

Abiding Values of the Methodist Class Meeting

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The class meeting was one of the invaluable religious discoveries of the Wesleyan movement. John Wesley, with an intuitive sense of genuine values, immediately recognized its worth and made it a basic element in his system of pastoral care. During the first few years of the Methodist movement, its worth was demonstrated to a greater extent than Wesley had anticipated, and he declared that it could "scarcely be conceived what advantages had been reaped" from it.¹

It is amazing that the church which originated the class meeting has now pretty well abandoned it. Furthermore, many holiness churches, affirming the great theological and experiential convictions of the early Wesleyan movement, are surrendering the class meeting also. This surrender is particularly untimely now, inasmuch as the value of the class meeting is better attested than it has ever been before.

The validity of the class meeting is now confirmed by a number of disciplines including education, sociology, and psychology. These disciplines have attested its value by varied approaches and emphases. Education has confirmed its worth of a statement of the principles and a demonstration of the worth of group discussion. Social psychology has attested its validity by its emphasis upon the values of social interaction. Clinical psychology has set forth some principles of group psychotherapy or "group counseling" that validates religious group counsel in the form of the class meeting.²

For a number of years psychologists have been using group discussion or counseling to meet many types of personal needs. They form, for example, small groups of people with common illnesses or problems and help these people gain insight by mutual discussion. Group counseling is used for persons with basic adjustment problems as well as for people having common needs as in premarital or marital counseling. Such groups meet periodically, and the members of them talk freely about their problems

¹Letters, "Standard Edition," volume II, p. 297.

²The term "group counseling" has not been used generally until very recently. It is now appearing more and more to suggest a group situation in which there is a free interchange of ideas aimed at the solution of personal problems.

or needs under the guidance of a trained counselor.

We purpose here to view the class meeting in the light of some of the principles that have been validated in group counseling. We do not approach this task with the idea that the class meeting has been on shaky grounds, and that now it must be attested by psychology which has been considered sometimes unfriendly to evangelical religion. The class meeting has demonstrated adequately its worth to people who have observed it. There is value, however, in presenting some collateral evidence which shows clearly that it is a basically sound form of Christian nurture.

I

Wesley proceeded on sound psychological and spiritual principles when he organized like-minded people into small groups for the discussion of personal spiritual problems. He anticipated group counseling in setting up these homogeneous groups that permitted a free exchange of experience, problems, and ideas in an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance. He saw clearly that these groups provided an opportunity for personal insight and spiritual growth.

Being thoroughly convinced that the class meetings should be homogeneous groups of spiritually concerned people, Wesley used the ingenious method of issuing tickets to those whom he thought qualified to attend. He said that every ticket represented a strong recommendation of the person to whom it was given; as if he had written, "I believe the bearer hereof to be one that fears God and works righteousness."³ Wesley was strict on this matter of issuing class tickets, and he refused, for instance, to give tickets to part-time attendants. This attitude grew out of his belief that one of the dependable signs of spiritual earnestness was regular class attendance. In September, 1759, for example, he met the society at Norwich and discussed the "nature and use of meeting in a class." Upon inquiry, he found that there were about five hundred members in the society, but one hundred fifty of those did not "pretend to meet at all" in class meetings. "Of those, therefore" he said, "I make no account. They hang on by but a single thread."⁴

Wesley realized that spiritual concern on the part of the members was necessary for successful class meetings. In this respect he was in keeping with modern counseling principles. It is recognized today that a maladjusted person cannot obtain significant help by either personal or group counseling unless he is really concerned

³Letters, volume II, p. 300.

⁴Journal "Standard Edition," volume IV, p. 350

about his problem and wants to solve it. Wesley knew that if people in class meetings were half-hearted about spiritual matters they would be half-hearted and listless in their participation in the class meeting. He knew that such a situation would provide no real basis for solving spiritual problems. He furthermore saw that the presence of unconcerned people would be a distraction to the others and that the sense of mutuality and understanding of the group as a whole would be greatly diminished.

II

A number of significant values are realized by the members of a class when it is comprised of a small group of likeminded Christian people who are under the guidance of a capable, Spirit-filled and broad-minded leader. We shall note a number of these values that are realized primarily in such groups.

The acceptance and understanding that a class meeting gives sincere Christians helps them attain a sense of spiritual security. The acceptance of a class is like that which a family gives a child. The family accepts, understands, and appreciates the child in spite of the fact that he has limitations, and that he often fails to live up to adult standard. Attitudes of understanding and appreciation help the child to accept his limitations and failures without developing an inferiority complex, and, other things being equal, he will grow up with a sense of personal worth and adequacy.

The urge to be understood and appreciated is deeply rooted in human nature, and is not removed at conversion or in any other religious experience. The convert, sometimes sensing that he is rejected by many of his erstwhile worldly friends, needs the understanding and fellowship of a group of warm-hearted people as much as he needs instruction and exhortation. Such a group will provide a sense of comradeship that will strengthen him and help him to feel confident. Moreover, surrounded by a group of Christians by whom he is approved, he can accept himself as an immature Christian without apology. With the support of such a group, he will not cast away his confidence readily in an hour of temptation or failure but, like the child in a home, will develop attitudes of spiritual adequacy and security.

The sense of belongingness that a class gives its members helps diminish feelings of aloneness and uniqueness that Christians often experience. When God's people are hard pressed and severely tempted, they often feel like Elijah once did: "I alone am left." These attitudes are found in life generally, for psychological counselors know that when people are under tension or when they are maladjusted, they are likely to think that their problems are unique. This sense of uniqueness often gives them a feeling of isolation.

When Christians are tempted and pressed in such a manner, they greatly need the fellowship that is found in a class meeting. The free interchange of experiences there will surely convince them that they are not strangely different from other people and that the temptations they face are those that will come to them.

The fact of belonging to a spiritually select group of Christians provides a type of personal spiritual status and recognition that is important. This was especially true in Wesley's day when class membership was highly selective. It has always seemed to me that Wesley was extraordinarily wise in having the early Methodists "earn the right" to belong to these groups. A candidate for membership in a class had to demonstrate attitudes of sincerity and earnestness, and it was a distinct honor to be admitted into the fellowship of a class meeting. Such a degree of spiritual status and recognition strengthened highly introspective and timid souls. It furthermore brought a sense of responsibility to continue the quality of life or aspiration that had made membership possible. The very fact of belonging to one of these groups tended to put its members under bond to be true to God and not to violate the confidence that had been placed in them.

A part of the value of class meetings is seen in the fact that they provided an opportunity for personal self-examination. Sincere Christians are able to examine themselves in a healthful and helpful manner when they are in the atmosphere of understanding and love, but where these conditions are lacking, their introspection and self-examination might be harmful or possibly damaging. Class meetings permit a large degree of self-expression in which one's problems and failures, as well as spiritual successes, may be mentioned without a feeling of either inferiority or superiority. The overt expression of one's personal problems often leads to insights that could never have been had otherwise. It is important to note, also, that this type of self-examination is carried on in a situation that takes view of other people's experiences. This fact does much to save one from becoming a spiritual hermit with many hindering eccentricities.

The practice of the confession of faults and sins is as psychologically sound as the latest principle enunciated in the most scientific textbook in psychology. Unconfessed faults and sins cause feelings of inadequacy and guilt with the accompanying emotions of personal rejection and spiritual inferiority. William James recognized this principle and affirmed it by a uniquely incisive phrase, "exteriorize your rottenness." Carl Jung held that personal confession is necessary on the part of all men, and if a man

will not confess his sins he will become a "moral exile."⁵ Wesley's psychological and spiritual grasp of this truth was as cogent as that of any psychologist. He recognized that it was helpful for Christians to "pour out their hearts without reserve, particularly with regard to sin which doth so easily beset them and the temptations which were most apt to prevail over them."⁶ He viewed the class meeting as an opportunity when the Biblical injunction could be carried best: "Confess your faults one to another and pray one for another that ye may be healed."⁷

Wesley observed some actual results of confession and prayer in his class meetings.

They prayed for one another that they might be healed of the faults they had confessed; and it was so. The chains were broken, the bands were burst asunder, and sin had no more dominion over them. Many were delivered from the temptations out of which till then they found no way of escape. They were built up in the most holy faith.⁸

Another impressive value of the class meeting is realized in the opportunity it gives to its members to express praise to God. Praise is a tonic to the soul. It helps a discouraged person to get his eyes off from his problems and to look to God as the source of his help. It delivers one from an exaggerated subjectivism that often becomes a spiritual morass to a struggling soul. Praise to God helps deliver one from an overemphasized problem-consciousness to a healthful power-consciousness.

The spiritual deliverance that often comes to discouraged people when they begin to praise God is graphically symbolized in 2 Chronicles 20: 22: "And when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushments against the children of Ammon, Moab, and Mt. Seir (Judah's enemies), which were come against Judah; and they were smitten."

In addition to praise, there is unique value in Christian people expressing their spiritual purpose and resolutions to a group. Such an expression tends to command spiritual forces for the achievement of it. Hundreds of Christians, hard-pressed and tempted, have been mightily strengthened to do God's will because they have declared their determination to be true. Their declaration of purpose put them under bond to both God and their fellow Christians.

⁵cf Bergsten, Gote, *Pastoral Psychology*, p. 73

⁶Letters, II, p. 301

⁷Ibid., p. 301

⁸Ibid., p. 302

In the recent past the writer had an extended conversation with old friends, a husband and his wife, who had been brought up in holiness churches and who had attended class meetings during their childhood and youth. Upon graduation from seminary, however, this man became a minister in a liturgical church and they had not attended class meetings for many years. During our conversation I asked my friends what unique and abiding values they now saw in the holiness movement. They replied that the class meeting had outstanding value and the wife told her reason for so believing.

The woman said that during her own high school days her Christian mother was burdened by many difficult problems. The mother would often go to the class meeting greatly distressed and heavily burdened, she said. During the meeting her mother would have opportunity to express herself freely in testimony and prayer about some of these burdens and to declare her determination to be true to God.

"I have gone with my mother to those class meetings when she was greatly discouraged," my friend said, "and I have seen that discouragement and distress leave during the meeting."

This widely traveled minister and his thoughtful wife concurred that the class meeting has such unique value that it should never be abandoned or surrendered by the churches that have been blessed with it.