regular ministers have been remarkably augmented and conserved. It is said that there are about thirty thousand class-leaders in the Methodist Episcopal Church alone. If this be correct, as it undoubtedly is, the total number of class-leaders in all the Methodisms of this country must aggregate in the neighborhood of fifty thousand. What an army of men to be weekly employed in supplementing the pulpit and pastoral labors of the regular ministers of American Methodism in the way of direct personal oversight of the church's entire membership, and with a view to building them up in holiness and in all that makes for faithful service and effectual witness-bearing!

The office of class-leader is second in importance to that of the pastoral office only. In fact it is a sort of sub-pastorate. If the class-meeting is "the right arm of the church," the class-leader is the right arm of the pastor. Bishops Coke and Asbury, in their Notes on the Discipline of 1777, explicitly say, "Every leader is in some degree a gospel minister," and the bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church have more recently designated the class-leader as a "sub-pastor." <sup>[17]</sup> The class-leaders are the Aarons and Hurs of Methodism, who hold up the prophets' hands while the battle rages and until victory turns on Zion's side. But for their wisdom, faithfulness and self-sacrifice many a siege would end in sad defeat, which, through their fidelity and helpfulness, issues in glorious victory for Christ and the Church. They have ever been, and henceforth must ever be in large degree, the makers of Methodism. Their watch-care and ministry over the entire membership of the church is ever more direct, constant and close than that of the chief pastors, even as the nurse's supervision of her patients in the hospital is more immediate, constant, and in some sense responsible than that of the staff physician or the specialist, as the case may be. "They watch for souls as they that must give an account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief" (Heb. 13:17). They are in an important sense overseers, teachers, guides, helpers, exhorters, comforters and defenders of "the flock of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." To them are applicable in no small degree the following words of Doddridge, with the term pastor's changed to leader's:

"'Tis not a cause of small import  
The Leader's care demands.  
But what might fill an angel's heart,  
And filled a Savior's hands."

From the time when class-meetings were first instituted until the present the function of the class-leader has been twofold: — that of spiritual oversight and of collecting the weekly contributions of his members. While at one time investigating the affairs of the Dublin society Mr. Wesley had occasion to read to the leaders a paper on the nature of their office, a part of which was as follows: "That it may be more easily discerned whether the members of our societies are working out their own salvation, they are divided into little companies called classes. One person in each of these is styled the leader. It is his business, (1) to see each person in his class once a week; to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort them; (2) to receive what they are willing to give toward the expenses of the society; and (3) to meet the assistant <sup>[18]</sup> and the stewards once a week," <sup>[19]</sup> the object of this latter meeting being, as we learn elsewhere, to give in reports as to amounts collected, and as to the spiritual condition of the members of their respective classes.

This is a brief but comprehensive setting forth of the class-leader's duties. The conciseness and simplicity of the statement should not, however, occasion an underestimate of the magnitude of the class-leader's responsibilities. Had he nothing else to do than hold a class-meeting once a week and make and report the required collections, his work would by no means be unimportant; but these are the lesser responsibilities that rest upon him. The unremitting care of the souls entrusted to his immediate supervision; the constant watchfulness, solicitude, prayerfulness and self-denying effort required on his part, in order that he may strengthen the weak, encourage the desponding, confirm the wavering, comfort the sorrowing, restore the erring, discipline the offending, edify all, and, so far as in him lies, "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus;" these are the things that press upon the true class-leader's heart by day and night as the weeks and months, and even years, go by. In course of time the pastors are changed, and lay off the burdens of the particular society which they serve; but, when the pastor goes, the leader stays; and, with each change of pastoral oversight, his burdens, instead of being lightened, are felt to press the heavier upon him. God bless the dear men (and women, too) whom the church has called to this responsible position, and who, in addition to their own domestic and business cares and responsibilities, abide year after year in this responsible and laborious service, discharging faithfully, patiently and effectively the duties it imposes upon them, and that with no hope of other reward than the joy of service here and the Master's "Well done" and "Come, ye blessed," hereafter.

In the very nature of the case so exalted and responsible a work requires certain important qualifications on the part of those who would prosecute it successfully. Not every novice, or every warm-hearted and zealous Christian of mature experience in the church, is qualified for efficient service in this responsible sphere, and an unskilled and blundering class-leader, even with the best of intentions, is likely to do, not only his own class but the whole church, incalculable if not irreparable injury. Let not this fact dishearten any one whom the church may have called to the office of class-leader while inexperienced in the things of God and the church, since God has said, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him" (James 1:5). If there be only a humble and teachable spirit, and a heart filled with the love of God and humanity, out of weakness God can develop strength, and out of apparently unpromising material He can develop "workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." There are, however, qualifications which all who are called to this responsible service in the church should have in some fair degree, in order to their efficiency, and which all may have

in such degree as to render them helpful to the work of God, if they will but know their need and seek in God's way to have that need supplied. To some of these let us now turn attention.

1. The class-leader should in all cases be a spiritual man. Here is a qualification within the reach of all. No one lives on a low spiritual plane from necessity. Walking with God is the privilege of all believers. Living in the Spirit and walking in the Spirit are obligatory upon all. We not only may "be filled with the Spirit," but we are commanded to be so filled. We not only may but we must be holy." It is written, "Be ye holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16); and again: "Follow peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14, R. V.). The chief object of the class-leader's work is that of building up believers in holiness. But how shall he build them up in an experience which he does not have himself? "If the blind lead the blind, shall they not both fall into the ditch?" It has been said that "He who comes from a garden of roses brings their perfume with him." Even so they who walk with God and commune with heaven carry about them a celestial aroma, a savor of the divine, by which men take knowledge of them that they have been with Jesus, and have learned of Him. The class-leader's life should at all times emit this celestial fragrance, this savor of spirituality, in an eminent degree. It is not enough that he be a converted man, who has never backslidden, and who has steadily grown in grace; he ought to be a fully sanctified man, ever going in and out before his class "in the fulness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ," and, yearning for their perfection, and skillful in the word of righteousness, able to bring them "unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Only he who walks with God and lives in daily communion with heaven can effectually compass so great a task as this.

2. The class-leader should also be an intelligent man. This is not saying he ought to be an educated man, although a sanctified education would be a most desirable equipment for such a position. A leader should, however, be a man of at least average intelligence regarding things pertaining to his calling, and particularly regarding the Bible, religious experience, and the culture of the spiritual life. Nor are these qualifications beyond the reach of any upon whom the duties of leadership may be imposed. Though one may be keenly sensible of his deficiencies at the first, and it is probably better that he should be, if he has the right metal in him he can and will go to work, with such aids as he can command, to inform and prepare himself, as Dwight L. Moody did for his evangelistic work, and, in course of a few months, his profiting and development will be apparent to all, so that henceforth he will have no trouble to command the situation. It is not so much the lack of intelligence and preparation, after all, as it is indisposition to seek intelligence and preparation that indicates one's unfitness for the work of a class-leader. Not a few of the men most eminent in this sphere of service have begun with the most limited equipments. Through much prayerfulness, wise counsel, and patient reading and study they became master-workmen in every sense of the word. To others called to this work and feeling their unfitness for it we would say, "Go and do thou likewise."

3. The class-leader should likewise be a judicious man. Many a man of fervent piety and of more than ordinary intelligence lacks sound judgment. He will oftener than otherwise do even right things at the wrong time and in the wrong way. He does not know human nature, and has no tact in managing men and women. He despises all diplomacy. He regards it as a solemn duty to be self-assertive, abrupt, severe and ruthless, especially toward those who may differ from him. He always rubs the wrong way, and thereby stirs up more devils than he can cast out or quiet down. He knows much about war, but nothing about the holy art of peace-making. He can effectually apply the

scourge of law; but knows not how to employ the wondrous lure of love. He can drive, but cannot draw. He can afflict, but cannot comfort, He can wound, but cannot heal. His heart may be warm, but his head is neither correspondingly clear nor cool. He means well, but does ill. He has laudable ends in view, but chooses the most unlikely ways and means to effect the realization of those ends. It is to be feared that his is a hopeless case, since, with respect to all these things, he fancies himself alone in the right, and all his brethren either defective in judgment or sinister and base in motive. Better by far a sensible woman or a judicious youth to lead a class than a man lacking in judgment, tact and versatility.

4. The class-leader should be an optimistic and an enthusiastic man. Optimism is a disposition to look at the bright side of life, and enthusiasm is used in the sense of earnestness, ardor, fervency, zeal, for either a person or a cause, or for both. These are everywhere essential qualities of good leadership. Neither in politics, state-craft, war, commerce, industry, education, morals or religion do men who are lacking them rise to eminence as leaders of their fellow men, or as the educators of public opinion. Pessimism is as contagious as smallpox or yellow fever. One discouraged general can spread his own infection through a whole regiment, and turn what might have been a splendid victory into an inglorious retreat and a national disaster. Optimism and enthusiasm are also contagious. "Little Phil" Sheridan, riding as on the wings of the wind from "Winchester, twenty miles away," meets the retreating Union forces, and with hopeful countenance, waving hand and cheering voice inspires them all with his own optimistic and enthusiastic spirit, turns them back, and leads them on to an immortal conquest. Here is a lesson for class-leaders. Let them live on the bright side of life, cultivate a cheerful heart, a sunny countenance, an inspiring tone and an enthusiastic spirit and manner; let them live in the realm of praise, and always meet and dismiss their classes with benedictions and hallelujahs on their lips; let them everywhere exhibit and inspire courage, hopefulness and enthusiasm, and they will seldom want for a full class or mourn over dull meetings.

5. The class-leader should be a laborious man. This is said more particularly with reference to the Lord's work, although it applies also to his general activities. As leader of his class he should both exhibit and inspire the working spirit. This of course means that he is to be deeply interested in all the work of the church, and in Christian work in general. As the "drill-master" of his class it is one of his important functions to train them for service. He can not do this except by going before them, and leading them into those fields where they are most needed and may serve to the best advantage. Were a leader to be the very personification of faithfulness in all that pertains to his obligations to the class, and then take little or no interest in getting to the weekly prayer-meetings, attending and helping in the special revival services, or with reference to the Sunday School, the home and foreign missionary work, and the various benevolences and temporalities of the church, he would very largely fail of answering the end of the class-leader's calling. No church of today can live and grow except it be in the most emphatic sense a working church; and in all Methodist churches a chief part of the responsibility for training the members to work, and for inspiring in them the working spirit, rests upon the class-leaders. They who fail to see and appreciate this, miss very largely both the end and opportunity of their calling.

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15:58).

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 11**

#### **PROBLEMS**

There are and always have been problems connected with the maintenance of class-meetings which are more or less difficult, though never impossible of solution. As we have already had occasion to note, Mr. Wesley himself had to deal with questions that were perplexing and embarrassing in the institution and development of this feature of his work. Problems similar and dissimilar to those which occupied Mr. Wesley's attention have arisen in connection with class-meeting history in every generation since. Many of the present-day problems are principally of a local character, while others are more or less the occasions of general embarrassment. Only those of a more general character will be considered here. They are as follows:

1. How may pastors be brought into more constant and helpful touch with the class-meeting? We have already observed that the class-meeting can never be made to serve the end for which it was instituted without the hearty support of the pastors. But in the practical working of the Methodist economy today we are face to face with the fact that many pastors are seriously derelict regarding this matter. Some of them have never appreciated the importance of this means of grace; and others, who have for a time striven to make it what it ought to be, have yielded too easily to discouragement, and seem finally to have become altogether pessimistic regarding it. Making allowance for some whose circuit work is so arranged that they cannot give the class-meeting the personal attention they would be glad to give it if they could, we suspect pastoral delinquency in this matter is generally due either to a lack of religious experience or to lack of sympathy with the economy and polity of Methodism. If such pastors as are indifferent through lack of spirituality would be honest enough to fulfill their duty in attending the class-meeting, and seeking to make it what it was designed to be, this itself would very likely be a means of quickening them into spiritual life, and so of making them not only more helpful to the class, but also more helpful to the church as a whole. This is the end to be sought in all such cases, and if sought properly no doubt the end could in many cases be realized.

With reference to that class of preachers who are indifferent through disbelieving in Methodism, or in this particular part of it, Bishop Vincent, as quoted by Goodell, says: "The pastor must believe in the class-meeting, its possibilities and the secret of its efficiency. He must accept the teaching of the Discipline . . . If he does not have this measure of faith in the class, he should seek a place in the ministry outside of Methodism. Our success imperatively demands the acceptance and appreciation of the Methodist theory on the subject of class-meetings. We should hold conferences with and give systematic instruction to the class-leaders, expounding the Discipline and lecturing to them on such subjects as 'The Care of Souls,' 'The Use of the Bible in Spiritual Guidance,' 'The Ways of the Spirit in the Inner Life,' etc., etc. The pastor should cultivate a class enthusiasm, visiting each class occasionally, inviting them to his own house, administering to each class at least once a year the holy sacrament, and using that opportunity for exhorting them to a more perfect consecration of themselves, their children and their property to the service of God." [20]

In order that the pastor may feel wholly unembarrassed in fulfilling such ministries as these to the leaders and their classes, it would be well for all leaders to cultivate the most confidential relations with their pastors respecting all that pertains to the interests of their classes, and most cordially invite their aid in the respects indicated by Bishop Vincent. Such invitations, especially if seconded by the class-members, would seldom be declined. We have known instances, be it said with regret, where such invitations were not only not given, but where leaders have assumed that the pastor's presence in the class was almost a matter to be regarded with suspicion, and have pursued a course not designed to make the pastor feel very welcome. This is a serious error of judgment on the leader's part to say the least.

2. The next problem of the class-meeting has respect to securing competent leaders, and increasing their efficiency after they have been placed in office. Right here let it be said, the ideal leader has never yet appeared, any more than the ideal preacher has appeared, except in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. There have, however, been multitudes of good and efficient leaders, many of whom have been developed from unpromising beginnings. God always has some one somewhere to fill these responsible positions. The pastors and the members need much spiritual discernment in order that they ascertain God's mind in such matters. Perfection should not be demanded, but goodness, piety, consecration and common sense should. Probably there is no society where a few may not be found having these qualities to recommend them. Of the first class-leaders, who were objected to by some as incompetent, Wesley said, "God has blessed their labors in spite of their incompetency." He can do the same still. Let pastors and members unite in seeking "holy men of God," who combine with their religion sound judgment and a cheerful, winning manner, to fill these important offices; and then let pastors and members combine to support them in their work, and to furnish whatever will serve to develop them and increase their efficiency, and under these conditions even such among them as the world calls "unlearned and ignorant men" will prove efficient in a surprising degree. The history of Methodism abounds with instances confirmatory of this statement.

It would be especially helpful in developing able class-leaders in all branches of Methodism if the church at large would do what in some cases has been done: — provide through its general conference, the same as for its local and traveling preachers, a course of study carefully adapted to instructing, inspiring and strengthening its class-leaders for their peculiar and responsible calling. Then, for the benefit of such as might not otherwise be able to command the books of such a course, the individual societies and circuits could maintain at trifling expense a small but choice class-leader's library, from which each leader could draw without cost to himself, if necessary.

3. Another problem of no small importance and perplexity is how to secure the desired co-operation of the members in maintaining class-meeting interest. Two things are absolutely necessary on the part of members in order to the efficiency of any class-meeting; punctual attendance, and enthusiasm for the class and the cause it represents. Neither pastor nor leader, nor yet pastor and leader together, can make a class-meeting a success without practical interest and enthusiasm on the part of the members. They should be able, however, to awaken interest and inspire enthusiasm among the members. One reason why many members stay away from class is that they find nothing attractive, inspiring and helpful when they go. If they go at all, they go from principle only. It is to them a weariness of the flesh, and more a depression than an enlivening of the spirits. The spiritual atmosphere is oppressive, and oftentimes the natural atmosphere is even more



unbearable. The service is monotonous and perfunctory from start to finish. Leader and members both seem relieved when it is over, as some little children are relieved and happy when their morning or evening prayers are ended. These things ought not so to be, Such conditions may and should be overcome.

The personnel of the leader has much to do with awakening and sustaining interest in the class-meeting on the part of the members. If he is personally agreeable and winning, a man whose presence inspires enthusiasm and good cheer, and whose passion for the welfare of all is a consuming flame, he will seldom find himself at class alone, or with half or two-thirds of his members absent. A benignant appearing, elderly gentleman was about to start a Sunday School in a neglected part of a certain city. He made arrangements as to location, room, helpers, etc., and then went out to look up scholars. Coming upon a group of neglected and rude appearing boys he addressed them kindly, told them of his purpose to start a Sunday School and said: "You will come, won't you boys?" "Nope," was their prompt reply. "But we're going to have fine music and singing, and we want you to attend. Now you'll come, will you not?" "Nope," they again replied. The old gentleman tried with several other inducements to secure their promise of attendance, but in vain. He turned away sad and a little discouraged, when one of the boys called after him: "Say, mister!" Turning to see what was wanted, he was surprised to hear the question, "Are you going to be there?" "I am," he replied. "Then we'll come," said the boys. There was something about the old gentleman himself so winning that it captivated every one of those rude boys, where promises of all other kinds of attractions failed. It was his kindly look and manner, and his deep personal interest in their welfare, that won them. And is there not an important practical lesson for every class-leader in this little story?

One way to secure the attendance and interest of members is to take a deep personal interest in them. Call on them and converse and pray with them in a pleasant, genial and helpful way. Invite and urge them to come to the aid of yourself and the rest of the class in the matter of building up a strong class and making it a powerful factor of the church in reviving and supporting the work of God. Do not be easily discouraged, but repeat the experiment often if necessary, in the meantime praying much for the delinquent ones. Forbear threatening and fault-finding in all your visitations, and so deport yourself as to leave a sense of blessing behind you when you have departed. Make the delinquents feel that you are deeply interested in them (something you can by no means do unless your interest in them is genuine and deep), and that you need their co-operation greatly in order that you may properly serve the welfare of the church and work of God in the office you have been called to fill. A few months of this kind of patient, persistent, prayerful effort, and the leader will be surprised at his own spiritual improvement and at the new hold he has acquired upon his members, and the new interest he has awakened in his class-meeting exercises.

Then, too, the leader who would sustain interest in the class-meeting must make its exercises spiritually attractive and helpful to those who attend. Set out your dish of honey and the bees will soon be present to lade themselves with its sweetness. Lead the way to green, sweet pastures, and the sheep will instinctively follow you thither. Make every class-meeting an exhilarating feast of divine love and holy joy, and neither pressing work, engaging company, bodily weariness nor inclement weather will often keep your members from this precious means of grace. People seldom tire of going where they get something of real worth. But to give one's members something worth

going after fifty-two times in the year will require much thought, reading, prayer and conference with spiritually-minded people, as also repeated anointings with the Holy Spirit, on the leader's part, and will also require versatility, and freedom from all monotonous, humdrum and stereotyped methods of leading and measures for sustaining and promoting interest. It will be specially helpful in the way of securing constant co-operation for the leader to regard his class as an organization for Christian work, and to exercise a wise generalship over it in this respect, giving everybody something to do for others and in the interest of the general work of God, and helping to train them for efficiency in the respective lines of work assigned them.

Moreover, the wise leader will always seek to associate his pastor with him in all these efforts to awaken and sustain interest among his members in the class-meeting. It often works well for pastor and leader to visit the members of each class together, in endeavoring to awaken fresh interest in the class-meeting exercises and to secure more uniform and punctual attendance. If this be done in a spirit of true enthusiasm, that enthusiasm will be likely to spread like a contagion among the members visited. As fire is kindled from fire, so enthusiasm must be kindled from enthusiasm. Moreover, it is written in our Lord's own words, "That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." (Matt. 18:19). As they go about this work let the pastor and leader plead the divine promise, and see if God will not fulfill it unto them most graciously in the revival of interest and co-operation among their members relative to the class-meeting and all other interests of the work of God.

4. Another problem, and one of no little perplexity in some places, grows out of the existence of conflicting views and preferences among members as to the character of the class-meeting exercise. There are those in most societies, and in some societies they are not a few, who are opposed to any deviation in methods and measures from the customs of the most primitive days of class-meeting history. In extreme devotion to the antiquity of modes and customs in religion, they would retain the old and reject the new, however ill-adapted the one and well-adapted the other might be to changed conditions and circumstances. Such must in patience be taught the lesson conveyed by Lowell when he wrote:

"New occasions teach new duties,  
Time makes ancient good uncouth;  
He must upward still and onward  
Who would keep abreast of truth."

Others are equally as impatient of all that is not strictly "modern," "up to date," etc. They would banish from the class-meeting all semblance of its primitive character, and make it strictly an elite, twentieth-century affair. A judicious leader will side with neither of these classes, but will endeavor with sanctified tact to keep his class-meeting conformed to all that is essential to spiritual effectiveness and adapted to modern conditions and needs.

5. A final problem to be considered relates to fixing upon a suitable time for holding the class-meeting service. Churches are more complex in their organization than they were before the days of Sunday Schools, Young People's Meetings, Missionary Societies, etc., and these multiplied organizations must each and all have their own set time for assembling and doing the work for which

they came into being. The tendency is for them to encroach upon the time of one another. Because of this tendency sometimes one of these divisions of the church organization suffers and sometimes another. Sometimes the class-meeting is practically crowded out, and sometimes the Sunday School has to be deprived of all chance to live and grow. Now, there is no one unvarying rule for the solution of such problems as these. As a rule the pastor and officials of the church can, with a little deliberation, fix upon the relative importance of these various interests, and advise an order for the weekly sessions of each subordinate organization, such as will best serve the interests of the whole work and commend itself to the acceptance of the church or society as a whole.

When such an order has been arranged and the majority of the society have accepted it, it is not becoming for the few who might prefer a different order to set themselves in opposition to it and either make trouble or become indifferent or disaffected, simply because their convenience and preference were not consulted and allowed to weigh over the opinions and wishes of the majority. All should be ready, willing and glad to make any concession of personal preference or interest in their power for what the majority of the brethren judge to be for the best interests of the work of God as a whole. When a member will not attend class, who could, simply because the class-meeting is held before preaching, after preaching, Sunday morning, Sunday noon, Sunday night, or on a week night, while he or she would prefer it to be held some other time, that member is more distinguished for self-will and obstinacy than for grace and saintliness. A better way is to observe the law of self-denying, brotherly love. "Let us, therefore, follow after the things which make for peace, and the things wherewith one may edify another" (Rom. 14:19).

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 12**

### **METHODS**

With class-leading, as with preaching, the way of doing the thing has much to do with its success or failure. Some have no method, make no preparation, aim at nothing in particular, and accomplish what they aim at. In the absence of aim and method most any kind of disjointed, ranting, rambling self-exploitation, of unseemly and offensive trifling with sacred things, or of rash, rabid, and rasping denunciation is likely to be foisted upon those present, to the wounding of the weak, the revolting of the more intelligent, the grieving of the Holy Spirit, and the dishonor of God's cause. The class-leader who would be successful in his calling must learn to do the right thing at the right time and in the right way.

In the first place, a wise leader will devote at least some time to special preparation for each service he is to conduct. "For a class-leader to go to his class without special preparation is an impertinence in the sight of God, and he is equally to be blamed with that preacher who presumes to enter his pulpit unprepared. To say that one has only to open his mouth and God will fill it, and to apply it to the regular ministry of the class-leader, is to utterly misapprehend the responsibility of the individual. Every great triumph in the life of Jesus came after great preparation alone with God for nights or weeks. The victory over the devil comes after forty days of solitary prayer. The Transfiguration comes after prayer has worked its transformation. For Moses, Paul, Luther, Bunyan, Wesley, years of preparation in the Arabian Desert, lonely Bedford jail, and meditation in city and wilderness. No great thing was ever done for God or man without ample preparation." <sup>[21]</sup>

A class-leader who is worthy of his calling will be always studying and endeavoring to prepare himself for greater efficiency in the spiritual guidance and development of those entrusted to his supervision. The burden of his work will compel him to think, meditate, study, pray, and seek by all available means to perfect himself, so far as possible, for winning souls to Christ, and for building up believers in holiness. All such preparation, however, is more or less general, while what is contended for now is a special waiting upon God in prayer, meditation, searching of the Scriptures, looking up of lessons, hymns, etc., for a little season preparatory to each particular service. The leader should come into his class fresh from communing with God in his closet, quickened and inspired by some particular portion of God's word upon which he has been musing until the fire burned within him, and with numerous passages of scripture, hymns, and fragments of hymns at his command, to be used for purposes of doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness, or for exhortation, edification and comfort, as the cases of his members may severally require. For lack of such special preparation on the part of the leader many a class-meeting has been either spiritless and dull on the one hand — an almost intolerable bore to those present — or, on the other hand, has drifted into unprofitable, if not positively injurious, disputation and exploitation of personal conceits and crotchets. The class-meeting is generally what the leader makes it, and no leader can make a class-meeting what it ought to be without much of both general and special preparation.

If it be objected to this that class-leaders are generally laymen, and are too busy with the secularities of life to admit of their giving the requisite amount of time to preparation for class-leading, it may be answered that Christians, whether preachers or laymen, have no right to become so engrossed in business that they are unable as a rule to devote a reasonable amount of time to preparation for and attendance upon the social means of grace. "Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord;" is the New Testament rule in this matter; and, on the whole, those who observe this rule, who take time to serve God, take time to be holy, take time to be helpful to others, will prosper most in both spiritual and temporal matters. But if it should require some sacrifice of one's temporal interests, such sacrifice should be cheerfully made in His name who gave Himself for the eternal enrichment of us all.

William Carvosso, that prince among Methodist class-leaders, was wont to feel the burden of his responsibility, until it drove him to wait on God in special spiritual preparation for his class-meeting services, as a divinely called and Spirit-filled preacher of the gospel waits on God for special spiritual preparation before entering the pulpit to declare his solemn message. In Mark Guy Pearse's dialect story of Daniel Quorm, he makes Daniel say: "A leader ought to be a kind o' doctor that can give to each one the prescription he needs; that can deal out his Lord's medicine and make up a strengthening plaster for them as is weak in the back and can't stand very well, and can clap on a stiff blister to them as have caught the fever of worldliness, and can make a pill for sluggish livers, which is the commonest kind o' ailin'."

Again, Daniel, realizing that no man can be such a physician of souls as he thought a class-leader should be, is made to say: "Class-meetings be like awls and needles — they'll go as long as ever you can keep 'em bright; but when they get dull they'll rust, and then it be hard work. We leaders must keep the place bright and cheerful and attractive if we want to keep the members. Why I should every bit as soon think o' goin' to class with the wax and grease on my hands, as soon think o' goin' with my apron on and in my shirt sleeves, as to think o' takin' all my cares and worries. I get away first of all an' lose all my own fears and troubles in the lovin' care of my heavenly Father. I get my own heart put into tune and then the rest'll take the right pitch from me." Here is an invaluable lesson for all class-leaders.

There should be no unvarying methods of conducting the class-meeting. Everybody tires of uniformity and monotony. We do not like it in our dress, nor in our daily meals. Variety is characteristic of life; sameness of death. The one end for which class-meetings are held should never be lost sight of, by leader or members, but that end may be reached by a great diversity of means. It is less likely to be realized by uniformity of method. Hence, other things being equal, that leader will be most successful in his work who is most versatile in respect to methods and expedients for giving freshness, inspiration and helpfulness to his class-meeting exercises.

Of course with reference to the more general features of the class-meeting service there will probably always be a more or less regular order, just as there is with our Sabbath morning and evening services in the churches. But even these need not become stereotyped and formal. In order to avoid it the preparation of which we have been speaking is necessary. A leader who is blessed and filled with the Spirit on entering his class-room will have little difficulty in avoiding monotony. He may, and probably will, announce a hymn, pray, or call on some one in whose piety and judgment

he has confidence to offer the opening prayer, read a scripture passage and comment briefly on it, and then proceed to the more direct work of leading his class; but in all this opening service there will be freedom from dullness, tediousness, conventionality and formalism. The leader will hem his place to greet his members as they arrive, and will greet them each with a refreshing cordiality, and with some word of cheer — a "God bless you," "Praise the Lord," "Hallelujah!" "Look up, brother," "Have faith in God, sister," "Get ready for a blessing, everybody," "God is with us, and we are going to have a season of refreshing from His presence." A few greetings like this, if cordial and in the Spirit, will put everybody in good frame, and generate an atmosphere in which formalism can not abide. Then, in all his opening exercises the wise leader will be brief, pointed and lively. He will not announce a long, dirge-like hymn, read a lengthy and ponderous chapter from those scriptures which are "hard to be understood," pray fifteen minutes, and then harangue his class for half an hour. The leader who does these things is always a bore to his class, and after awhile will have principally empty seats for auditors. All introductory exercises in the class-meeting should be very brief, else the opening ceremonies will leave insufficient time for that which is the chief object of the class-meeting. There is no objection to a class-leader's preaching, provided he does not preach in the class-meeting! He should not ordinarily take up more than ten or fifteen minutes with the entire opening service. If he cannot come within these limits otherwise, let him keep his watch before him, and when he has reached the proper limit, promptly call time on himself.

It is when the introductory exercises are over that the leader's more important work begins. Now he is to deal not only with his class collectively, but with each member of his class separately. "It is the business of a leader," said Wesley, "to see each person in his class once a week at the least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort, as occasion may require; to receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the poor." This in substance is repeated in all the Methodist Disciplines with which the writer is familiar. The things indicated above were at the first done by visiting the members at their homes or places of employment, as Mr. Wesley tells us; but, for reasons heretofore noted, it was later found more expedient that they should all meet in class for these purposes.

The chief object of the class-meeting, therefore, is to afford the leader a favorable opportunity to inquire of each member present regarding his or her spiritual condition, and that with a view to ministering to each in such a way as may be best suited to his or her spiritual advancement and edification. In the very nature of the case, therefore, the class-meeting is not a meeting for preaching, lecturing, speech-making, lengthy exhortation, or for the relation of spiritual biography. In no place is display of oratorical ability more inopportune. The class-meeting was instituted originally, as we have had occasion to note in the chapter on its origin, that those belonging to each class might the more frankly confess their wrongs and shortcomings to one another, the more effectually watch over each other in love, and the more suitably help each other in every way to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. It was understood, desired and agreed on the part of all that belonged to the early Methodist classes that the leader of each class would deal kindly but thoroughly with every member. The usual method was for the leader to address each person separately, asking them to relate in few words their exact spiritual state; to tell of what progress they had made, what conflicts they had encountered, what temptations had beset them, what victories had been gained, what defeats they had suffered, etc., etc. Then the leader was free, and frequently used this freedom, too, to ask each member, in a kindly manner and with a view to helping the member into greater freedom and

usefulness, any questions by which to draw out such information as would better enable him to accomplish the spiritual end in view. In the writer's early Christian experience all the class-meetings he attended were conducted on this method, and he is prepared to testify unqualifiedly of its excellence and helpfulness. Class-meetings were both more helpful and more appreciated by the members when they were places for this kind of plain, honest and faithful personal work on the part of all, than they appear to be where, in these days, they are turned into mere experience meetings or testimony meetings. The old method has scarcely been improved upon for effectiveness in the promotion of spirituality and holy living.

The class-meeting, then, is in a most important sense an inquiry-meeting. The leader neglects a plain and important duty who fails, when dealing with his members in class, "to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort, as occasion may require." This, however, need not and should not be done in any offensive way. Impertinence here would hardly be pardonable. Nor need this duty always be performed in the same way. It is well usually at the beginning to request definiteness, frankness and the utmost honesty of expression as to each one's personal state of experience, and then to be guided by circumstances as to asking personal questions, never asking them as a mere form, never so asking them as to indicate suspicion or captiousness, never pressing a member for an answer publicly who seems embarrassed and unwilling to answer, and never using any but the kindest possible words or indulging any but the kindest possible manner. It is not always necessary to question every member in every meeting, especially if, in the opening of the service, all were asked in a general way for such a statement of their case as the leader desires, or if he has been in personal consultation with any of them outside the class-meeting, and so is already apprised of their condition. As a rule, however it would be well for the leader to call on the members personally for a statement of their case, instead of simply throwing the class-meeting open, as we do our love-feasts, for everybody to speak when and of what they please. In this latter way preaching, speech-making and exhortation are apt to creep in, take up the time, protract the service unduly, and turn the exercises entirely out of the channel of a class-meeting proper.

Occasionally, but only occasionally, it may be well, for variety, for the leader to say after the opening exercises: "Now, brethren and sisters, we will vary the order somewhat for this meeting, and allow you to speak as you feel moved to speak, without being called on; but please remember that the object of the class-meeting will best be realized by talking out your present state just as it is, good, bad or indifferent, and with reasonable brevity; and then after you have all spoken I may take up a few moments with such observations, advices or exhortations as seem to be in place."

Whatever form the class-meeting takes, one of the most desirable things is to avoid all that is stereotyped and monotonous. The utmost freedom of the Spirit on the part of all should be encouraged. All should be urged to follow the moving of the Spirit in respect to singing, praying, praising God, etc., as nothing will more effectually and hopelessly kill a class-meeting than running it according to iron rules, repressing freedom and spontaneity, discouraging expressions of religious joy, discountenancing testimony to full salvation or entire sanctification, and making the service more like a funeral than like a festival of holy love and joy. Spontaneous responses, outbursts of praise, fragments of appropriate song, the utterance of audible ejaculatory prayer — these, if they come in the Spirit, help much to enliven the class-meeting service, and should not be discouraged

or repressed, but rather encouraged, as tending to keep the meeting out of the ruts of dead formality, and as making for the individual and mutual edification of all.

It will sometimes be found helpful for the leader, in the midst of his calling on the members for their testimonies, to change the order, and introduce a brief season of prayer, led either by himself or by some one whom he may designate. This would be especially in place after some one has spoken who is in any kind of trouble, or who has expressed a felt lack in experience and an earnest desire to come at once into a better spiritual state. It would be very encouraging and helpful to the burdened soul, and would at the same time break up anything like monotony and throw new life into the service.

Whatever may be his methods the leader should diligently strive to adapt himself and his instructions to the individual as well as the collective needs of all present. Is there a soul present desirous of fleeing from the wrath to come, but who has not the witness of acceptance with God? The leader should, with much tenderness, wisdom and perseverance, endeavor to bring that soul into peace with God before the service closes. Are there believers present who are deeply hungering and thirsting after full redemption? They should be helped at once to see that now is God's time to sanctify them wholly, and then brought to the point of full surrender, entire consecration, and appropriating faith, which are conditions of full salvation. Are there tried, tempted, or sorrowing ones present, none should feel a deeper, tenderer sympathy for such than the class-leader, who, in the way that best commends itself to his judgment — whether by the reading or quotation of an appropriate scripture passage, the singing of an appropriate verse or hymn, the offering of a few words of comfort, or a commendation of the troubled one's case to God in a few well-chosen words of prayer — should minister to them so helpfully that they can but feel it has been good for them to be there. A leader who can thus adapt himself wisely and helpfully to the various conditions and needs of all who attend his class, will find his class usually well attended, and will also find a joy in such ministrations that will abundantly compensate him for all the toil and sacrifice incident to a faithful class-leader's work.

In a former part of this chapter frankness has been insisted on as the duty of members in stating their condition of heart and life in the class-meeting. There needs to be a return to primitive usage in this respect. This end is sometimes defeated, however, by a practice that is highly censurable among members. It is that of repeating, out of class, and sometimes with unfavorable comment, what a brother or sister has said in class in the way of personal confession, or, it may be, in the way of speaking of things unpleasant to be borne in the home life, and which are hindrances to spiritual progress and freedom. The statements were made without intention to reflect on any one, but simply to get the troubled one's case before the leader and the members with a view of securing helpful sympathy, counsel and prayers. Repeated by some one out of class, and as likely as not before those who are unsaved, what was said innocently and with the best of motives is thereby put in circulation, and, by and by it reaches the ears of parties who suppose their own family secrets have been divulged, and that they themselves have been reflected upon in the class-meeting; and by this means all parties are put to great mortification, and almost irreparable harm is done to the cause of God. It may be that, where all are urged to speak freely and very frankly in class, some one will occasionally drop remarks that are not altogether wise; and it will ever be the part of a skillful leader to reduce the possibility of such risks to a minimum, without at the same time repressing the freedom and



frankness that should be encouraged. Moreover, it should be definitely understood by all that repetition out of class of confessions or statements made in class, particularly when giving currency to such confessions or statements tends to reflect upon or injure the person or friends of the member who first made them, will be regarded as not merely a gross discourtesy, but an offense against a fellow-member, and against the whole class as well, sufficiently grave to warrant disciplinary action against the offender. The leaders and the church must be very strict in such cases, or the class-meeting will be made more injurious than helpful to the work of God.

"Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 13**

### **MISTAKES**

"We learn wisdom from failure much more than from success," says Smiles; "we often discover what will do by finding out what will not do; and probably he who never made a mistake never made a discovery. Horne Tooke used to say of his studies in intellectual philosophy that he had become all the better acquainted with the country through having had the good luck sometimes to lose his way."

We may learn not only from our own mistakes, but from the mistakes of others as well, if we will. Some, however, do not learn the lessons they should, either from their own mistakes or from the mistakes of their fellowmen. They see and acknowledge the errors into which they and others fall, and still run into these very errors over and over again. The worst of all mistakes is to learn nothing from the mistakes one makes. "There is no horse so sure-footed as never to slip," says a French proverb; and even so, there is no man so perfect as never to err. Mistakes occur with all, not excepting even the Pope of Rome, though he is theoretically infallible! Class-leaders have been no more exempt from errors and failures than any other class of men. A good class-leader, however, avoids the mistakes he knows himself and others to have made, and thereby shows himself a man of sense, as well as a man of grace. For the benefit of this class of leaders, and of such as desire to be of this class, we subjoin the following somewhat extended extract, on "Some Mistakes of Class-leaders," from Goodell's "The Drill-Master of Methodism:"

"There can be no greater mistake than for a class-leader to give the fag-end of his time and strength and thought to the class. The work of the class-leader is as distinct a calling as any other in the church of God. He must be able concerning that work to say, 'This one thing I do,' before he will be able to accomplish any great or fitting good. He must look at everything from the standpoint of the class-leader; so will he find grist for his mill. Reading and observation will fill his mind.

"It is a serious mistake for the class leader to crack his whip and ply the lash. He is a leader and not a driver. 'The shepherd goeth before his sheep and calleth them by name and leadeth them out.' Kindness and not severity must rule in thought and life. If severity ever has place it should be like the cut of the surgeon, which is to save life, and should be done with the loving tenderness of a mother.

"It is a mistake for the member to harp on old experiences; it is also a mistake for the leader to employ cast iron methods and stereotyped expressions. Get a new vocabulary. Dress up the truth in new garments. Throw away the threadbare platitudes which were outworn a century ago. 'Experience,' says Gregory, 'is the life-blood of the church, and its unchecked circulation is essential to vigor and effectiveness.' Let the class never lose its distinctive character as a meeting for testimony and experience, but do not think that these are the only things to be conserved.

"Experience becomes of value as it is examined and classified by trained and thoughtful minds. 'Too much is made of doubts and fears, as though these were a part of the Christian's legitimate stock in trade, instead of being really contraband goods to be seized and destroyed in the King's name!'

"Do not mistake a sigh for religious piety or a smile for an agent of the enemy. Even a good laugh may clear the atmosphere of some second-hand solemnity as unhealthful as last Sunday's atmosphere left in the church by a careless sexton to ruin a preacher's health and sermon. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked,' and people are not blind. The leader cannot consort through the day with the world, the flesh and the devil, and come to his class at night with a fervor of holy zeal. He bears an unmistakable atmosphere. No warm declamation or pious platitude will supply his lack or move his people.

"It is a mistake not to go from the closet to the class. If it is a mistake not to begin on time, it is also a mistake not to close on time.

"While we would not limit the manifestation of the Spirit in class in expressing the high commission from God, the leader ought to be as much in touch with God's Spirit as any member of his class, and be able to discern whether the lengthy testimony is of God or from pride or self.

"Said a class-leader of sense to a member who was giving a long and profitless testimony, with the declaration that God had commanded it: 'You are quite mistaken, my brother; the Spirit has just told me it is time for you to stop.' If such an answer shocks us, it is no more shocking than such a claim.

"It is a great mistake for the class-leader to rail at the church or find fault with the ministry, either his own pastor or the ministry at large.

"He cannot afford to be absent from the weekly prayer-meeting nor to be silent when in attendance. Unless the service is crowded and he must deny himself for the sake of others, let him speak at the first opportunity and be a model in point and brevity.

"It is a mistake for the leader to do all the work himself. No meeting can long survive with full ranks and interest where the leader takes three-quarters of the time, and then says to the members, 'Let us be very brief tonight.' Do not make the mistake of replying to each testimony or speech. Some of them are complete in themselves, and need nothing but your amen; others are of such a character that the less said the better. It is an unpardonable blunder to match a long and purposeless testimony with a longer homily.

"Do not scold the members who are not there and accuse every one of spiritual apostasy who does not answer to his name each week. Do not in the prayer-meeting inveigh against all other means of grace as compared with the class-meeting, and do not hold up the attendants of the class-meeting as the only religious people in the church. Do not think that the only place for prayer is at the beginning or close of the meeting. The best answer to many a testimony is an earnest prayer. The best person to offer it may not be the leader, but some one who himself is walking a lonely way, a Via Dolorosa such as his Master knew.

"Permit these warning words, and may grace and wisdom keep you from all the mistakes which might otherwise mar your noble, faithful ministry."

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 14**

### **MINISTRIES**

Ministry means service. Referring to the vicariousness of both His own earthly life and His death upon the cross, Jesus said, "The Son of Man is come not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20: 28). When He had washed His disciples' feet, He said: "Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you" (John 13:13-15).

The lesson we should learn from such scriptures is this: We are Christians only in so far as our lives, like the life of the Master, are devoted to service for others — to condescending and self-forgetful ministries toward our fellow men!

Next to ministers of the gospel perhaps no class of men are, by virtue of their office, more obligated to altruistic service than class-leaders. It is their peculiar duty to look after and minister in every way after their power to all among their flock who are in any kind of temporal or spiritual need: and, other things being equal, the leader who is most faithful and efficient in this particular part of his calling will be the most acceptable leader, and also the most fruitful in building up not only his own class, but the church as a whole and the work of God in general.

There are particular classes to which the class-leader should ever strive diligently to adapt himself in the way of helpful ministry. These are too numerous to admit of all being mentioned here, and so only those that should appeal more especially, to the leader's attention and sympathy will be noticed.

1. Seekers after God should ever find in the class-leader a man full of sympathy for them, and skilled in the art of leading them into peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. When class-meetings are what they ought to be, and what they used to be, they will be seasons of revival interest. They will be places to which both leaders and members will invite such as are awakened on account of their sins and desire to flee from the wrath to come. Such were the class-meetings of early Methodism, and such were the class-meetings of the writer's early day. Such in particular were the class-meetings held for many years by the saintly Carvosso, who, almost everywhere he went (by the way he was a sort of itinerant class leader, and would that we had many like him today), kindled a red-hot revival flame, not alone in his own classes, but in the church and throughout the community as a whole. Referring to one of these revivals as described in his Memoir, his son, who edited the volume, says: "Of all the various revivals of religion, of which Cornwall has been so remarkable a scene since Methodism was first planted in it, the revival of which my father here speaks is by many considered the most striking and interesting. It is, therefore, now generally distinguished by the epithet, 'the great revival!'" <sup>[22]</sup> Carvosso was as every class-leader should strive to be, successful in getting sinners under conviction, and then skillful in getting them soundly

converted to God. The secret of his success was that he took the burden of souls on his heart, and made it the chief business of his life, so far as possible, to get them happily saved. The same method will be found effective still, in greater or less degree, almost everywhere.

2. Young converts should ever receive the tenderest culturing care the leader, under the illumination and guidance of the Spirit, is capable of rendering. In Methodism the class-meeting is the convert's training school. If those converted are not at once gathered into the fold by the pastor, let the leaders invite them to their classes, encourage them all they can, bring them to the notice of the pastor and recommend that they be received on probation and assigned to classes at once; and then let them become a special charge of the leaders to whose classes they are respectively assigned, even as a new babe on its arrival in the home becomes a special charge and object of loving attention and service on the part of the parents.

Young converts must be instructed in the way of righteousness; led on in personal experience into the deeper things of the Spirit; fed on "the sincere milk of the word" until so developed that they can take "strong meat" with impunity; exercised in habits of Bible reading, meditation, prayer, testimony, good works, and service for the salvation of others, particularly; safeguarded against the temptations and wiles of Satan; cheered amid the discouragements that so often beset them; disciplined to "endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ;" comforted in seasons of trouble and sorrow; inspired with a patient and glowing optimism; trained to constant and cheerful service; and taught the invaluable secret of how to "rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks." Moreover, as the surest means of strengthening, establishing, and settling them in all that is vital to Christianity, they should, as early as possible after their conversion, be made to know their privilege with reference to entire sanctification, led to hunger, thirst and seek for the experience, brought to the point of intelligent, deliberate, complete and eternal consecration to God, and of acceptance and apprehension of the cleansing efficacy of Christ's blood, resulting in full assurance that they are cleansed from all sin and "made perfect in love."

These are momentous responsibilities, indeed; and, in face of them, the most experienced leader may well inquire, "Who is sufficient for these things?" And yet, in face of them, assured by the divine promises, the weakest and most inexperienced leader may exclaim, with an inspired apostle, "But our sufficiency is of God" (II Cor. 3:5), and then press hopefully and nobly on in his responsible calling, fully confident that his labor is not in vain in the Lord. One thing should be ever borne in mind, however, by both the church and the class-leaders, namely, that he who said, "Feed My sheep," also said, and that with equal emphasis, "Feed My lambs;" and that, as no flock will long need tending whose lambs are neglected, so no church will long exist in a sense worthy of the name which fails to look carefully after its young converts, nurture them in the things of grace, and build them up in all that makes for holy character and lofty service.

3. Believers who hunger and thirst for full redemption should ever find in the leader one who lives in the experience of holiness, yearns for their perfection, and is wise and efficient in helping others into the experience. There is no other service in the church in which there maybe such freedom in exchange of views and experiences with reference to helping seekers of entire sanctification into the experience as in the class-meeting. This is the most appropriate of all places to present the subject of holiness, urge upon all to seek that perfect love which casteth out fear, deal faithfully with those

who do seek it, and minister the kind of help each seeker's case may seem to require. A live and well-conducted class-meeting ought to be characterized by continuous revival in this direction. as well as in the direction of securing the conversion of sinners and the recovery of backsliders. Let every class-meeting be, at least in some measure, a repetition of Pentecost, and that class and its leader will live on high spiritual planes, and will be a mighty host for the upbuilding of the church and for the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom on the earth. An unsanctified leader, however, will lack both the interest and the skill requisite to build up believers in holiness and make them instrumental in spreading Pentecostal fire wherever they may go. It is a characteristic of the good shepherd that "he goeth before his sheep," and 'leadeth them out' (John 10:3, 4).

4. Another class on whom the leader should bestow much tender and helpful care are the poor. "Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him, and keep him alive; and he shall be blessed upon the earth: and Thou wilt not deliver him unto the will of his enemies. The Lord will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing: Thou wilt make all his bed in his sickness" (Psa. 41:1-3). God regards helpful ministration to the poor in the same light as though it were rendered directly to Himself; and there is no kind of service for which He promises more abundant and precious rewards. On the other hand neglect and oppression of the poor are both highly provoking to the Almighty, and will not be allowed to go unpunished. "Whoso mocketh the poor reproacheth his Maker" (Prov. 17:5).

One of the things which pre-eminently characterized the primitive Christians was their compassionate care of the poor; and in this respect the rise of Methodism was a revival of that primitive spirit and practice. It began with Wesley and his fellow students of the "Holy Club" in Oxford. It was introduced in systematic form into the primitive Methodist societies. From the beginning it was one of the class-leader's duties to minister to this much neglected class, and for many years the "penny a week" class contributions were devoted exclusively to this object. Nor did Mr. Wesley regard duty to the poor as done when money was contributed and sent to them. He insisted on visiting the poor himself, and also on their being visited by others. He spent the month of December, 1760, in London, examining the society, visiting many of its members, etc. Referring to this in his Journal, he says: "I visited as many as I could of the sick. How much better is it, when it can be done, to carry relief to the poor, than to send it! and that both for our own sake and theirs. For theirs, as it is so much more comfortable to them, and as we may assist them in spirituals as well as temporals; and for our own, as it is far more apt to soften our hearts, and to make us naturally care for each other." <sup>[23]</sup>

To a member of one of his societies he also wrote, February 7, 1776, as follows: "I have found some of the uneducated poor who have exquisite taste and sentiment; and many, very many, of the rich who have scarcely any at all. But I do not speak of this. I want you to converse more, abundantly more, with the poorest of the people, who, if they have not taste, have souls, which you may forward in the way to heaven. And they have (many of them) faith and the love of God in a larger measure than any persons I know. Creep in among these, in spite of dirt and a hundred disgusting circumstances, and thus put off the gentlewoman. I should like this as well as you do, but I cannot discover a precedent for it in the life of our Lord or of any of His apostles. My dear friend, let you and I walk as He walked." <sup>[24]</sup>

This was the spirit and practice of early Methodism, as it was the spirit and practice of primitive Christianity, and as it should be the spirit and practice of all Christians, and especially of all Methodists, to the end of time. Obligations are upon all Christians in this respect, but these obligations rest with double weight upon the class-leader, particularly with regard to the poor of his own class, and such others in need as he becomes apprised of in connection with his work as a class-leader. Nor can he or others minister to such in a truly evangelical spirit except by walking closely with the Master and cultivating that tender sympathy for them which ever dominated His heart and was exhibited in His life. How many of us have need to say, in Shakespeare's words:

"Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? Oh, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this!"

Brethren, be it never forgotten that our mission is especially to the poor. In the fulfillment of this mission let us go forth in the spirit of the Master, of whom it is written: "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich" (II Cor. 8:9). Let us remember, too, that we are nowhere likelier to gather gems of unfading luster for Immanuel's crown than among the poor and neglected classes. "The fairest jewels in the coronet of Methodism have been gathered from lowly places," says Mr. Atkinson. "That Methodist girl whose beautiful life, glorious experience and saintly death, as told by Leigh Richmond in his simple story of 'The Dairyman's Daughter,' have charmed Christendom and converted multitudes, was a girl in humble life. Now princes in intellect and piety wander to her tomb to pay homage to her faith and to breathe renewed vows of devotion over her dust, while throughout the Christian world the name of Elizabeth Walbridge is 'like ointment poured forth.'

In fact, not a few of the illustrious leaders in all branches of Methodism have risen out of obscure conditions, among the number being the holy and beloved Bishop Asbury, "the chief founder and apostle of Methodism in America." <sup>[25]</sup>

5. Among other classes that should engage the special ministrations of the class-leader are the sick and the sorrowing. As with the poor, so with these classes, they are always with us. Christian Science, so-called, may deny the reality of sin, sickness and death, but sin, sickness and death are melancholy facts, nevertheless. Because of this the world is full of trouble and sorrow. We may be tempted at times to think it might have been a better ordered world than it is, but we are probably mistaken in this. This world, as it is, is the best kind of world that could be as a theater of probationary discipline for future perfect and immortal life. Here is a field for testing, developing and perfecting character that is better adapted to these ends, so far as we can see, than heaven itself. Here are opportunities to "let patience have her perfect work," for instance, such as we can not conceive of as having place in the heavenly world. Here, too, are demands upon us for altruistic sympathy and service such as could hardly have place in a sinless and sorrowless world.



The sick among his members should be the class-leader's special care. Second to that of the pastor only is his responsibility in this matter. In defining and limiting the authority of the class-leader of early Methodism Mr. Wesley said: "He has authority to meet his class, receive their contributions, and to visit the sick." From that time until now it has been regarded as the leader's duty to fulfill this ministry, especially to those among his own members who are ill. To perform such a duty in a way that will be welcome and helpful rather than offensive and harmful he must have, in addition to grace, sympathy, judgment and tact. Sympathy will enable him in some degree at least to take on the condition of the patient, and thereby to gain easy approach, to adapt himself to the patient's peculiar needs, and to be soothing and inspiring rather than irritating and depressing. Judgment will enable him quickly to discern what is and what is not befitting in his relation to the patient, the family, the nurse, the physician, and any others with whom his visitation may bring him into contact. Tact will enable him skillfully to overcome difficulties that may confront him in some places, to avoid snares that may be laid for him in other places, to manage perplexities and embarrassments that are always liable to arise with a deftness that must command respect for himself and his office. In all such visitation the spiritual good of the patient should be the chief thing sought, but good sense should always dictate the manner in which it should be sought. As a rule the visits should be quite brief; conversation, reading and prayer, if in order at all, as usually they will be, should also be brief, subdued, tender, and of a cheerful and inspiring tone and character. Faithfulness there must be, but the result of the visitation should on the whole be cheering and enlivening, or it will prove a calamity rather than a blessing. A bunch of flowers, or some little delicacy or remembrancer of one kind or another, taken to the afflicted, will often open the heart to receive one's ministry in things spiritual, where otherwise it might have remained closed. In no place can one more appropriately exemplify the Golden Rule than in the visitation of the sick.

The troubled and sorrowing should also find in the class-leader one who can appreciate their distresses and bring to them the ministry of heavenly consolation. Bereavement is sooner or later the common lot of all.

"There is no flock, however well attended,  
But one dead lamb is there;  
There is no home, however well defended,  
But has one vacant chair.

"The earth is full of farewells to the dying.  
Of mourning for the dead;  
The heart of Rachel, for her children crying,  
Will not be comforted."

How welcome a messenger is he in the home of sorrow who can truthfully say: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted," etc. (Isa. 61:1). The class-leader should be a man of this sort — one who by his sympathy, his counsels, his prayers, his appropriate use of Scripture and sacred hymnody can minister to minds diseased or troubled, and who by the atmosphere of holy cheerfulness which he generates can assuage grief, inspire faith, kindle hope, and, as with celestial sunshine, dissipate darkness and make even broken hearts rejoice.

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (II Cor. 1:3, 4).

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 15**

#### **STUDIES**

Every class-leader should be studious. His library may be small, but it should be choice, and its contents should be well mastered. Half an hour a day devoted to careful reading will enable any one to master at least half a dozen volumes of choice literature each year. This would mean the mastery of thirty volumes or more in five years, sixty or more volumes in ten years, and so on. This would have various advantages. In the first place it would beget the habit of reading and study, which in itself is of much value. In the next place it would be a means of constant intellectual quickening, broadening and strengthening — acquisitions of value incalculable. Then, too, provided the reading were of the right character, it would be decidedly a means of grace — a most valuable aid to spiritual self-culture. Finally, it would in many ways furnish helpful equipment for the more effective performance of the numerous and responsible services a class-leader is regularly called to perform.

In these days of cheap literature books that would be helpful in particular to class-leaders are multiplied on every hand. Those who desire to become well informed in directions that will strengthen them for their work certainly may do so. Valuable books may be obtained at comparatively trifling cost. The following are recommended, not only to all class-leaders, but to their members as well, and also as being helpful to Christians generally and to those who are known as "Christian workers" in particular:

1. The Discipline of the Church
2. The Catechism of the Church
3. Binney's Theological Compend [An HDM publication]
4. The Class Leader — Atkinson
5. The Drill-Master of Methodism — Goodell
6. The Class-Meeting — Fitzgerald
7. Memoir of Carvosso [An HDM publication]
8. Life of Bramwell
9. Christian Perfection — Wesley
10. Perfect Love — Wood [An HDM publication]

11. Fishers of Men — Roberts

12. Hymns That Are Immortal — Hogue

13. History of Methodism (abridged edition) — Stevens [HDM has published the unabridged 4-volume edition of Steven's M. E. History, and it is part of the HDM Electronic Library. — DVM]

14. Daniel Quorm and His Religious Notions — Pearse

15. The King's Son: A Memoir of Billy Bray

16. The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life — Mrs. Smith [Edited — An HDM publication]

17. Lectures to My Students — Spurgeon

18. Teaching and Teachers — Trumbull

19. In Christ — Pierson

20. The Person of Christ — Schaff

Most of these are small and inexpensive volumes. None of them are heavy works, and all of them will, we trust, be found instructive, inspiring and helpful. They need not all be bought at once, although if one is in circumstances to procure them that way he might thereby save something, and in addition would have quite a complete class-leader's library on his shelves from the start. All reading should be done discriminatingly, since books that are, on the whole, good and helpful, may contain passages here and there that are less worthy of acceptance than are the main portions. The foregoing volumes, however, will be found comparatively free from whatever would be unacceptable to those most loyal to Methodist doctrines. Bacon's advice at this point is eminently appropriate: "Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider."

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# **THE CLASS MEETING**

## **As a Means of Grace**

By  
**Wilson Thomas Hogue**

### **Chapter 16**

#### **APPEAL**

The foregoing chapters have not been written merely as a pastime, nor for the purpose of making a book; but in hope of contributing, in some degree at least, to the production of awakened interest in the class-meeting, and to the bringing on of a revival of this inestimable means of grace in all that made it the mighty instrument of good it proved to be in the day of its greatest popularity. In concluding his present work the writer would earnestly and affectionately appeal to all who peruse this little volume, and who, like Habakkuk of old, are praying, "O Lord, revive Thy work," to give themselves to zealous efforts of every legitimate kind for the revival of the class-meeting in all that was essential to its primitive simplicity and power.

As the realization of the desired end must depend more on the attitude and efforts of the ministry than on any other class, our first appeal is to pastors, or preachers in charge. Brethren, much, very much, depends on you as to what the future of the class-meeting shall be. In so far as the class-meeting has declined in interest and power, the chief responsibility is with the preachers as a rule. In so far as relates to the desired revival of this invaluable means of grace, on you as a class devolves the chief responsibility of determining whether that end shall be realized or not. In the interest of making your own work more effective and enduring you should give all possible attention to making this "right arm" of the church vigorous and fruitful. Nothing else can so admirably supplement your pulpit labors as a wide-awake and well regulated class-meeting, and the work of a godly, zealous and skillful class-leader. These are means of incalculable value for gathering and conserving the results of your pulpit and pastoral labors. The instruction received by the membership of the church through the agency of the class-meeting; the mutual interest and inspiration awakened by their communion together in their weekly gatherings for confession, testimony, prayer and praise; the more regular and frequent private instruction, counsel, exhortation and consolation ministered by the leader than most pastors can have the time to bestow; — these are ministries supplementary to your own efforts such as should be highly appreciated and constantly encouraged.

"Great as this labor of private instruction is," says Mr. Wesley, "it is absolutely necessary; for after all our preaching, many of our people are almost as ignorant as though they had never heard the gospel. I speak as plainly as I can, yet I frequently meet with those who have been my hearers for many years, who do not know whether Christ be God or man. And how few are there who know the nature of repentance, faith, and holiness! Most of them have a sort of confidence that God will save them, while the world has their hearts. I have found by experience that one of these has learned more from an hour's close discourse than from ten years' public preaching." [26]

We next appeal to class-leaders everywhere to give their most earnest and indefatigable efforts to the bringing about of a general and genuine class-meeting revival. Be determined that in your case it must come. Fast, pray, and wait on God; enlist the pastor's interest and co-operation; associate your

members with you in persevering prayer for the realization of the desired end; visit your members at their homes, and converse personally and earnestly with them regarding this matter; get the burden of souls on both yourself and them; inspire them with missionary zeal, both by precept and example; be wise, gentle, loving, patient and forbearing, but determined to succeed, "do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father by pleading the divine promises with a faith that cannot be denied, and see if God "will not open the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

"The revival of the work of God does perhaps depend as much on the whole body of the leaders as it does upon the whole body of the preachers . . . Our leaders under God are the sinews of our society, and our revivals will ever in great measure rise or fall with them . . . In short, we can truly say that through the grace of God our classes form the pillars of our work, and, as we have before observed, are in a considerable degree our universities for the ministry." <sup>[27]</sup>

This estimate of the class-leader's calling, which has received the endorsement of the most thoughtful men of Methodism down to the present time, indicates the exalted and responsible character of the office, and should impress leaders everywhere with the importance of giving diligence to show themselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (II Tim. 2:15).

In dismissing the appeal to pastors and leaders the writer would commend to their most serious consideration the following extract from the "Episcopal Address to Class-Leaders" delivered before the Methodist Episcopal General Conference of 1892.

## **PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS**

"I. To our pastors, who appoint the leaders and who should themselves be model leaders:

"1. Have at least one class-meeting in every church, however small. If necessary, lead it yourself. If you can find no other convenient time, hold it after the Sunday morning service, and if need be, shorten your sermon to make room for it.

"2. Preach occasionally on class-meetings, and give notice of them every Sunday.

"3. Assign all the members to classes, being careful to consult their convenience as to time.

"4. Change the leaders when necessary, appointing some women when that seems best, especially for young people's and children's classes.

"II. To class-leaders:

"1. Your office demands a life of high consecration to God. The church has a right to expect of you a life marked by conspicuous moral purity and religious zeal. Be holy. Be zealous. Be an example of earnest and constant devotion to all good works.

"2. Be absolutely regular and prompt in attending your class-meeting. Always begin it and close it on time.

"3. Make it interesting and instructive. These are two indispensable requisites for a good class-meeting. In order to do this you must be a constant student of the word of God and of religious books and periodicals . . . Your mind and heart must thus be constantly fresh and full. Keep out of the ruts. Avoid platitudes. Make the meeting largely conversational. Do not require every one to speak, nor always reply to every one. Introduce topics of experimental and practical godliness in a free conversational way, asking questions and drawing out replies. Vary the meeting, by sometimes asking each member to quote a verse of scripture, or of a hymn, indicating his personal experience. If your class-members are interested and helped, they will come again, and regularly.

"4. Be a constant student and teacher of the word of God. Saturate your mind and heart with it. Read, study, and search it daily. Commit to memory texts suited to all varieties and stages of religious experience and temptation. Quote them discriminatingly and believably. In his duel with Satan our Lord conquered every time simply by quoting Scripture."

Our final appeal must be to the members of our churches. In order that pastors and leaders may succeed in effecting a revival of class-meeting interest and effectiveness, they must have your co-operation. Co-operation is ever an indispensable condition of effectiveness in church work. Working apart, we can accomplish little; working together, we may accomplish marvelous things. "However small may be the force of any living thing, unite enough of them and they accomplish wonders. The weevil is an insect hardly visible to the naked eye, yet for years they laid waste the finest wheat fields of a large section of country. The coral islands of the Pacific ocean are built from the rocky bed of the sea by polypes — small animals of the lowest order. Yet some of these islands are fifty miles long by twenty wide. These aquatic animals have built up a barrier reef along the shores of New Caledonia for a length of four hundred miles, and another which runs along the northeast coast of Australia. These mounds were built amid the waves and storms of the ocean; yet in comparison with them the greatest monuments of the physical strength of man — the walls of Babylon, the great wall of China, and the pyramids of Egypt — sink into insignificance. They show us what can be effected by patiently toiling together toward the accomplishment of a common object, If such mighty achievements can be effected by animals without intelligence, what might not Christians reasonably be expected to accomplish if they labored together to build up the kingdom of God among men, the untiring energy of the Holy Spirit working with them?" [28]

Dear brethren and sisters of the laity, get the burden of this matter on your hearts. Know, feel, and appreciate, your opportunity and obligation. If your pastors and leaders are awake to the importance of the class-meeting, and to the need of a revival of class-meeting interest and effectiveness, thank God for it, and enter into hearty and practical sympathy with them in their efforts to bring about a realization of the desired ends. If they are not as fully awake to these matters as they should be, then by every kind and courteous means on your part endeavor to arouse their interest and secure their active engagement in the direction of making this means of grace the mighty agency for good it was designed to be in the beginning, and has ever been when at its best. It is to your own interests, to the interests of the church as a whole, to the well-being of Christ's kingdom, and to the eternal welfare of dying men and women all around you, that you should awake to a solemn sense of personal

responsibility in these matters and consecrate yourself to special and untiring endeavors to make the class-meeting a mightier instrumentality than it has ever been for the salvation of men and the advancement of God's kingdom on the earth.

"See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:15-20). And "let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; for He is faithful that promised; and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more as ye see the day approaching" (Heb. 10:23-25).

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 "Cyclopedia of Methodism," Art. "Methodism."
- 2 Works, Vol. III., page 74.
- 3 Works, Vol. V., pp. 179, 180.
- 4 Fitzgerald's "The class-Meeting," p. 57.
- 5 Works, Vol. V. pp. 580-581.
- 6 Simpson's "Cyclopedia of Methodism."
- 7 "The Story of the Churches," Volume on "The Methodists," pp. 35-36.
- 8 "Life and Times of John Wesley, Vol. I, p. 381.
- 9 "Life and Times of John Wesley, Vol. III, p. 215.
- 10 "The Class-Meeting," pp. 40-41.
- 11 "The Class Leader, His work and How to Do It."
- 12 Methodist Magazine, 1837, quoted by Tyerman.
- 12 Quoted by Charles Goodell in "The Drill-Master of Methodism."
- 13 "The Drill-Master of Methodism."
- 14 Ibid. Page 47.
- 15 See Works, Vol. V., pp. 213-217.
- 16 From "The Drill-Master of Methodism," Written while Mr. Hughes was yet alive.
- 17 The Class-Leader and His work, page 15.
- 18 By "assistant" Mr. Wesley meant the preacher in charge under himself.
- 19 Works, Vol. IV., pp. 117-118.
- 20 The Drill-Master of Methodism, pp. 51-52.

21 "The Drill-Master and His Class." p. 55.

22 Life of Carvosso, p. 47.

23 Works, Vol. IV, p. 80.

24 Works, Vol. VI., p. 782.

25 "The Class Leader," pp. 121-122.

26 Works, Vol. V., p. 214.

27 Coke and Asbury, "Notes on the Discipline," 1787; quoted in 'Episcopal Address to Class-Leaders," 1892.

28 Roberts' "Fishers of Men," pp. 234-235.