

The Disciplines of the Wesleyan Way

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The reformers of the 16th century gave to their followers a catechism, or confession of faith, later to be expanded, in one case, into "Institutes." Pietism, a century later, stressed not doctrine but holy living. Methodism in the 18th century elaborated this, after the fashion of Jeremy Taylor, so that followers of Wesley were given a "Discipline." With them the point of greatest concern was not the pattern of belief but the implementation of creed in a pattern of living.

Perfect love is not static, does not operate in a vacuum, nor is it primarily a religious experience. It is essentially a way of behaving. The perfection commanded by Christ, when he said, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect," postulates a way of life in which love and impartiality flow out toward all men, whether good or bad. Perfect love, although an inner principle, finds expression at every point at which a man touches life.

This aspect has not always been kept to the fore by teachers of Perfection, particularly by those who have leaned toward mysticism. Wesley's early and unhappy experiences with mysticism aided him in preserving an interdependence of character and conduct and a balance between inward and outward religion.

He liked to parallel his own situation with that of Paul, who before conversion had attempted slavishly to obey a ponderous code of 613 laws, and yet after his liberation on the Damascus road had not abandoned Mosaic law, but had loved it the more and submitted to its demands even more happily because it had been the means of bringing him to Christ.

Wesley further valued the law because after bringing us to Christ it "keeps us with Christ. The law says, 'Thou shalt not kill'; and hereby (as our Lord teaches), forbids not only outward acts, but every unkind word or thought. Now," says Wesley, "the more I look into this perfect law, the more I feel how far I come short of it: and the more I feel this, the more I feel my need of his

blood to atone for all my sin, and of his Spirit to purify my heart, and make me 'perfect and entire, lacking nothing.'"¹ Only so does the convert come to sense his need for perfect love.

Throughout the Christian life there is, therefore, continuing dependence upon the law. "...on the one hand, the height and depth of the law constrain me to fly to the love of God in Christ; on the other, the love of God in Christ endears the law to me.... seeing I know every part of it is a gracious promise which my Lord will fulfil in its season."²

Without the law neither faith nor perfect love can be attained. In Wesley's case, for example, the exacting standards of conduct set up by Kempis, Taylor, and Law had first convinced him of the unique and lofty quality of Christian morality and then had driven him after utter despair of human endeavor to faith in the atonement.

In another respect, also, Wesley found his course paralleling that of St. Paul's. The great apostle, convinced of Christ's fulfillment of all contained in the law, had had to apply Christ's principles to problems of conduct that arose in the early church. Likewise, Wesley, made aware through his reading in church history of the continuity of the Christian tradition, had to translate the principles he had rediscovered into terms of practice for the eighteenth century.

Law had given him many of his ideas concerning Christian conduct; but it is one thing for a mystic like Law to outline in his quiet study the high standards of Christian Perfection, and quite another for an evangelist to hold these same standards unflinchingly before audiences of semi-pagans and interpret them with sufficient clarity and urgency to call forth truly Christian behavior. This was Wesley's task, and without question he succeeded in it to a phenomenal degree. An abundance of documents from early Methodist writers testify to the beauty of life that resulted when love found expression in action.

How had this been accomplished? Not alone through *the preaching* of "the full ideal." Not simply through the response of individuals to this preaching. Very early in the revival Wesley dis-

¹ *Sermons*, II, 55.

² *Loc. cit.*

³ *Works*, VII, 260.

covered to his dismay the universal human tendency toward antinomianism, that is, the proneness of weak human beings, after their first experience of saving grace, to rest in a static legal fiction that divorces works from faith. He did not have to cope long with new converts who loudly professed on Sunday morning to a state of grace, despite their reversion on Saturday night to drunken sprees, before he saw the necessity for positive specification of what constitutes Christian practice.

Laws and rules that could be definitely observed had to make principles explicit to men and women void of moral insight. Love continued to be the core of his message, but the *modus operandi* of love in life situations had to be made plain. Even those who claimed the high experience of Christian Perfection were sometimes found resting in mere profession. Wesley came to suspect all testimony to religious experience that was not directly accompanied by positive Christian action. He had no patience with the religious sentimentalist.

The foundation for a code of Christian conduct he laid in unhesitating acceptance of eternal values as the only reality. His faith in the spiritual capacities of men and women previously sunk in gross materialism is amazing. In such sermons as "Walking by Sight and Faith," he expects an immediate comprehension of supersensuous reality, and declares that Christians "regulate all their judgments concerning good and evil, not with reference to visible and temporal things, but to things invisible and eternal. They think visible things to be of small value, because they pass away. . . . but, on the contrary, they account invisible things to be of high value, because they will never pass away."³

Upon this basis they judge all things to "be good or evil, as they promote or hinder their welfare, not in time, but in eternity. . . . They regulate all their tempers and passions, all their desires, joys, and fears, by this standard. They regulate all their thoughts, and designs, all their words and actions, so as to prepare them for that invisible and eternal world to which they are shortly going."⁴

Some test cases make this truth clear. He asks, "Which do you judge best—that your son should be a pious cobbler, or a profane lord? Which appears to you most eligible—that your daughter should be a child of God, and walk on foot, or a child

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

of the devil, and ride in a coach-and-six?" Rejecting all materialistic values, he sternly asserts that one who sets his affection upon earthly things is "as surely in the way of destruction, as a thief or a common drunkard."⁶

This, he adds, "is religion, and this alone....It is not *moral-ity*; excellent as that is, when it is built on a right foundation, loving faith; but when otherwise, it is of no value in the sight of God....Religion is no less than living in eternity and walking in eternity and hereby walking in the love of God and man . . ." The utter renunciation of all materialistic aims in a life of perfect love is here made plain.

Life in eternity calls for a rejection of the old scale of values. To the Christian the love of God is the only total good; all other goods are partial and secondary, and their value depends entirely upon the contribution they can make to a life of love. The Christian sees the "real evil of apparent good," the danger of resting even in such legitimate satisfactions as delight in the beautiful, honor from one's fellows, success in one's vocation.

We are all materialistic, according to Wesley—disbelievers in the eternal—to so great a degree, "that it requires no less than almighty power to counteract that tendency to dissipation which is in every human spirit, and restore the capacity of attending to God, and fixing itself on him." Our indifference to eternal things may come simply from the "hurry of business," or "seeking honour or preferment." Rivalry with God may be set up merely by love of adornment, or "fondness for diversions" or "any trifle under the sun."⁸

"The vulgar," says Wesley, "confine the character of dissipation to those attached to women, gaming, drinking, to dancing, balls, races, fox-hunting, but it applies to anyone who forgets God by attention to any worldly employment." The gratification of the senses, for instance, may become a major source of happiness, not only in "gross, open intemperance," but often in a "genteel sensuality," that is to be found among the poor as well as among the rich.⁹

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁸ *Works*, VI, 445.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.*

The satisfaction of the imagination in "objects grand, beautiful or uncommon," especially in dress, furniture and amusements, may supersede the happiness found in God.¹⁰ Desire for the honor of men, which is called by great men "thirst for glory" and by ordinary men "taking care of our reputation," in either instance is an expression of the love of the world and engenders pride and conflicts with devotion to God.¹¹

We shall find that the evil in most of the matters denounced by the early Methodists lay as much in their refusal to remain subordinated to the supreme good as in their inherent sinfulness. The drama is a striking example of this in its continual tendency to drift away from high spiritual purpose and moral control. Perry remarks that all aesthetic pleasures, although higher than physical delights, may be "proportionately more dangerous to true piety," for they set up a more subtle claim upon the cultivated mind and gradually dull it to the love of God.¹²

The proper attitude to take toward all legitimate interests is that of stewardship. Wesley believed that "we have no right to dispose of anything we have, but according to His will, seeing we are not proprietors of any of these things; they are all, as our Lord speaks. . . . *belonging to another person*; nor is anything properly *our own* . . . We shall not receive . . . *our own things*, till we come to our own country. Eternal things only are our own: with all these temporal things we are barely entrusted by another, the Disposer and Lord of all."¹³

This principle of stewardship applies to much more than money. Wesley enumerates the human faculties of understanding, imagination, memory, will, affection and emotion, as well as the functions of the senses. Other endowments to be used for eternal ends are personality, strength, health, education and influence over

¹⁰ *Works*, VI, 438-40. Speaking of those things that appeal to the imagination, Wesley says: "The generality of men, and more particularly men of sense and learning, are so far from suspecting that there is, or can be, the least harm in them, that they seriously believe it is matter of great praise to *give ourselves wholly to them*."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

¹² R. B. Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy*, p. 236. Perry remarks that those who "confuse piety with what they call 'the beauty of the service,' . . . testify to the power of this seduction, especially over more cultivated minds."

¹³ *Sermons*, II, 464.

others.¹⁴ It follows, then, that no action or use of time is indifferent. All have significance in a life of stewardship.

One must be ready at the end to give an inclusive accounting: "Didst thou use thy food, not so as to seek or place thy happiness therein, but so to preserve thy body in health....a fit instrument of thy soul? Didst thou use thy apparel, not to nourish pride or vanity, much less to tempt others to sin, but conveniently and decently to defend thyself from injuries of the weather? Didst thou prepare and use thy house, and all other conveniences, with a single eye to my glory? in every point seeking not thy own honour, but mine....?"¹⁵

If such questions seem too exacting, too much concerned with minutiae, let us remind ourselves of the high goal set by Wesley. Perry says of Puritanism that it requires "a will that is never wholly committed to any subordinate enterprise, or wholly absorbed by any constituent part of life....It implies a centralized and unified control which will bring the whole course of man's actions, feeling, and thoughts into accord with his moral judgment or spiritual faith."¹⁶ If this was true of seventeenth century Puritanism, the subject of Perry's investigation, it was even more characteristic of a movement which claimed Perfect Love as its governing principle.

Methodism was the first movement to bring the doctrine of Perfection and the disciplines for its attainment out of the monastic environment and present it as the norm for all Christians. The Reformation had declared that the full Christian life can be lived in any of the ordinary callings. However, neither Calvin nor Luther worked out the full implications of this revolutionary view of the common life.¹⁸ Law saw these implications and Wesley preached them to the masses.

They lie at the base of all his advices to Methodists, and were never more emphatically stated than in his article on the "Character of a Methodist," of whom he says, "In all his employments of every kind, he not only aims at this (the glory of God)....but actually attains it. His business and refreshments, as well as his

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 464-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 476.

¹⁶ Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

¹⁷ See Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*, p. 250. *et seq.*

prayers, all serve this great end. Whether he sit in his house or walk by the way, whether he lie down or rise up, he is promoting, in all he speaks or does, the one business of his life; whether he put on his apparel, or labour, or eat and drink, or divert himself from too wasting labour, it all tends to advance the glory of God, by peace and good-will among men. His one invariable rule is this, 'Whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus''¹⁸

What criterion, then, should govern our desire for the natural goods, such as food, clothing, or work? Wesley had early accepted Law's principle of temperance in the satisfaction of all natural desires. He believed that, just as in eating and drinking the rule is strict temperance, so "we may *dress*, we may buy and sell, may *labour*, we may provide for ourselves and our Families" as nature demands. But "all Variation from this Rule, is like Gluttony and Intemperance, and fills our Souls with . . . Tempers . . . contrary to the Spirit of Christ . . ."¹⁹

Wesley condemns those who vary from this rule upon the pretext of accomplishing more good by increased natural goods. Such persons practice "worldly prudence," which declares as its "grand maxim": "The more power, the more money, the more learning, and the more reputation a man has, the more good he will do." But it may be observed that "Whenever a Christian, pursuing the noblest ends, forms his behaviour by these maxims, he will infallibly . . . use more or less of conformity to the world, if not in sin, yet in doing some things that are . . . not good to him; and perhaps at length using guile or disguise, simulation or dissimulation."²⁰ Christian prudence forms its judgments from the Word of God, not from compromise with the standards set by men.

This is the lofty ideal for the use of natural goods which the preaching of Perfect Love placed before the early Methodists. If the law of love places such severe controls upon legitimate interests, certainly any matter of conduct that contains in it positive elements of evil will come in for condemnation. Whatever deteriorates personality or harms society can never be harmonized with love of man.

¹⁸ *Works*, VIII, 345.

¹⁹ Law, *Works*, III, p. 76.

²⁰ *Letters*, IV, 63.

This principle was applied not only to the gross sins but to the so-called lesser sins as well: not only to drunkenness, sexual laxity, licentiousness and brutality in amusements, but also to covetousness, jealousy, anger, evil-speaking, vanity and worldly anxiety. Each age has its own peculiar sins, great and small. Methodism, because of its deep moral sensitivity, its high estimate of the value and potentialities of human personality, and its acceptance of a wholly Christian scale of values, recognized the sins of its age and made no allowance for them in its way of life.

Many of the evils denounced by Wesley had already been specified by seventeenth century Puritanism. This does not mean that he unthinkingly accepted traditional views. It means rather that there still persisted in the eighteenth century a lack of moral control in the same areas of conduct; for example, in dancing, in the theatre, in the use of spiritous liquors. Wesley recognized, as had Fox and Baxter and Law, the deterioration of personality that accompanied the free expression of impulse in these directions and likewise sought for regulation.

So free did Wesley believe himself from any traditional bias that he looked upon Methodism as something new in the eighteenth century, something called forth by the moral and spiritual needs of the time and not simply a revival of Puritanism or Moravianism.²¹ There is indeed ground for accepting this point of view when it is remembered that the Methodist Societies were an organic development within the Church of England, and the Rules of the Societies simply means improvised by Wesley for the restoration of the national church to the Christian Way. If puritanism be defined in the generic sense, not as a single historic episode in the seventeenth century, but as the recurrent revival of Christianity in its simplicity, then it will be seen that the pattern of conduct evolved by Methodism, dealing drastically, as it did, with all the symptoms of moral weakness in its age, was bound to have some likeness to all conduct-patterns adopted by such revivals. The insubordinated human will remains the same throughout the centuries, manifesting its enmity to God and good in much the same manner; hence, every revival of Christianity brings with it similar insights into universal evils and opposition to them.²²

²¹ Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion*, p. 201.

²² See Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

No such conduct pattern is ever popular. It is branded as narrow-minded and fanatical. Perry, analyzing this inevitable accompaniment of puritanism, remarks that unswerving adherence to belief will always seem fanaticism to more balanced minds, just as did the faith of the early Christians to the cultivated pagans of that day. The Puritan, in his "ruthless subordination of every lesser consideration to the one thing needful" is single-minded, and single-mindedness is always likely to seem narrow-mindedness.²³

Wesley in his advices to Methodists warned them of this inevitable reaction to their way of life. They would give offence to all classes: to bigots by laying so little stress on opinions, to men of form by insisting on the inwardness of religion, to secular moralists by declaring the necessity of faith, to humanists by talk of inspiration and guidance of the Holy Ghost, to open sinners by reproof and separation from their company. It will be said of them, "you are grown so precise and singular, so monstrously strict, beyond all sense and reason, that you scruple so many harmless things, and fancy you are obliged to do so many others which you need not."²⁴

The *Rules of the Society of the people called Methodists* seemed in 1743,²⁵ when they were first published, the very epitome of narrow-mindedness, just as they do today, when cultural influences for a century have carried us farther and farther away from the single-mindedness and simplicity of early Methodism. Wesley is now often condemned as a legalist attempting to cramp the religion of love within a narrow set of regulations.

But before we accept this indictment let us try to place ourselves imaginatively in his situation when in 1743 he was faced with the necessity of making more explicit for a large group of near pagans the meaning of the gospel of Perfect Love. It was in Newcastle that the *Rules* were composed. Nine months had elapsed since his first meetings there, during which time hundreds had responded to the call to a life of Christian Perfection. In the interval the society had lost 149 members. About 800 remained.

²³ *Loc. cit.*

²⁴ *Works*, VIII, 354.

²⁵ Simon says that the dismissals showed Wesley the necessity for an explicit statement of a conduct pattern "in accordance with the gospel." John S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Methodist Societies* (London: Epworth Press, 1921), p. 99.

Of the 149 departures seventy-six had been voluntary, produced mostly by persecution. The remainder had been due to expulsion, upon what appear to be quite legitimate grounds, in accordance with Wesley's clear teaching on conduct. The charges listed are: swearing, sabbath breaking, drunkenness, selling spirituous liquors, quarreling, wife-beating, wilful lying, railing, laziness, and lightness and carelessness.

It was imperative that some precise regulations be formulated for the 800 members who remained. Otherwise disintegration would continue. Those who had gone constituted the "hysterical fringe" of the revival, the seekers for emotional experiences rather than for the righteousness that is in Christ. Wesley by this time had come to recognize this peripheral group, common to all great revivals, whose awakening is not moral, and who are, therefore, unprepared for the stern challenge of Christianity. They are those described by Christ as the stony and thorny places, where seed cannot grow. But the good ground that remained could be made to bring forth fruit if properly cultivated. The *Rules* and the organization into classes were the means devised for nurturing the seed.

As we have noted previously, Wesley's first conversion was ethical and determined the ethical emphasis of his message.²⁶ Like Paul, he recognized the full significance of the negative demands made by the law and knew that love not only fulfills these but exceeds them in intensity because of Christ's new interpretation of inner principles. It was in this spirit that the *Rules* were written, the same spirit that animated Paul when he applied the principles enunciated by Christ to specific situations and problems faced by the first century church.

It must be noted, also, that Wesley as well as Paul was prescribing for those who wished to be "whole Christians," those who were responsive to all the implications of the Christian ethic and proposed by the power of God to live the life of Christian Perfection. The Methodist, as Wesley envisioned him, was a Christian in fact as well as in name. "He is inwardly and outwardly conformed to the will of God, as revealed in the written word. He thinks, speaks, and lives, according to the method laid down in the revelation of Jesus Christ. His soul is renewed after the image

²⁶ Luke Tyerman, *Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, I, 403.

²⁷ See Chapter V, p. 80.

of God, in righteousness and in all true holiness, and having the mind that was in Christ, he so walks as Christ also walked...."²⁸

In formulating the *General Rules* Wesley looked first of all to the life of Christ. Here was the Way in its purity, and the Methodist was to ask in every situation, What would Christ do here? This required that one be always spiritually alert, flexible, forever open to new light. The *General Rules* formed only a skeletal outline of problems that might arise; each follower was to seek first the "mind that was in Christ." Wesley urged, "...in the name of God, be open to conviction. Whatever prejudices you have contracted from education, custom, or example, divest yourselves of them, as far as possible. Be willing to receive light either from God or man; do not shut your eyes against it."²⁹

The whole Bible was to be consulted and its precepts accepted without question. "...the Christian rule of right and wrong is the Word of God, the writings of the Old and New Testament; all that the prophets and 'holy men of old' wrote 'as they were moved by the Holy Ghost'...." The Christian "esteems nothing good, but what is here enjoined, either directly or by plain consequence; he accounts nothing evil but what is here forbidden, either in terms, or by undeniable inference." On the other hand, "whatever the Scripture neither forbids nor enjoins, either directly or by plain consequence, he (the Christian) believes to be of an indifferent nature; to be in itself neither good nor evil; this being the whole and sole outward rule whereby his conscience is to be directed in all things."³⁰

It is very evident from many passages that Wesley proposed to unite in a way never attempted before religious experience at its highest and Christian practice at its best. As he surveyed the practices of the various religious groups of his day, Wesley felt that none of them had acted fully upon this principle. He said: "When we look into the Bible with any attention, and then look round into the world, to see who believes and who lives according to this book; we may easily discern that the system of practice, as well as the system of truth, there delivered, is torn in pieces, and scattered abroad like the members of Absyrtus. Every de-

²⁸ *Works*, VIII, 346.

²⁹ *Works*, XI, 467.

³⁰ *Sermons*, I, 226.

nomination of Christians retains some part either of Christian truth or practice; these hold fast one part, and those another, as their fathers did before them."³¹

This may be a debatable indictment, but we must remember that Wesley was looking for "whole Christianity" in practice just as he had looked for it in doctrine and experience. Accordingly he concluded that "the duty....of those who desire to follow the whole work of God" is "to 'gather up' all these 'fragments' that, if possible, 'nothing be lost'; with all diligence to follow all those we see about us, so far as they follow the Bible; and to join together in one scheme of truth and practice what almost all the world put asunder."³²

This statement is of great significance, because of the information which it gives: first, concerning the sources of the *General Rules*, and secondly, concerning the claim made by Wesley to the uniqueness of the Methodist movement. While the Bible was his original source, and the practices of the early church, as recorded by the historians, furnished a helpful commentary upon the Biblical directions, Wesley drew also upon practices among contemporary religious groups. For example, the influence of the Quakers, the Independents and the Moravians upon such matters as personal adornment, diversions, and use of money were all acknowledged by him.

It has been generally held that the major influence came from Anglican authorities upon the primitive church, such as Cave and Fleury.³³ While it is true that they did shape his early thinking, the statement just quoted as well as others that might be given indicate a wide eclecticism in his treatment of the problems of Christian behavior. The synthesis between the Catholic theory of Christian Perfection and the Protestant doctrine of Justification by Faith which Wesley is said to have formulated in the realm of doctrine is paralleled by a far-reaching synthesis in the realm of Christian practice. He sought to bring together in the *General Rules* whatever in the practices of early Christians or contemporary believers seemed to conform to Biblical standards.

³¹ *Works*, XI, 466.

³² *Loc. cit.*

³³ Cave is the source given by Simon, *op. cit.*, pp. 105 *et seq.* Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 64, 65 adds Fleury and the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

This is the reason for Wesley's claim that Methodism was something new. Within the State Church groups had voluntarily come together who were so concerned about "whole Christianity" that they were willing to take upon themselves *all* the disciplines that historical Christianity had found helpful. They saw the interdependence of character and conduct more clearly than did their fellows in the State Church. Their uniqueness in religious experience led inevitably to uniqueness in practice.

The extent of these disciplines and the seriousness with which they were adopted is manifest in Wesley's "Advice to the People called Methodists," 1745, when he said to them: "Your strictness of life, taking the whole of it together, may likewise be accounted new. I mean, your making it a rule, to abstain from fashionable diversions. . . . ; your plainness of dress; your manner of dealing in trade; your exactness in observing the Lord's day; your scrupulosity as to things that have not paid custom; your total abstinence from spirituous liquors (unless in cases of necessity); your rule, 'not to mention the fault of an absent person,' . . . may justly be termed new."³⁴

Wesley believed that these practices occasioned by Methodist emphasis upon perfect love set his followers apart from all eighteenth century religious groups. He said that although some groups were "scrupulous in some of these things" and others were "strict with regard to other particulars," yet he did not find "any other body of people who insist on all these rules together." Methodists might, therefore, be considered a "new people" with respect to their "name, principles, and practice."³⁵

The significance of Methodism, Wesley believed, lay in its comprehensive inclusion of the elements which have characterized Christianity, whenever it has returned to its fundamental doctrines, principles and practices. It had discovered what is common to Christianity whenever and wherever it has appeared in its simplicity. In spite of all the seeming diversity in historic Christianity, at the core is uniformity, for the dictates of love remain much the same from age to age.

For this reason he believed the rules would carry their own verification and appeal to every man's judgment. He confidently

³⁴ *Works*, VIII, 354.

³⁵ *Loc. cit.*

declared their universal acceptability, saying, "all these we know His Spirit writes on every truly awakened heart." This seems an amazing assumption; yet Harnack has pointed out that Protestantism reckons upon the Gospel being something so simple, so divine, and therefore so truly human, as to be most certain of being understood when it is "left entirely free," and also as to produce essentially the same experiences and convictions in individual souls. Wesley had reached this conclusion after years of thought upon the ethical demands of Scriptural Christianity. Under the influence of the Evangelical Movement his conclusion was accepted in the main by thousands of Christians within and without the Church of England and on both sides of the Atlantic during the nineteenth century.

To the early Methodists the *Rules* were entirely acceptable. They were immediately adopted by the Manchester Society. We may assume that the withdrawals and expulsions had rid the Society of all those who were not seeking perfect love. Those who remained were glad to submit to rigid disciplines, for they agreed with Wesley that "these outward signs" are the consequences of love of God, which precludes anything that will interfere with right tempers, communion with God, or dedication to His will; and also anything that interferes with love of the neighbor and devotion to his good.

The *Rules* were for them an objectification of principles which had already been filled with meaning by their experiences in their search for God. The *Rules* elucidated the way of life which they wished to adopt. They were not a super-imposed code of laws; they simply charted the way of perfect love.

If one understands the spirit in which the *Rules* were written and adopted, one can also understand the spirit which prompted expulsion of those who refused to be governed by the *Rules*. Such persons had not caught the full implications of the Methodist message; they were still too close to the worldiness of the great mass of Anglicans who rested in opinions, church attendance, assent to creed or other false assurances condemned by Wesley. Their way was not the Wesleyan way and their continuance in the movement would soon obscure its high goal and weaken its power.

Wesley attributed the inefficacy of current Christianity to this very lack of discipline in the Church. He agreed with the belief held by the primitive Church that "none could be real Chris-

tians, without the help of discipline."³⁶ The fact that no such discipline now existed "in any part of England" seemed to him to account for the scarcity of English Christians.

He was very severe with those clergymen who accused him of destroying the order of the Church, replying that if by order was meant "true Christian discipline, whereby all the living members of Christ are knit together in one, and all that are putrid and dead immediately cut off from the body" he would agree to reverence it. "But," he asked, "where is it to be found?....Your parishioners are a rope of sand....few (if any) of them are alive to God; so they have no connexion with each other, unless such as might be among Turks or heathens." The clergy had neither the power nor the courage "to cut off from that body, were it alive, the dead and putrid members."³⁷ They dared not repel the greatest men in their parishes from the communion table, even though they might be drunkards."³⁸

Wesley's view of the dependence of Christianity upon discipline for its spread and likewise his severity in expelling from the societies all those who did not obey the *Rules* indicate plainly the original nature of Methodist Societies. They were very definitely a "gathered church," who had chosen "the more excellent way." They did not impose their conduct pattern upon those who did not know their principles. But, for themselves, they were convinced that a life of complete dedication to God required acceptance of all the disciplines proposed by Wesley.³⁹ They agreed with him, likewise, that the moral state of the world would not be greatly bettered until "the more excellent way" was understood and generally followed; hence, while avoiding censoriousness, they were continuously evangelistic.

It was early found that "many ill consequences" came from continuing those in the Societies who had given way to "sins which had long easily beset them. It was dangerous to others; inasmuch as all sin is of an infectious nature." The scandal which it brought "caused the truth to be evil spoken of."⁴⁰

³⁶ *Works*, VII, 285.

³⁷ *Works*, VIII, 255.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³⁹ See Wesley's sermon on the "More Excellent Way," *Works*, VII, 29-36,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

Wesley's administration of "true Christian discipline" was, therefore, firmly and fearlessly carried out. He advised one of his preachers facing the problem of smuggling among his members, "Begin in the name of God and go through with the work. If only six will promise you to sin no more, leave only six in the Society. But my belief is an hundred and fifty are now clear of blame; and if you are steady, an hundred will amend."⁴¹

Direct and sympathetic dealing with the offender always preceded expulsion. In the early days of the Societies Wesley himself met every member at least once in three months. He knew "not only their names, but their outward and inward states, their difficulties and dangers." "How otherwise," he asked clergymen who made no pretense to pastoral work, "can I know either how to guide them aright, or to commend them to God in prayer?"⁴²

As the revival spread, class-meetings were organized and served the purpose of both better counseling and closer discipline. The prospective member was first placed in a class for a quarter and then given a ticket of admission if he had proven himself. The class-leader kept in weekly contact with the members of his class and once a quarter Wesley or one of his preachers examined all members and renewed the tickets of those who had been faithful. Those who had not been were admonished and again put upon probation. This was done in the most quiet and inoffensive manner, and very often the unruly member finally became a faithful Methodist. Only in cases where the offence was great was any announcement of dismissal made. Wesley felt that the plan was simple, rational and scriptural.⁴³

He said also that this plan was unusual, that the exclusion of "the disorderly, without any respect of persons" was a method used by few religious communities. He felt that Presbyterians, Baptists, Independents and Friends had close kinship with Methodism in their insistence that Christian principles be translated into action; but he believed that they had all grown lax in enforcement of their position.

One of his principle objections to the Baptists of the time was that, while still maintaining high requirements for admission,

⁴¹ *Letters*, VI, 236.

⁴² *Works*, VIII, 226.

⁴³ *Works*, VII, 209.

they allowed those who had lapsed from their Covenant to remain. He argued that "if no man ought to be admitted into a church or congregation, who has not actual faith and repentance; then neither ought any who has them not, to continue in any congregation." To allow this, he said, was a practical renunciation of the Baptists' main principle.⁴⁴

The *General Rules* close with an injunction that the Societies took very literally: "If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be made known unto them who watch over that soul, as that they must give an account. We will admonish him of the error of his ways: we will bear with him for a season. But then if he repent not, he hath no more place among us." There can be no question that the early Methodist Societies, while remaining an adjunct to the Church of England, were organized like many of the sects of the seventeenth century.

They had rejected "a natural ethic, whose standards differ greatly from those of Christianity"; they had evolved their social ideal from the Gospel and the history of the early church. They had banded together to demonstrate to the world the truth of "whole Christianity" by a consistently followed way of life.

⁴⁴ *Works*, VIII, 183.

⁴⁵ See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1931), II, 461 et seq.