

**PURSUING HOLINESS - A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF WESLEYAN
DISCIPLESHIP AND IT'S POTENTIAL TO RESHAPE MODERN DISCIPLESHIP
PRACTICES**

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2024

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the significance of John Wesley's understanding of discipleship and compares his theology and methodology to those of the modern era. The primary aim is to evaluate the central place of holiness in Wesleyan theology, as well the structure of accountability, discipline and intentionality that marked discipleship in Wesley's context. By examining Wesley's own journey toward saving faith and holiness, I have identified his unique contributions to this field. Employing a critical analysis of Wesley's writings and sermons, as well as a case study on the impact of the seeker-sensitive movement on modern discipleship practices, my research points out the tensions between these two contexts. Where Wesley emphasised holiness, spiritual growth and community, the modern experience among evangelicals is marked by individualism and pragmatism, resulting in a need for a revitalised discipleship model. Drawing on Wesley's contribution as well as modern resources, I provide a framework for discipleship in the postmodern era.

Keywords: John Wesley, discipleship, holiness, community.

Contents

Introduction	7
Chapter 1: Wesley's Theology on Discipleship	10
1.1. A Personal Journey	10
1.2. Influences	13
1.3. Experiences	18
1.4. In Pursuit of Holiness	21
Chapter 2: Methodologies and Practices	24
2.1. A Call to Reform	24
2.2. Societies, Clubs and Bands	25
2.3. Virtues in Practice	26
Chapter 3: Modern Practices in Discipleship	29
3.1. Key Influences on Modern Discipleship	29
3.2. Case Study:	34
Impact of the Seeker Sensitive Movement on Discipleship	
3.3. Tensions and Gaps	38
Chapter 4: A Critical Framework for Discipleship in a Postmodern Era	41
Conclusion	46
Bibliography	47

Introduction

John Wesley is regarded as one of the most important figures in evangelical history. Although his ministry was largely confined to the British Isles, with a brief (and rather unsuccessful) stint in America, his influence now reaches around the world and across denominational lines. Wesleyan theology can be found - to varying degrees - in almost every expression of evangelical Christianity, for Wesley himself contributed much to the formation of evangelicalism as a movement. As Henry Knight observes, Wesley was unfortunately not recognised for his theological contribution until the early 20th century¹ due to the wider acceptance of post-Reformation scholars. There has been, however, a renewed interest in Wesley as theologian, this largely driven by Albert Outler, Randy Maddox, Theodore Runyon and Kenneth J. Collins - and with this renewed interest, a fresh appreciation for the depth of Wesleyan theology.

Writing of Wesley, William Abraham suggests that he is more 'a mediaeval theologian than a modern one.'² By this Abraham means that Wesley's engagement and practice of theology better reflects a methodology not rooted in the staunch systematical approach of the Reformation, which arose during the Enlightenment, but rather depends on an experiential faith with noted elements of mysticism. This is a lived, pastoral theology which seeks to connect with masses rather than provide academic surety of faith. Part of the reason Wesley enjoyed such great success as a preacher is that he understood what the average person needed to hear in order for them to understand that faith alone justifies.

Wesley is, therefore, of great interest to the modern church as we wrestle with what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in a context that is far removed from the first century in which Jesus lived. Context is, however, only part of the equation. In this regard, we are well served to do as Wesley himself did: reach back into the rich heritage of our history and seek a return to our theological roots. Considering the impact Wesley has had on global Protestantism, I believe there is enormous benefit in a closer study of his theological and methodological contributions.

¹ Knight. 2018. John Wesley, [edition unavailable] (Cascade Books) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/882425>> [accessed 27 September 2024].

² Abraham, William. 2005. Wesley for Armchair Theologians, [edition unavailable] (Westminster John Knox Press) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/2100633>> [accessed 30 September 2024]

This paper seeks to address the need to rethink, reform and revitalise discipleship. My goal is to provide a critical framework through which evangelical churches can better equip believers to intentionally grow as apprentices of Jesus Christ. The impact of modernity and the emergence of the seeker sensitive movement - which has come to dominate western evangelicalism - has resulted in the urgent need for a clear and concise theological framework in this regard.

Many of our modern practices in discipleship, intentionally or not, come from a Wesleyan heritage. The practice of small groups meeting together to study scripture, discuss pertinent faith topics and hold one another accountable is scripturally inspired - following the example of Jesus and his disciples - but also very much influenced by Wesley's practice of establishing classes and bands. He earnestly believed that holiness depended on communal pursuit and, as such, established his movement in this way. His theology was deeply concerned with the lived experience of the people he felt compelled to serve, and therefore in stark contrast to the systematic theology of post-Reformation Europe. Wesley reads differently to Luther, Calvin, Edwards and Spurgeon because he thought and practised differently to them. He was, in many ways, something of a maverick, being far more concerned with that which needed to change in the expression of the Christian faith than the groundwork others had established for him to stand on³. In a similar way, as one considers the state of the western Church and the many challenges we face, it is apparent that we need the mavericks - the dissenters and the reformers - to lead the way in blazing a new trail for discipleship that fits a completely new and fast changing context while remaining rigidly orthodox in theological conviction. In this regard, Wesley excelled. He can be criticised in the area of orthopraxy, not orthodoxy.

I will therefore provide an overview of Wesley's own journey in discipleship, examining the people and experiences that shaped his thinking and practice on this topic. To work towards a framework for modern evangelicalism based on Wesley's theology, that theology must first be identified. Wesley himself will be the primary source here.

I am concerned that too much has been made of the need for change in our practice of discipleship within evangelicalism that we readily abandon the very heart

³ Abraham, W. 2005. *Wesley for Armchair Theologians*. (Westminster John Knox Press) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/2100633>> [accessed 30 September 2024].

of that which we seek - to be authentic in our commitment to submit to and follow Jesus Christ as we believe him to be revealed through scripture. This demands from us the acceptance of the sufficiency of scripture and the work of Christ in our salvation. I must, therefore, include here a comment on historical evangelicalism - which has been indelibly shaped by John Wesley, among many others. This will help to establish the context I am addressing, for the universal Church is broad in belief and expression. My comments on the challenges in discipleship may not reflect, for example, the realities and experiences in Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism. I am keenly aware that discipleship in a place where Christians suffer persecution and must practise their faith in secret will, by necessity, look very different to the discipleship we discuss in many western, liberal democracies. This paper is therefore concerned with discipleship in the western, evangelical Church.

I will then turn to Wesley's practice of discipleship, considering how his methodology impacted the advancement of the renewal which he sought within the Church of England - and, later, the emergence of a completely new denomination. This will be important in identifying what Wesley uniquely brings to this conversation. Here, I will include more discussion around contemporary sources on Wesley.

The paper will then discuss modern practices in discipleship, including key influences, a case study on the seeker-sensitive model of discipleship, the impact of modernity and the gaps and tensions between modern practices and Wesleyan methodology.

Finally, I will propose a critical framework rooted in Wesleyan spirituality and contextualised for our time. I will draw on Wesley's theology and methodology, considering how the essence of this theology and practice translates to a culture so far removed from his own. Different though our worlds may be, the modern church has much to learn from John Wesley - just as he learned so much from those who had gone before him.

Chapter 1: Wesley's Theology on Discipleship

1.1. A Personal Journey

One of the reasons I look to Wesley for guidance on discipleship is that he did not just think, discuss and teach it but he modelled it. Raised in a devoutly Christian home to a Church of England vicar father and a deeply pious mother, Wesley grew up not only in the faith but deeply informed about it. It is surprising, then, to read these words in his journal:

I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! Who shall convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this heart of mischief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near; but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled.⁴

These words reflect the inner turmoil Wesley experienced as he returned from a missionary trip that was, by all accounts, an utter failure. We do not find here mere complaints born from some perceived inconveniences. This is Wesley in, quite possibly, his darkest hour, as the full reality of his human condition comes crashing upon his soul like waves relentlessly crash on a beach. His mind and spirit are in turmoil, for he recognises now that which he has been growing increasingly aware of - religion is futile when it looks to the wisdom and sufficiency of man.

Wesley's own journey of discipleship is indelibly marked by his desperation to lay hold of an assurance that he was truly saved. In recording his conversation with one Mr Spangenberg, a Moravian bishop in Georgia, Wesley provides this invaluable insight:

I soon found what spirit he was of and asked his advice with regard to my own conduct. He said, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?" I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" I paused and said, "I know He is the Saviour of the world." "True," replied he; "but do you know He has saved you?" I

⁴ Wesley, J. *The Journal of John Wesley*. p.47.

answered, “I hope He has died to save me.” He only added, “Do you know yourself?” I said, “I do.” But I fear they were vain words.⁵

This struggle became transformational for Wesley. Increasingly convinced that he lacked faith, that being saving faith, he endeavoured to learn how he might best obtain it. To understand Wesley’s theology on discipleship is, first and foremost, to understand the enormity of what he discovered, for a new man was birthed. The John Wesley to whom so many pastors, preachers, revivalists and theologians of the 21st century look is far removed from the fearful and defeated man who sailed back to England from Georgia. That man was so unconvinced of his own salvation that he denied himself any hope of seeing transformation in the lives of those to whom he ministered. The man we look to now, who preached the Gospel with boldness and clarity in fields, villages and taverns across Great Britain had become so convinced of his own salvation that he no longer sought only transformation, but reformation⁶. A pertinent question is, how did that happen?

It is evident from Wesley’s own records that such a transformation was the result of discipleship. Without the guidance of key men and women in his life, there is no guarantee Wesley would have found his heart growing strangely warm one evening at an Aldersgate meeting⁷. His mother Sussanna taught Wesley about faith and discipline⁸; Bishop Spangenberg revealed to Wesley what he lacked⁹; the Moravian bishop and missionary Peter Bohler guided him toward an understanding of justification by faith¹⁰. Left to his own devices, Wesley might never have recognised that his faith depended more on the sufficiency of man than Christ and the movement of Methodism may never have gained traction.

A clear example of Wesley’s commitment to discipleship is evidenced by the formation of the Holy Club, as it came to be known in jest, during his time at Oxford University. Arriving in 1729 Wesley joined his brother, Charles, and William Morgan for regular study, prayer and worship. The small group sought to encourage and hold one another accountable though they attracted ridicule from fellow students¹¹.

⁵ Wesley, J. p. 32.

⁶ Note from either Wesley’s journal or the other source that talks about ‘scriptural reformation’.

⁷ Wesley, J. p.56

⁸ Wesley, J. The Journal of John Wesley. Taken from:
https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.iv.xxi.html#fna_vi.iv.xxi-p3.1

⁹ Wesley, J. p. 32.

¹⁰ Bohler’s influence on Wesley is documented in parts of his journal.

¹¹ Wesley, J. p. 28.

Despite this, others wanted to join and a disciplined, methodical community was formed - which would later give the Methodists their name¹². In 1730 Morgan began visiting the local jail and encouraged his associates to give their time to visiting not only prisoners, but also the sick. This the brothers eagerly engaged, and Wesley's concern for the welfare of the poor would stay with for the rest of his life, becoming a hallmark of Methodism.

Tragically, Morgan passed away sometime in 1732 and hostility toward the Holy Club intensified, with rumours circulating that the strange practices of the group led to his demise¹³. In response, Wesley wrote a letter to Morgan's father in which he praised Morgan for his fervour toward those forgotten by society and explained the purpose of their little group as being to study, grow together in their faith and live holy lives. Later members would include Benjamin Ingham, who would travel to Georgia with John and Charles, and George Whitefield, who would have a profound impact on Wesley's life.

The Holy Club reveals an appreciation for discipleship through community in Wesley's mind even before the Aldersgate experience. He was intentional about not only bringing others into his orbit who could share the journey of faith with him, but also establishing a methodical practice which would benefit the spirituality of those who were also looking to go deeper. Wesley was emerging not only as a follower, but a leader.

It is clear to see that discipleship, perhaps in a form that looks different to the modern context but which remains discipleship nonetheless, is a thread that runs through the tapestry of Wesley's life. His own experiences were, at least in part, the result of his willingness to seek faith in community, this moving beyond the regular meeting for worship and sacrament as he displayed a remarkable intentionality and discipline in the pursuit of spiritual growth. Discipleship was not merely a methodological practice to Wesley, but a deeply personal experience which he cherished.

¹² Britannica, *Methodism* (2024)< <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism>> [accessed 30th September 2024]

¹³ Wesleys Oxford, *A Short History of the Holy Club* (2019)
<<https://www.wesleysoxford.org.uk/people/holy-club/what-was-the-holy-club>> [accessed 30th September 2024]

1.2. Influences

Having looked at Wesley's journey of discipleship, it is important to now consider the people who shaped him so significantly. These influences vary from historical scholarly sources which shaped and informed his thinking to personal relationships and experiences which deeply formed him. Albert Outler's chapter in *Theology Today*, titled *John Wesley: Folk Theologian*, provides a brief yet insightful overview of the religious and academic works that shaped Wesley's theology, while highlighting the difficulty in recognising these influences considering Wesley's lack of citations. For this reason Outler describes Wesley as a folk-theologian, developing a rigorous and surprisingly deep theology which - in contrast to the systematic theology of post-Reformation Europe - is easy to overlook. He was widely read, as evidenced by his seemingly causal use of scripture - which littered both his speech and writing - and, perhaps more interestingly, obscure lore upon which he drew to interpret scripture and illustrate his points when needed¹⁴. It is striking in a study of Wesley's works that he frequently references a particular person or verse, but often omits where his source is drawn from. That omission, however, does not indicate an ill informed man.

Eastern Orthodox Influences

Still, we are able to identify in Wesley some important influences outside of his own time and even tradition. Outler points to the example of Wesley's contentious - even to this day - doctrine of Christian perfection. This doctrine will be examined more fully later in the paper, but as Outler points out, Wesley's understanding of perfection was not rooted in the western tradition but that of the Eastern church and even mysticism in the form of figures such as 'Clement, Gregory of Nyssa, Macarius, Ephrem Syrus, et al.'¹⁵ Wesley was clearly not only well read, he was also unconcerned with rigidly remaining in his particular theological camp. Though he was inarguably Anglican and undeniably Protestant, Wesley displayed a willingness to draw in theological insights from a variety of sources if they proved themselves to withstand scriptural scrutiny and, in many cases, helped him interpret scripture.

¹⁴ Albert Cook Outler, 'John Wesley: Folk-Theologian.' *Theology Today*, 34. 2 (1977), 150-60 (p. 153) <EBSCOhost, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=cb8943ba-2e6e-38d6-88ce-b532031658c3>

¹⁵ Ibid.

I include this brief mention of Wesley's Eastern influences to display the breadth of his theology, which often drew the ire of those with more rigidly Reformed persuasion. The point of considering his influences is to better understand not only his theological development but also his willingness to embrace methods and practices which were unusual for a clergyman at the time. Wesley was certainly not the first Anglican or evangelical theologian to be shaped by Eastern theology or mysticism, but it is telling of his outlook that he readily studied these men and embraced their teaching.

Anglican Influences

Closer to home, Wesley was deeply impacted by the works of two Anglican clerics: Jeremy Taylor, who died before Wesley was born, and William Law, who Wesley would correspond - and disagree - with. Taylor's book *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Holy Dying* - first published as two books - is described by Mark Olson as 'a discipleship manual in which Taylor advocates a "rule and method" approach to the Christian life'¹⁶, that is, an offering of a manual by which one can structure and order one's life in such a way as to live well and, indeed, die well in Christ. The work promotes a deep sense of responsibility toward one's own salvation and Christian living, giving guidance as to how that responsibility can best be put to use.

Evidently, this thinking attracted Wesley, in part due to his nature as a meticulous and disciplined man, but also I suspect as a result of his relentless search for true faith. Wesley took on board the concepts of rules and exercises in living, eventually developing his own Rule for Christian Living. So great was the influence of this work, that it helped to shape the methodological approach of the Holy Club at Oxford¹⁷.

William Law's *Christian Perfection* contributed significantly to Wesley's own doctrine on Christian Perfection. Law defines Christian perfection as:

...a perfection that does not consist in any singular state or condition of life, or in any particular set of duties, but in the holy and religious conduct of ourselves in

¹⁶ Mark K. Olson, *The Doctrine of Justification in the Early Wesley* (2021) <<https://wesleyscholar.com/the-doctrine-of-justification-in-the-early-wesley/>> [accessed 27th September 2024].

¹⁷ Ibid.

every state of life. It calls no one to a cloister, but to a right and full performance of those duties, which are necessary for all Christians, and common to all states of life.¹⁸

The challenge from Law, and later Wesley, was to live in such perfect love for Christ that sin no longer has dominion. While Wesley would revisit this doctrine from time to time, not necessarily to correct but to clarify what he meant, it came to his discipleship and Methodism. The debate around Christian perfection rages on even today, igniting criticism of Wesley's soteriological and eschatological views centuries later. Yet Law's work challenged Wesley to consider his own love for Christ, how perfected it truly was, and in turn he challenged any disciple to pursue such perfection. This was not legalism, although it could easily stray into that realm, but in Wesley was a deeply rooted desire to love Christ in perfection.

Wesley's theological influences, only a handful mentioned here, are important to bear in mind as his theology on discipleship is explored. He drew on the accepted sources of his day - those being scripture, reason and tradition - but, importantly, opened the door to a new source of theology, at least for an Anglican in 18th century England: experience.

The Influence of Susanna Wesley

The impact of Wesley's mother, Sussana, on his life and faith cannot be overstated. During the early 18th century it was not uncommon for children to receive an education at home, and that was the experience of the Wesley clan. Besides being married to a vicar, Susanna Wesley was the daughter of Samuel Annesley, a noted Puritan nonconformist¹⁹. There can be little doubt that Susanna retained much of the Puritan influence from her upbringing and passed this on to her children. A well read and highly intelligent woman, she ensured they all received an education from their fifth birthday. This included classes for six hours a day covering subjects like Latin, Greek and classics²⁰.

Wesley's penchant for order and structure, even his unrelenting pursuit of Christian perfection, may well have been the result of his mother's influence - long

¹⁸ Law, William. 2023. *A Practical Treatise Upon Christian Perfection* (Braunfell Books) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/3832782>> [accessed 30 September 2024]

¹⁹ Abraham, W, *Wesley for Armchair Theologians*.

²⁰ Note here

before he read Taylor or Law. The Wesley children grew up used to order and method; discipline was instilled and expected²¹. Susanna was, in many ways, the first person to disciple young John Wesley.

Susanna is remembered as a spiritual guide to her children and others²²; Wesley's own abilities as an academic were undoubtedly the result of his mother's influence, for she had taught him before anyone else did. Her husband, Samuel Wesley, was not good at keeping his finances in order and faced debtors' jail twice, leaving Susanna to keep the house in order. This she did with remarkable talent when one considers the trouble with her husband and the fire that burned down the rectory in Epworth. John Wesley wrote of his mother with great fondness and himself recognised how important she was in his academic and religious development²³.

I suspect that it was Susanna who instilled in Wesley such a strong desire for holiness, and whatever Puritanesque views he held likely came from her lessons and example. He was, along with his siblings, raised in a strict environment and taught to endure that which he might not find pleasant - as a child, food or not getting his way. The later methodical practices that defined Wesley and his movement no doubt came, at least in part, from his upbringing, and he never departed from the practices of scripture reading and prayer which Susanna had instilled in him.

The Influence of the Moravians

During his fateful mission trip to the then colony of Georgia, Wesley encountered a group of German Moravians. According to Wesley's journal the ship they were on sailed into heavy storms and fear filled him. He records his despair as he asked himself, 'How is it that thou still hast no faith?'²⁴ and stating that he was, 'unwilling to die.'²⁵ He described the sea boiling and raging in biblical proportions and the fear that was evident among most on board²⁶.

²¹ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.95-96.

²² Arthur Dicken Thomas, *Profiles in Faith: Susanna Wesley*, (2003)
<<https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/profiles-in-faith-susanna-wesley/>> [accessed 25th September 2024]

²³ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.89-90.

²⁴ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.30.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

The Moravians, he noted, displayed no such fear. Even as the waves broke over the deck they continued to calmly sing²⁷. Intrigued, Wesley approached the group and asked if they had not been afraid. He recorded the response in his journal:

He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, " But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, " No; our women and children are not afraid to die." From them I went to their crying, trembling neighbours, and pointed out to them the difference in the hour of trial, between him that feareth God, and him that feareth him not. At twelve the wind fell. This was the most glorious day which I have hitherto seen.²⁸

This encounter stayed with Wesley, gnawing at him throughout his time in Georgia and planting a seed of frustration at his perceived lack of faith. While there, he was able to spend more time with the Moravians. He attended services with them and was able to engage them in lengthy, and often important, conversations on theological topics.²⁹ Unfortunately, the mission journey was a disaster, with Wesley effectively getting away as soon as he could after a particularly serious relational breakdown.³⁰ His relationship with the Moravians did not end there, however.

On his return to England it was a Moravian, Peter Bohler, who stepped in to guide Wesley toward that which he sought. When Wesley confessed to him of his struggle with unbelief, told him to, 'Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.'³¹ Bohler can be credited more than most for shaping Wesley's understanding of faith and keeping him in ministry at a time when he was struggling to do so. He disciplined this man and, in doing so, helped to unearth the gold we enjoy today.

It was a Moravian society which Wesley attended in Aldersgate, leading to his famous experience of true faith, which is examined next. After this, Wesley travelled to stay with the Moravian in Herrnhut, Germany and while there was deeply

²⁷ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.31.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Julian E. Pace IV, *John Wesley and the Moravians: 1735-1741* (2020)

<<https://wesleyscholar.com/john-wesley-and-the-moravians-1735-1741/>> [accessed 29th September 2024]

³⁰ This was the infamous relationship with Sophie Hopkey, which is detailed in Wesley's Journal - providing his perspective - as well as numerous contemporary sources which suspect that Wesley downplayed his wrong in the situation.

³¹ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.51.

impressed by their piety and practices, much of which was resounded with his own views. Perhaps the most influential aspect of the Moravians was their deep faith in God, which Wesley witnessed first hand both on board the ship to Savannah and while at the funeral of a young boy in Herrnhut.³² Nothing seemed to shake their quiet, yet powerful, resolve in the sovereignty of the God whom they worshipped and the assurance of their salvation.

The Moravians influenced Wesley not only theologically but also practically. While he was already a man of order, their practice of meeting in societies and bands would contribute to his own formation of Methodist structure.

1.3. Experiences

Wesley was not only shaped by the people he read and knew, he was also shaped by his experiences. It is important to note this, for the discipleship Wesley pursued and taught was one of the lived experience of Christ. So far, Wesley has been described as a man with deep seated doubt and fear who was searching for a way to live in complete obedience to Christ, and who desperately hoped to lay hold of the assurance he witnessed among the Moravians. While the people who influenced him played an important part in his formation, it was experience which broke down his doubt and filled him with faith.

The most famous of these is the Aldersgate experience. On the 24th of May 1738, Wesley attended a Moravian gathering at the Fetter Lane Society in Aldersgate Street, London. While Luther's preface to Romans was being read, Wesley experienced all that he had been trying to learn from Peter Bohler and, more recently, his own brother, Charles. He writes:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt 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 death³³.

Aldersgate is a watershed moment for Wesley for three reasons: first, it can be credited as his conversion moment. At the Fetter Street Society a new man was

³² Pace, 2020.

³³ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.56.

birthed. This is evidenced by the remarkable shift in Wesley's own writing following the experience. The tone since Georgia had been one of doubt filled wrestling, both with his own faith and his calling. From this point, it is as if a new man appears. The assurance of his salvation is compelling and solidifies the value of a personal experience with Christ, which will become a core theme in Wesley's preaching and discipleship.

A helpful way to frame the Aldersgate experience is to return to the challenge presented to Wesley by Bishop Spangenberg in Georgia. He asked Wesley if the Spirit of God bore witness with his soul that he was a child of God, to which Wesley could not muster an honest answer. Now, he understands what that means. At Aldersgate, the Spirit of God witnessed to his salvation and confirmed his adoption as a child of God. The theological implication for Wesley is massive, but still fits with his Anglican worldview. Before Aldersgate, Wesley understood himself as having the faith of a servant - after Aldersgate, he recognised in himself the faith of a son.³⁴ Salvation, relying on prevenient grace - that is, grace which goes before us - was granted to him before his heart was strangely warmed. Yet the choice to pursue inward holiness and live as one who could be saved, knew he was saved and testified to that salvation³⁵ was made after this night.

Second, the Aldersgate experience contributed significantly to Wesley's evangelical theology. Olson points out that Wesley's testimony of Aldersgate stands as a conversion testimony when compared to others of the same period.³⁶ Wesley, as have so many others, *felt* something, emotionally and spiritually, which dramatically changed the course of his life and ministry. The kind of evangelical preaching emerging at the time promoted a personal, and tangible, experience of Christ which Wesley could now attest to. It is the difference between a person who, justified by faith in Christ, lives in the hope of going to heaven one day, and a person who knows that heaven has already broken forth in Jesus Christ. Their countenance shifts and the weight of sin, guilt and shame is removed from them as the Spirit bears his fruit.

³⁴ Mark K. Olson, *Wesley's 'Warmed Heart' At Aldersgate - What Really Happened?* (2020) <<https://wesleyscholar.com/wesleys-warmed-heart-at-aldersgate-what-really-happened/#:~:text=%5B36%5D%20This%20means%20that%20later,the%20indwelling%20presence%20of%20Christ.>> [accessed on 30th September 2024]

³⁵ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.57.

³⁶ Olson, 2020.

Third, understanding this, Wesley's discipleship is deeply impacted by Aldersgate. Olson suggests that it became a model in his evangelism³⁷, with which I concur. For Wesley, justification and sanctification - salvation and holiness - became inseparable, for a Christian pursues perfection.³⁸ Evangelism and discipleship are, likewise, inseparable in Wesleyan theology. One is saved in order to be discipled, and one who is being discipled goes about the business of evangelism. Wesley deeply appreciated the transformation wrought by an experience such as this, and he endeavoured to help as many people as he could to discover it.

Experience played a vital role in both the revivalist preaching of the 18th century and Wesleyan theology. Wesley is credited as a forebear of the Pentecostal movement, well known for its emphasis on spiritual gifts. While Wesley never displayed the same fervour as 20th century Pentecostals in this regard, he certainly had his share of experiences. He records in his journal, on the 27th of July 1739, of an encounter with a woman from whom he thought was possessed by a demon.³⁹ He had some more encounters like this, and he displayed an openness to the work and power of the Holy Spirit in regard to religious experience, but as long as it toed the line of scriptural authority. Much has been made of the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral, a tool developed by Albert Outler to better understand the sources of Wesley's theology⁴⁰. This may inadvertently present Wesley as holding to four *equal* sources of theology: scripture, reason, tradition and experience carrying the same weight in his interpretation and application of faith. This is not the case, however: a better picture may be that of a stool⁴¹, in which three legs represent reason, tradition and experience, while the seat - covering each leg - represents scripture. The analogy is helpful in confirming that Wesley believed in scripture as the highest authority in matters of faith and living, while the sources of reason, tradition and experience assisted him in interpreting scripture.

Wesley's experiences of God, be that at Aldersgate or those he witnessed, served to bring him to a place of greater appreciation of the sovereignty and salvific power of Christ and contributed such to his ministry, as he sought to help others

³⁷ Olson, 2020.

³⁸ See *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* for Wesley's theology on perfection

³⁹ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ Outler, C. *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*

⁴¹ Olivier, R, *Lecture notes*, (2011).

experience the same - and enjoy the assurance of their salvation, purchased by faith through grace.

1.4. In Pursuit of Holiness

Wesley's theology of discipleship was born out of a lifelong journey in pursuit of saving faith. Early on he wrestled with doubt and fear, questioned his calling and made a mess of himself until he realised the truth of justification by faith alone. Many people had poured wisdom into his life, but it was ultimately a personal experience with Christ which transformed his heart and strengthened his resolve. He understood not only what it meant to be saved, but what it meant to be a disciple of Christ⁴².

The discipleship Wesley taught can be defined as the pursuit of personal and social holiness⁴³. This was the centre of all Wesleyan spirituality. Rooted in his earlier exposure to Taylor's *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Holy Dying* and Law's *Christian Perfection*, Wesley resolved to renew holiness in the Anglican Church through the proclamation of the true faith and a call to perfect living. This was most effectively done, he believed, in community.

Christian Perfection

Wesley's teaching on Christian Perfection has already been mentioned but deserves further examination, for it is how he understood holiness. It is a difficult topic to navigate not least because it is the most contentious of Wesley's teachings, and he had to revisit it multiple times throughout his life in order to qualify what he meant. On the one hand, Wesley says, 'A Christian is so far perfect, as not to commit sin.'⁴⁴ On the other hand, Wesley later clarified, 'Therefore sinless perfection is a phrase I never use, lest I seem to contradict myself.'⁴⁵

The doctrine of Christian Perfection, which Wesley espoused, centred on the belief that, in Christ, a mature believer - one who is spiritually alive, growing in faith, pursuing holiness - is not perfected in (1) knowledge, (2) freed from ignorance or mistake, (3) infallible, (4) free from infirmities.⁴⁶ Wesley allowed that a Christian, however mature, remained in a state of fleshly constraint by which he or she may

⁴² Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.57.

⁴³ Sometimes referred to as *inward* and *outward* holiness; I prefer the language of *personal* and *social*.

⁴⁴ Wesley, J. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. p.24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 54.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.21.

make mistakes - though Wesley did not refer to these as sins. His belief in perfection is drawn primarily from 1 John 1:7: 'But if we walk in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.'

Wesley's argument is that the word *cleanses*, which is in the present tense, means that a believer is no longer beholden to sin. In this way, while the believer is still constrained by the flesh and therefore able to mistakes, 'they are in such a sense perfect, as, Secondly, to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers.'⁴⁷ He includes impressive exegetical work to show that the rest of this chapter does not indicate a believer can still sin, indicating that 'the tenth verse fixes the sense of the eight: "If we say we have no sin," in the former, being explained by, "If we say we have not sinned," in the latter, verse.'⁴⁸ He addresses objection from the book of James exegetically as well, and that the Israelite people sinned by distinguishing the Jewish dispensation from that of the church age.⁴⁹

Throughout the rest of the book Wesley provides his revisions over many years as he seeks to clarify his thoughts or respond to an objection. It is helpful, perhaps, to highlight some of these final thoughts. For example, Wesley states in the final sections (26 - 28) that 'There is such a thing as perfection; for it is again and again mentioned in Scripture.'⁵⁰ He is evidently still convinced of Christian Perfection, and seeks to remain so out of a conviction to uphold the authority of scripture. For Wesley, if scripture says it, it must be figured out and not easily discarded. He distinguishes perfection from justification⁵¹, indicating that one is not perfected at the moment of being justified by faith. The issue which naturally arises, then, is: at what point is one perfected? And further, how can we know who is perfected? He references Paul, who spoke of living men being perfect⁵² - so it cannot be only at the point of death. He acknowledges that is is not absolute, for absolute perfection belongs only to God⁵³. It is not sinless, but salvation from sin and the closest we get to a definition is that it is perfect love⁵⁴.

⁴⁷ Wesley, J. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. p. 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 24.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 22-23.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 122.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 122

⁵² Ibid, p. 122

⁵³ Ibid, p.122

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.122.

This doctrine is the most difficult of Wesley's to embrace, for it stands in contrast to most other theological positions - particularly that of the Reformed world, in which man most certainly cannot achieve perfection until he is glorified. There is perhaps a disadvantage in Wesley's theological style and presentation here. Whereas Reformed theology is largely systematic, Wesley - as has been discussed - presents more as a folk-theologian. His inability to clearly articulate what he means by Christian Perfection may be the result of his natural tendency to simply quote works without reference and seek a practical application in a way that helps his followers better pursue holiness - though in this case, I think he has caused more confusion than he has been helpful. At some point Wesley may have articulated what he meant in perfect clarity to Dr Gibson⁵⁵ but his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* is not so plain at all. It is, at times, muddled and confusing, and his exegetical arguments are flimsy at best.

However, Wesley believed in scripture as highest authority and so, confronted with the mention of perfection before death, he endeavoured to not only understand what that looked like but encourage his people to lay hold of it. A man in pursuit of holiness, it is natural that he looked to this perfection in regards to the deepest of his convictions and sought to attain perfect holiness for his beloved Christ.

This is the heart of Wesley's theology on discipleship - that holiness can and must be obtained through faith in Christ. The evidence of this transformed life is in the practical outworking of holiness, not in isolation, but in community - for a holy person is well aware that they are not perfected in knowledge or free from ignorance or mistake, and so they need accountability, encouragement, love and direction. They need the Gospel - as much as they needed it for salvation - and this pursuit in community ensures that they keep on the narrow road.

⁵⁵ Wesley, J. *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. p. 21.

Chapter 2: Methodologies and Practices

2.1. A Call to Reform

At his core, Wesley was a reformer. The kind of reformation Wesley enacted came about both intentionally and quite by accident. Intentionally, because he genuinely sought to renew the Church of England, to which he saw himself as a loyal son until the day he died. Accidental, because in seeking this renewal Wesley - more through denial than innocence - fully established a new Christian denomination, which would go on to provide a platform for later denominational movements that would come to define evangelical Christianity in the 20th and 21st centuries.

In England, Wesley was careful not to sanction any departure from the traditions and practices of the Anglican Church. He held a genuine belief that the Church of England was orthodox in faith and practice⁵⁶. The renewal movement of Methodism was born out of Wesley's personal experience of justification by faith alone, and it was in the practicalities of his preaching that message that Methodism slowly - at a glacial pace - shifted from a movement within the Church of England to an entirely new denomination. It is well attested that Wesley lived and died an Anglican. In fact, as Stephen Fife puts it, Methodism began at Oxford as a way for John and Charles Wesley 'to live out their Anglican faith in Christ.'⁵⁷ Any discussion pertaining to Wesley's spiritual heritage must regard that his views on the world and the Christian faith in particular were deeply Anglican by nature and practice.

The eventual split, which was not so much an event as it was a process, began when Wesley found himself barred from preaching in Anglican churches⁵⁸. So convicted was he of justification by faith, Christian perfection and personal and social holiness that he, in a sense, had no other choice. As churches began to close to him, Wesley felt the compulsion to continue preaching in whatever manner he could. 'I look upon all the world as my parish'⁵⁹ is not some dramatic outburst toward the establishment; it is the resolve of one who knows he is called to proclaim the Gospel. Wesley's understanding of his call was that 'God in Scripture commands me, according to my power, to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the

⁵⁶ Abraham, William. 2005. Wesley for Armchair Theologians, [edition unavailable] (Westminster John Knox Press) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/2100633>> [accessed 29 September 2024]

⁵⁷ <https://anglicancompass.com/from-methodist-to-anglican-returning-to-the-church-of-the-wesleys/>

⁵⁸ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.56.

⁵⁹ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p.65.

virtuous.’⁶⁰ This conviction resulted in a sweeping reform which continues to reverberate in Protestant circles two centuries later.

While the Methodist movement was not to the scale of the Protestant Reformation, Wesley ignited a fire which could easily have burned out of control. However, his loyalty to tradition and desire to keep the church intact went a long way to keep this from happening. Though Wesley had no intention of taking his movement out of the Church of England, the sheer growth of Methodism demanded he structure it appropriately.

2.2. Societies, Classes and Bands

The chief concern of Wesley for those he preached to was that they could effectively grow in holiness. He understood, perhaps better than most, that holiness is not the result of preaching alone. It must be pursued, sought after and fought for. Wesleyan discipleship came to depend on communal worship, mutual accountability and regular gathering in groups of varying size depending on the purpose.

It is important to note, and pertinent to the discussion of this paper, that the structures Wesley put in place were developed to meet the emerging needs of the discipleship of those who were becoming Methodists⁶¹. It is frequent, in modern discipleship, to seek a structure into which people can be fit - yet that was not the approach of the first Methodists. As both John and Charles Wesley were approached by individuals who desired to grow in their faith and holiness, they agreed to dedicate time in which they would all come together for teaching, guidance, encouragement and prayer⁶². These they called *societies*, a term ‘very common in London for any number of people associating themselves together.’⁶³

While societies were initially started to provide opportunity for more direct discipleship, it quickly became apparent that the personal growth and accountability Wesley and other Methodist leaders sought for their people was not well suited to gatherings of this size. With discipleship their chief concern, Methodist *classes* and *bands* were soon introduced to afford more opportunity to grow in love and holiness.

⁶⁰ Wesley, J, *Wesley's Journal*, p. 65.

⁶¹ Atkins, Martyn. *Discipleship and the People Called Methodist*. p. 11.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Kevin M. Watson, *John Wesley's Structure and Theology of Discipleship* (2014) <<https://academic.oup.com/book/27734/chapter/197910235?login=true>> [accessed 30th September 2024].

Classes were introduced within each society and limited to 10-12 members. It was here that people could more openly discuss their spiritual wellbeing, confess their sin and receive encouragement and support. Where the societies were more tailored for wider teaching and instruction, classes more closely followed the model of Jesus and his disciples, enabling a closeness that is necessary for spiritual growth.

Bands further focused this ideal, being smaller than classes. Here members were afforded a high degree of confidentiality as they shared details of their sins and failures, looking to hold one another to a high standard of accountability and pursue holiness more intensively.

The structuring of the movement played a key role in shaping the very identity of Methodism. At its core a discipleship movement, seeking to reform the spiritual landscape of England, the experience of the Holy Club so many years ago in Oxford no doubt confirmed in Wesley's mind that the pursuit of holiness is most effectively undertaken in community, where each person is able to find the support they need on a journey that is difficult to complete.

2.3. Virtues in Practice

This structuring is interesting because it highlights the virtues which Methodists sought to live by. The general virtues are well attested - love, generosity, compassion, grace, mercy and so on. For the purpose of this paper, I propose three virtues which Wesley embodied and that had a profound impact on Wesleyan discipleship.

Any study of John Wesley reveals the *intentionality* with which he sought to outwork his faith and calling; the *discipline* by which he submitted himself to Christ; and the close *proximity* he afforded others in order to be effective. These three concepts - intentionality, discipline and proximity - mark Wesleyan discipleship in a way that is unique to Wesley. Not in theory - for many before him have been intentional about their faith, disciplined in their living and of close proximity to their people - but in practice. In a sense, Wesley raised the bar of spiritual leadership by making himself as available as he possibly could to as many as he possibly could whenever he possibly could. His work ethic is well documented. He is reported to

have travelled 225 000 miles to preach and visit societies.⁶⁴ The data on Wesley's work ethic is limited and requires no small amount of speculation⁶⁵. Yet, in order to accomplish what he did, the scope of work he undertook must have been legendary.

On intentionality, one need only look to Wesley's relentless pursuit of holiness to acknowledge this virtue. From the moment he identified that which lacked in him, he resolved to seek a cure.⁶⁶ His discipleship benefitted from this in three ways:

- I. *Intentional Approach*: Wesleyan discipleship required deliberate action, as evidenced in the establishing of societies, classes and bands. As discussed above, each of these forms of meeting carried a distinct purpose. We find in this model a wide reaching, yet focused, approach by which discipleship is accessible to any believer - be they mature or new to the faith.⁶⁷
- II. *Intentional Growth*: with a focus on holiness and maturity, Wesley encouraged growth among his followers. Disciples were not left to their own devices, but intentionally trained and equipped for both a life of faith and Christian ministry.
- III. *Intentional Engagement*: from the days of the Holy Club, Wesley endeavoured to make himself available to those on the margins of society. His intentionality in this regard laid the foundation for the Methodist movement to become a powerful force in the realm of social justice.

On discipline one need look no further than the careful and methodical way in which Wesley structured his life and ministry:

- I. *Accountability*: Wesley instilled discipline through the structure of classes and bands, expecting every Methodist to attend their group and honestly discuss

⁶⁴ T. R. Doraisamy, *John Wesley: Father of Methodism*.

<<https://www.methodist.org.sg/about-mcs/our-history/john-wesley-father-of-methodism/>> [accessed on 30th September 2024].

⁶⁵ Various references seek to provide specific hours Wesley worked, and others offer hours worked by his itinerant preachers. However, I feel that these cannot be properly verified and therefore choose not to include them as specific references.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Wesley's Journal

⁶⁷ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 8: Addresses, Essays, and Letters*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), p. 243.

the state of their soul. Those who failed to attend or who displayed unholy behaviour could be expelled, as the society in Bristol discovered when Wesley reportedly purged 20% of members for various transgressions.⁶⁸

- II. *Spiritual Disciplines*: Wesley's methodology enabled a culture of practising spiritual disciplines together, including prayer, fasting, reading scripture and sharing in communion. These regular practices not only benefited the spiritual growth of members but instilled discipline within them.

On proximity, Wesley made himself available to whomever he could, made more remarkable by the fact that travel was not as easy in his time as it is today:

- I. *Mentorship*: Wesley did not see himself as merely a preacher but as a spiritual father to many. He invested in the lives of those he disciplined by engaging in personal conversations, writing letters to provide spiritual guidance and directly mentoring individuals.⁶⁹ In doing so Wesley shaped the lives of his people and modelled a relational discipleship.
- II. *Man of the People*: though contextually necessary, Wesley had opportunity to live among the people he disciplined. He is known to have preached multiple times a day, travelled extensively to visit societies and stayed with families or his preachers.⁷⁰ This allowed him to remain acutely aware of the needs of his people and address them in turn.

Wesley ensured that he modelled those virtues which he sought to instil in the lives of his people. His example provided not only a visible picture for others to imitate but an encouragement to do so. Many disciples are willing but looking to someone to show them the way, and modern leaders would do well to consider Wesley's intentionality, discipline and proximity as he not only raised disciples but revealed himself to be a disciple too.

⁶⁸ Charles White, *Spare the Rod and Spoil the Church*, (2001)
<<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/spare-the-rod-and-spoil-the-church#:~:text=Wesley%20lived%20a%20disciplined%20life,persuading%20them%20to%20come%20in.>> [accessed on 30th September 2024].

⁶⁹ Wesley, J. *The Journal of John Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1909), vol. 4, p. 84.

⁷⁰ Henry D. Rack. *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), p. 351.

Chapter 3: Modern Practices in Discipleship

3.1. Key Influences on Modern Discipleship

Much has been said, by a cacophony of voices, on discipleship in the modern era. A quick search on Amazon lists some 50 000 resources available under the topic of Christian Discipleship. As far as trends in the Church go, discipleship is front and centre - particularly among evangelicals. Part of the reason for this is the after-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. A 2023 study by Pew Research found that there has been slight decline in overall church attendance among American adults, declining from 33% who said they attended church at least monthly before the pandemic to 30% saying they attend at least monthly since⁷¹. The concern that social distancing laws, localised and national lockdowns and the shift from physical to virtual gatherings would decimate church attendance has proven unfounded.

Despite this, many churches have identified a need to revisit their theology and practice on discipleship because of their experience during this time. It may be that a once sturdy pillar of the worshipping community failed to return when services opened back up, or that a once fervent believer has confessed that they lost their faith in isolation. Whatever the reason, church leaders - particularly evangelicals - are reviewing discipleship.

While the Covid-19 Pandemic undoubtedly had a lasting impact, much of the need for such a reform in discipleship theory and practice is the result of cultural influences. Just as Wesleyan theology was partly a result of cultural dynamics in the 18th century, so our modern practices are shaped by the context in which we operate. The key difference is that where Wesley operated in an overwhelmingly Christian context, the present age is decidedly post-modern.

The Impact of Modern Culture on Discipleship

Modernity describes the state of cultural being which is radically different to any and all past forms of human experience.⁷² The world has changed dramatically

⁷¹ Pew Research Centre, *How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at U.S. Religious Services* (2023)

<<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/>> [accessed on 30th September 2024]

⁷² Robbie Shilliam, *Modernity and Modernisation*, (2017)

<<https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-e-9780190846626-e-56>> [accessed on 30th September 2024].

since the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century and the Enlightenment before then. In pursuit of progress and modernisation, humanity has barrelled into a future so far removed from our roots that we now have trouble retaining our humanity. As the world has expanded online, so our relationships have declined. The importance of community has dwindled. It is far more likely that, in the western world, hearing a phrase like 'ubuntu' from sub-Saharan Africa - which emphasises the importance of togetherness and seeking the collective success of one's community - will, at best, elicit a

In his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor identifies individualism as one of the three malaises of modernity.⁷³ He discusses the steps we have taken to get to this point, the possible dangers we face and provides some suggestions to avert disaster. In a similar way, modernity presents a threat not only to the societies in which we live but the churches in which we worship - and the discipleship we are called to partake in.

I. Individualism

Borrowing from Taylor, I identify individualism as the first and primary concern for the Church. The Church has always functioned - in whatever form it takes - as a worshipping community. That word *community* carried with it an inherent meaning for every human being, because throughout our history we have depended on our community to survive. The human experience has never been one of isolation, but togetherness, as we have worked in unity to feed, clothe, house, protect, raise and empower one another. At one time out of necessity, and later from choice, humans have always understood the value of community - be that family, friends, tradespeople or any other.

The advent of individualism has challenged our thinking on community. At one time a source of dependence, it has now become a luxury which few can afford. Effective community demands time, resource and sacrifice. The notion of individualism thrusts the self into a position of utmost importance. It teaches that we are the centre of our own universe, the only ones worthy of whatever it is we own and earn because our worth is determined in the self.

⁷³ Taylor, Charles. 2018. *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Harvard University Press) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/3122218>> [accessed 30 September 2024]

Discipleship does not thrive where individualism reigns. If we accept that discipleship is the pursuit of holiness, and holiness must be pursued in community, then individualism directly threatens the very core of what it takes to do this effectively.

II. Hurry

In his book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, John Mark Comer identifies the chaotic busyness of modern life as a primary threat to spiritual health and development. Part of his research is drawn from The Obstacles to Growth Survey, which found in 2007 that 6 in 10 Christians globally report being too busy for spiritual growth⁷⁴. Dr. Michael Zigarelli, author of the study, pointed out that as Christians are absorbed into a culture of increasing busyness, their faith becomes less of a priority resulting in a stagnant or even deteriorating relationship with God which makes them more vulnerable to adopting societal norms and more at risk of increasing busyness.⁷⁵

On a practical level, this is easy to appreciate. Mere decades ago, most western families relied on one salaried adult to meet their financial needs. Typically, mothers stayed home to raise their children while husbands went out to work. While I do not advocate for an extreme kind of complementarianism that denies the right to equality in the workplace, the majority of the global economy demands that a family have at least two salaries coming in just to make ends meet. The world has grown richer, but somehow more people have grown poorer. In fact, research from the IFS in 2017 indicates that the 'average earnings of a working father in a one-earner couple are 6% lower in real terms than in 1994–95.'⁷⁶

Busyness is a cultural shift, not a choice. As society has moved toward a dual-income model, we have undoubtedly enjoyed some benefit but found ourselves busier than ever before. Factoring in the responsibility of parents to children, spouses to one another, students to schools and clubs and sports along with our

⁷⁴ Audrey Barrick, *Survey: Christians Worldwide Too Busy for God* (2007). <<https://www.christianpost.com/news/survey-christians-worldwide-too-busy-for-god.html>> [accessed on 30th September 2024].

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Cribb, Andrew Hood, Robert Joyce and Agnes Norris Keiller, *Families dependent on fathers' earnings alone have average incomes no higher than 15 years ago* <<https://ifs.org.uk/news/families-dependent-fathers-earnings-alone-have-average-incomes-no-higher-15-years-ago>> [accessed 30th September 2024].

constant connectivity through social media and we find ourselves living reactively instead of intentionally.

Discipleship requires intentionality, and when we are no longer intentional about how our time is spent, the result is exactly as Zigarelli describes - an endless cycle of hurry, busyness and hustle.

III. Convenience

Modernity has brought with it a surprising vice: more than ever before we are able to have what we want, when we want it. Decades ago the height of convenience was the ability to refrigerate food, reducing trips to the store or market and making the planning of a week's worth of meals far easier. Today we are able to tap our phones and order any number of food items to our location within half an hour. Where convenience once served to free us from menial tasks, it is now beginning to cripple us.

Such convenience in regard to our spirituality is troubling. While hard data is sparse, there is a growing concern over how many 'new converts' in one church are merely 'pew swapping'⁷⁷ from another. While many people have legitimate, and sometimes heartbreaking, reasons for leaving a church community, there is also enormous potential for the convenience of church hopping to play into our personal appetites in terms of style, content and fellowship. It has never been easier to just go to another church if someone grows tired of the one they currently attend.

Convenience also makes it easier to slowly withdraw from their community. While online worship quickly became a necessity during the Covid-19 Pandemic, it is concerning that worshipping members of a community may choose to engage solely online and remove themselves from physical fellowship.

While convenience can indeed be a blessing in many situations, not least those who are immobile or ill, it does not breed discipline, and discipline is a necessity for discipleship.

IV. Freedom

Modernity presents freedom as an ideal to be cherished, but the question must be asked: freedom from what? And freedom to what? Freedom from

⁷⁷ The practice of going from church to church without settling in a particular one. Data is rare but there is much concern over this practice in local contexts.

oppression, injustice, hopelessness and poverty are ideals to be cherished and closely guarded. Yet freedom can also draw us from responsibility, dependability, service and virtue. The rugged individualism which is growing to dominate the West, in which each self takes the place of highest esteem and greed and pride are fostered, risks freeing us from so much that we lose any sense of our interdependence. In the context of discipleship, this is anathema, for to be a disciple is to serve both God and the family in which he has placed us. It is to seek the benefit and joy of others before ourselves, and to lay our lives down for one another⁷⁸.

Freedom in Christ means freedom from our bondage to sin and the penalty thereof; it does not equate to living as we see fit and seeking our own pleasure. We are freed from ourselves to live as new creations, inheritors of a promised kingdom for which we wait with the whole family of God.⁷⁹ For discipleship to be effective we must regain a biblical understanding of freedom and discard the cultural influence which is so easily prevalent within our church communities. True freedom is found in the pursuit of holiness, together as a community of faith, as lives are released from bondage and restored to God.

Advancements in Technology

Not all that the modern age offers is inherently bad for discipleship. The Covid-19 Pandemic showed the value of being able to connect online while millions of people were in isolation, enabling communities of faith to continue discipling one another and pursuing holiness even though doing so physically was not an option. As we see ageing populations in the West, this technology affords us an opportunity to ensure that disciples who may have very good reasons for not being able to physically attend church gatherings stay connected to their wider community. More resources for spiritual growth are available online than ever before, meaning churches can supplement their teaching in a strategic way. This benefits not only the members, but also the pastors, leaders and staff, many of whom already carry tremendous responsibility.

It is also interesting to note that as the world moves from a modern to a post-modern era, interest in spirituality - not necessarily religion - is on the rise

⁷⁸ See John 15:13.

⁷⁹ See Romans 8:17.

again.⁸⁰ This shifting cultural landscape will provide new opportunities for evangelism and engagement in discipleship, and it is therefore imperative that churches prepare by equipping their people to witness and practically demonstrate the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

It is inevitable that secular culture will always have an impact on our ecclesiology, but a community which understands what it means to be the Church and to pursue Christ together is far better placed to resist that which poses a threat to its unity and practice and that which may provide unique opportunities to advance the cause of the Gospel.

3.2. Case Study: The Impact of the Seeker Sensitive Movement on Discipleship

The seeker-sensitive movement emerged in the late 20th century in western evangelicalism and sought to revolutionise church growth. Pioneered by megachurches such as Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Church, both in the United States, this movement aimed to make church services more appealing to non-Christians or ‘seekers.’ The approach led to impressive numerical growth in churches, but it also prompted significant discussions and debates around its impact on discipleship. While the seeker-sensitive model has succeeded in reaching large audiences, critics argue that it often compromises spiritual growth and discipleship for the sake of numerical growth.⁸¹

This case study will explore the seeker-sensitive movement’s impact on discipleship, focusing on both the positive and negative consequences of this approach. It will examine how the movement’s emphasis on attractional methods, accessibility, and engagement has reshaped discipleship, often leading to a tension between evangelism and spiritual depth.⁸²

The seeker-sensitive model is an attempt to create an inviting and non-threatening environment for people unfamiliar with, or sceptical, of Christianity. Its primary goals include:

⁸⁰ David Kinnaman, *Rising Spiritual Openness*, (2023) <<https://www.barna.com/research/rising-spiritual-openness/>> [accessed 30th September 2024].

⁸¹ Cally Parkinson and Greg Hawkins, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (WCA: Chicago, 2007).

⁸² Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, *The Other 80 Percent: Turning Your Church’s Spectators into Active Disciples*. (Jossey-Bass, 2011). p. 15-20.

- **Relevance:** The movement minimises traditional church elements that might alienate non-Christians, such as liturgy, hymns, and overtly religious symbols.⁸³
- **Practical Sermons:** Preaching is designed to be relevant, practical, and heavily topical, addressing issues pertinent to daily life such as relationships, finances, and personal success.
- **High Production Quality:** Services are characterised by modern music, multimedia presentations, and high-level production.
- **Low Pressure:** People can participate in church activities without feeling pressure to make an immediate commitment to the Christian faith or deeper involvement in church life.⁸⁴

These features attracted many who were previously disengaged from church or hesitant about religion, resulting in substantial growth in attendance in seeker-sensitive churches during the 1980s and 1990s. However, as seeker-sensitive churches grew, questions arose about how effectively new Christians were being discipled,⁸⁵ and how much depth there really was to this movement.

Positive Impact on Discipleship

1. Increased Accessibility and Engagement

One of the benefits of the seeker-sensitive movement is its ability to attract large numbers of people who would not typically attend traditional church services. By removing barriers that often made the local church seem irrelevant or inaccessible, seeker-sensitive churches have drawn people into the Christian community.⁸⁶ This has been accomplished by:

- **A Focus on Evangelism:** The seeker-sensitive model has been highly effective in evangelism, reaching people who might never have set foot in a church.

⁸³ Parkinson and Hawkins, *Reveal: Where Are You?*

⁸⁴ Gary Gilley, 'The Seeker-Sensitive Movement: The Answer or the Problem?', *Southern View Chapel*, 2006, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Albert Mohler, 'Willow Creek's Huge Shift', *The Christian Post*, 2007.

⁸⁶ Parkinson and Hawkins, *Reveal: Where Are You?*

This emphasis on meeting seekers where they are mirrors biblical examples of outreach, such as Paul's ministry to the Gentiles⁸⁷, where he adapted his message for a new audience.

- **Connecting to Practical Life:** Seeker-sensitive churches often preach sermons which are highly practical and applicable to everyday life, helping people connect Christian principles with their real-world experiences. This practical focus can be an attraction to new believers who are interested in understanding how faith can be beneficial to their daily lives.⁸⁸

II. Getting Started in Faith

The seeker-sensitive model provides an easy and relaxed entry point for new believers to begin their journey of faith. Many seeker-sensitive churches offer small groups, entry-level classes, and support groups designed to help newcomers take their first steps in Christian faith. These programs often address topics around basic Christian beliefs, which may inspire a deeper dive into faith later on in life.⁸⁹

Some seeker-sensitive churches, such as Willow Creek, have also recognized the importance of discipleship after conversion. Willow Creek's leadership commissioned the Reveal study in 2007, which showed that while they were successful in drawing people in, they were much less effective in helping believers grow in spiritual maturity. As a result, Willow Creek adjusted their focus to incorporate a greater emphasis on discipleship alongside their seeker-sensitive programming.⁹⁰

Negative Impact on Discipleship

I. Shallow Discipleship

The primary critique of the seeker-sensitive movement is that, in its attempt to reach a broad audience, it sacrifices spiritual depth and discipleship. Critics argue that the movement's focus on attracting seekers can lead to:

- **Weak Theology:** The drive to keep messages non-threatening and accessible can result in sermons which avoid difficult or challenging theological topics.

⁸⁷ Acts 17:16-34

⁸⁸ Mohler, 'Willow Creek's Huge Shift'

⁸⁹ Thumma and Bird, *The Other 80 Percent*, p. 100

⁹⁰ Parkinson and Hawkins, *Reveal: Where Are You?*

Topics such as sin, repentance, suffering, and the cost of discipleship are often downplayed in favour of messages that are more palatable to a broader audience.⁹¹

- Entertainment over Substance: The high-production quality and emphasis on engaging services may develop a culture of entertainment, resulting in consumerism, rather than spiritual formation and discipleship. The focus on keeping attendees comfortable and entertained can discourage a deeper engagement with spiritual practices like prayer, scripture reading, and confession.

Compared to Wesley's virtues of intentionality, discipline and proximity, the seeker-sensitive model neglects many of the aspects of discipleship that lead to spiritual maturity. Wesley's methodical system of societies, classes, and bands was established to foster deeply personal relationships which bred accountability and contributed to growth in holiness. This stands in contrast to the less structured and more relaxed forms of discipleship that often characterise seeker-sensitive churches.⁹² The emphasis is often on convenience over depth, resulting in missed opportunities to disciple new believers.

II. Consumerism

Another critique of the seeker-sensitive movement is that it can foster a consumer mindset among attendees. Since the focus is on meeting the needs and preferences of seekers, there is a risk of reducing church participation to a consumer experience, where individuals evaluate their church involvement based on what they 'get' out of it rather than their growth in Christ.⁹³

This consumer mindset is in sharp contrast with the costly discipleship that Jesus called his followers to. Jesus emphasised the need for believers to 'take up their cross daily and follow me,'⁹⁴ a call that requires sacrifice and commitment to Christ and a willingness to be formed by him.

⁹¹ Gilley, 'The Seeker-Sensitive Movement: The Answer or the Problem?'

⁹² Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), p. 77-79.

⁹³ Gilley, 'The Seeker-Sensitive Movement.'

⁹⁴ Luke 9:23.

III. Weak Emphasis on Spiritual Growth

Many seeker-sensitive churches have been criticised for failing to provide clear pathways for deeper spiritual growth. While they are highly effective at drawing people into the church, they often struggle to help new believers move beyond a superficial level of faith. As the Reveal study found at Willow Creek, many attendees reported stagnation in their spiritual growth after the initial excitement of attending seeker-friendly services.⁹⁵

Without some structure of accountability and spiritual growth, like Wesley's society, class and band meetings, it can be difficult for believers to grow into mature disciples. Wesley's system ensured that every believer had regular opportunities for confession, spiritual direction, and growth. Seeker-sensitive churches often lack these methods of spiritual discipline and accountability, resulting in poor biblical literacy and shallow theology.

The seeker-sensitive movement has had a profound impact on discipleship, especially in the way it has swept through the world. As a church planting model it enjoys enormous popularity. Its emphasis on relevance and engagement has opened the doors to people who might have felt alienated by traditional church structures. However, the model has so far failed to provide a substantial methodology of discipleship and continues to face significant critiques for its tendency toward consumerism and weak emphasis on deeper spiritual growth. Due to its popularity and wide reaching influence, the seeker-sensitive model has contributed to the need for renewal in western evangelical discipleship practices.

3.3. Tensions and Gaps with Wesleyan Discipleship

While modern discipleship practices of small groups meeting together to discuss a topic or text may appear to be Wesleyan in nature, the reality is that much of our modern practice is far removed from Wesley's vision of discipleship. Some of these gaps and tensions are quite obvious - modern discipleship can be shallow and overly sensitive to new believers, lacking in discipline and accountability - while others are more subtle and harder to address.

⁹⁵ Parkinson and Hawkins, *Reveal*.

Pursuit of Holiness vs Pragmatism

Upon examining both Wesleyan and modern discipleship in the evangelical context, the first gap to immediately stand out is that of holiness. While this was fundamental to Wesley's vision of discipleship, it is too often lacking in the modern experience. One of the ramifications of the seeker-sensitive movement has been to reject the language of holiness and, in doing so, disempower disciples in their pursuit of it. It is ironic that modern discipleship methods make so much of community when community has historically been the primary tool by which disciples seek to grow in holiness. Divorced from this purpose, community becomes little more than a gathering - in the same way that we gather to watch sport, to exercise or to socialise - and is no more effective in the pursuit of holiness than any secular group.

In place of holiness we may find pragmatism as modern churches seek to soften the demand of following Jesus by appealing to the natural appetites of the crowd. Instead of expositing scripture to exhort believers in holiness, obedience and repentance, sermons can take the form of inspirational and engaging lessons on how to build one's best life. Even the grace which empowers the disciple can be cheapened in such an environment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes this observation in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*:

Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before. "All for sin could not atone." The world goes on in the same old way, and we are still sinners "even in the best life" as Luther said.⁹⁶

Such discipleship is powerless to transform and hopeless to attain the assurance of salvation and the ongoing sanctification of the Spirit. Where true discipleship strengthens the Church, this pragmatism weakens the worshipping community, paralysing her ability to witness and advance the Kingdom of God. It is the responsibility of pastors and leaders to recognise that while discipleship does not

⁹⁶ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2012. *The Cost of Discipleship*, (Touchstone)
<<https://www.perlego.com/book/1411650>> [accessed 30 September 2024]

depend entirely on the Sunday gathering, it is where many find both the start of their journey and the sustenance they need to continue. We must, therefore, take seriously our role in exhorting the gathered people of Christ and impart truth and grace in equal measure.

Accountability vs Individualism

Where historic discipleship, particularly that of a Wesleyan fashion, has recognised enormous value in the practice of structured accountability - such as the type provided for in classes and bands - the embrace of individualism gives rise to a jealous guarding of our own rights and freedoms. Objective truth is rejected in favour of individual truth, and everyone does what is right in their own eyes.⁹⁷ This tension exists because accountability directly assaults the degree to which individualism may be exercised; by nature, accountability demands a willingness to take responsibility for mistakes, admit faults and endeavour to change not only for personal benefit, but the benefit of the community as a whole. Accountability shifts the emphasis from 'what is good for me?' to 'what is good for all of us?'. It demands engagement on a personal level, in which the goal is both *personal* and *social* holiness.

Organic Discipleship vs Program Delivery

A major criticism of modern discipleship practice may be that churches risk becoming experts in program delivery and fail to foster an environment where organic discipleship may occur. Neat discipleship, complete with measurable outputs and visible achievement, is best delivered in the form of a short course or group. These have clearly defined expectations, attendees know when they will start and finish and as such can plan their lives accordingly. This is in stark contrast to the messiness and interruptive nature of organic discipleship, by which relationships naturally form - often in the most unlikely places.

There is a unique strength in the diversity of many local churches, which the apostle Paul references in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Addressing the issue of spiritual gifts, Paul likens the Church to a body and exhorts the Corinthians to see the beauty and opportunity that lies before them. Though messy, the benefit of organic discipleship is that it instils a sense of intentionality among a community to invest in

⁹⁷ To quote Judges 21:25.

relationship with one another, bringing our gifts and talents to bear alongside people we may otherwise never get to know, let alone pursue holiness alongside. These relationships also tend to run deeper than those fostered on a short course, where the purpose for gathering is externally provided.

Chapter 4: A Critical Framework for Discipleship in a Post-Modern Era

To develop a critical framework for discipleship in a post-modern era, one must begin with current realities. This paper has so far highlighted the impact of modernity on the Church's attempt to make disciples, showing that however good our intentions may be, our people are likely to (1) value their individuality over community, (2) find themselves busier than ever before, (3) be at risk of growing addicted to convenience and (4) likely to abandon anything they perceive as a threat to freedom. Where does one begin in such a culture?

The Contexts of Discipleship

Interestingly, while discipleship itself is a challenge, church attendance remains relatively stable, as we have seen. This presents an opportunity to instil a scriptural and theological foundation in our communities.

In *Discipleship That Fits* authors Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom identify five contexts in which discipleship takes place. These are the public context, the social context, the personal context, the transparent context and the divine context.⁹⁸ A brief analysis of these will be helpful.

Harrington and Absalom build on the research of sociologist Edward T. Hall through the work of Joseph Myers. Myers explores how people build community and experience belonging, asking the question: how does the way in which we occupy physical space communicate to others whether we want them to belong?⁹⁹ Applied to the community of the church, the authors recognised that there is natural scope to apply Myers research in a way that fosters an environment geared towards authentic discipleship.

⁹⁸ Harrington, Bobby, and Alex Absalom. 2016. *Discipleship That Fits*, (Zondervan) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/561232>> [accessed 30 September 2024]

⁹⁹ Ibid.

The **public context** is where people gather in hundreds around a shared outside resource.¹⁰⁰ The mindset is to engage the resource and not necessarily seek deep connection with others. In the church, even smaller churches, this would be the Sunday service as people come to engage structured worship.

The **social context** is still a larger gathering, between 20 and 70, where people gather to enjoy something together and therefore are prepared to get to know one another.¹⁰¹ This may be in the form of a church picnic, a youth outing or a children's party.

The **personal context** takes the shape of groups, 4 to 12 in size, where we are more comfortable sharing private matters.¹⁰² This is where genuine friendship is built and deeper relationships formed. In a church setting, this might be a small group or team.

The **transparent context** is a group of 2 to 4 people in which the deepest relationships can be formed.¹⁰³ There is a safety in the available intimacy and real formation is more likely to take place.

The **divine context** is the one-one relationship with God.¹⁰⁴ It is here where we may find ourselves most vulnerable, as we experience a divine connection through prayer, worship and adoration.

I have chosen to include some of this book in my framework because, as I draw on Wesley's discipleship approach, I find this language helpful in bridging our contexts. We have established that Wesley operated in a very different world to us, therefore his methodology cannot simply be picked up and replicated without some adjustment. Although Wesley's societies could range from 50 to hundreds of people, their purpose reflects that of the public context. His classes take the shape of the personal context and the bands fit the mould of transparent contexts. With that in mind, we proceed to establish the foundation of discipleship.

The model looks like this:

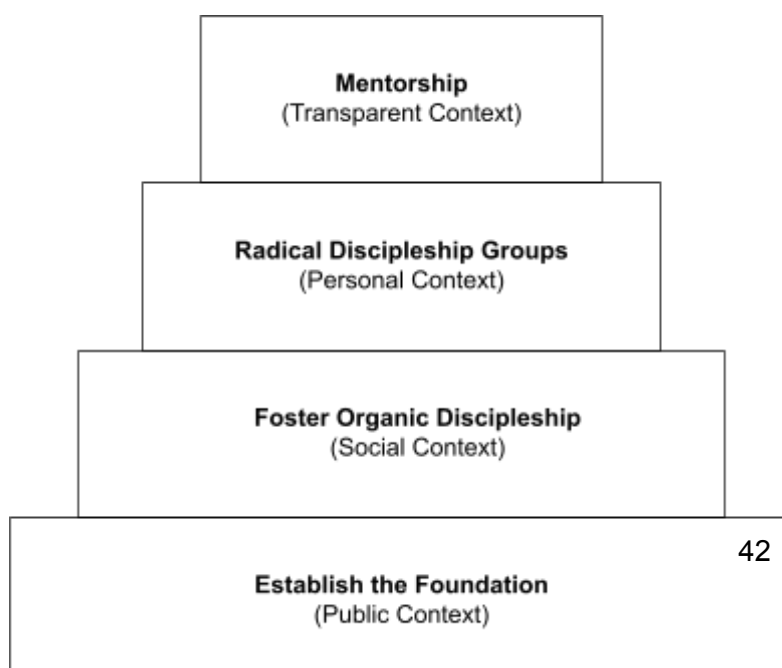
¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.



Establish the Foundation

Wesley called people to the pursuit of holiness through his preaching, and every church has the opportunity to do the same. Our public context - the Sunday gathering - affords a weekly, invaluable opportunity to equip the saints in their main work as disciples by imparting biblical truth on salvation, righteousness, holiness, the nature of God and any other foundational doctrines. This requires a commitment to preaching and teaching that is scripturally based and intended to both sustain the desire to follow Jesus and equip disciples as they do so.

Wesley's *The Complete Sermons* deserve a mention in this regard, for he intentionally sought to pull together the sermons he identified as formative for the people called Methodists. Understanding them to be disciples, he developed a library of sermons which addressed doctrinal, ethical and practical matters of faith - and which still shape disciples today. In the same way, church leaders can begin by strategizing how best to make use of their preaching and teaching time on a Sunday to pursue holiness as a community of faith. By establishing that the Sunday service is not primarily concerned with the formation of deep rooted relationships, we are able to release ourselves from the pressure of facilitating this and explore new ways of doing so.

A key foundation to establish, as early as possible, would be to clearly define and communicate what is meant by disciple. The language itself needs to be revitalised as expectations can vary from context to context. Though Wesley rarely used the word disciple, most Methodists knew beyond any doubt that they were signing up to pursue holiness together. He established a clear structure to help them do so, and then showed them how to go about it. Foundations may seem insignificant, but if they are weak the entire building falls down. In the same way, clarity around the meaning of discipleship and what that practically looks like will go a long way in sustaining the health of a church community.

Note: This can be done both in-person and online, recognising the busyness of people's lives.

Fostering Organic Discipleship

Once the foundations are in the process of being established, organic discipleship can be fostered. This may best fit the personal context, as the church

facilitates the gathering of people in an environment where friendship can naturally take root. What that looks like practically will vary from one context to the next - it may be a lunch or dinner; it might be for women only or men only. The goal is to instil a culture of connection and friendship - togetherness - in the congregation so that community comes to have meaning for the congregation. The western church needs to hand back some level of responsibility to our members, as we have grown very accustomed to paid staff and key volunteers taking care of everything. Rather than try and program connection, the church is well positioned to foster communal living - celebrating with one another, weeping together, having fun and learning what it means to be family.

As Wesley discovered, larger groups are not well suited to the intricacies of formation - such as accountability and confession - but do really well in serving the purpose of forming an identity. If a group of people are going to pursue holiness together, they need space to learn who they are.

Note: While this is an excellent opportunity to hand responsibility for organising and leading back to the members, be mindful that there likely needs to be some work on defining community. Take the opportunity and share some teaching on what biblical community is, what it looks like and allow conversation on how that spills outside the church walls.

Radical Discipleship Groups

As community forms, it is time to encourage a deeper pursuit of holiness. Introduce the personal context, small groups of no more than 12 people, which the church still facilitates by identifying leaders, who are invested in by pastors (preferably those who are in the transparent context), but the responsibility to organise and lead should not fall on staff. The members must desire to be accountable and to grow, or they simply won't. That is why foundations matter so much. Like Wesley's classes, clearly communicate the expectations of these groups: to hold one another to account in faith and discipleship; to encourage each other in pursuit of holiness; to confess sins and to study scripture and pray together. I am not in favour of topical study in groups like these because scripture needs to be understood as the highest authority and to inform the life of every disciple. However, studies which exposit scripture should be encouraged and provided if possible, as this will help disciples learn how to handle the Bible.

It is important to remember that any small group will encounter challenges with potential personality clashes, disagreements and misunderstandings. Church discipline should be introduced here in a kind, loving but firm manner and the importance of confidentiality must be stressed. Culturally, these groups need time to grow into communities which genuinely desire to pursue holiness together and hold one another to account in love.

Note: provide the option to join online if travelling so that members can stay connected, and foster a culture of importance around joining the group.

Mentorship

This is the transparent context or, to borrow from Wesley, the band. This is where one to one mentorship takes place as often as required or is possible. The most mature believers should be mentoring those who are in discipleship groups but desiring greater accountability and more growth. This is where the church needs to take greater responsibility and invest directly in individuals, but by this point the relationships should be well established and organically develop. Particular material should not be needed as mentors and mentees should be able to study scripture together and discuss it, as well any pertinent issues that arise. The relationship you want to see here is one akin to deep friendship, which takes time to develop. Set aside time to meet with mentors twice a year and ensure that they are doing well and feel supported. It is a good idea to talk together about the challenges of discipleship and adjust the program to cater for any sudden changes.

Note: people in this stage may well be developing leadership skills and looking for ministry opportunities. Hold them lightly and be prepared to talk about what it would look like to release them if required, with your blessing. Stagnation kills discipleship, so don't try to keep someone where they are if they are led to serve elsewhere.

The Divine Context

This is not a stage someone gets to, but a necessity for holiness. Foster a culture of regularly spending time alone with God through preaching, reminders in groups and clear communication. Encourage believers at any stage to prioritise their personal prayer and study and ask them how they are doing and if they need any support or guidance. The more a community seeks holiness together, the more individuals will too - and vice versa!

In summary, this discipleship model prioritises communal and personal holiness through intentional teaching, proximity to one another and discipline in meeting together and holding one another to account. Clear communication around what is available and what it means to be a disciple is essential, as well the transfer of responsibility to the members. Be clear on the expectations and purpose of each stage and invest in the formation of community.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the theological position of John Wesley on discipleship, tracing his personal journey toward saving faith and holiness and identifying the key influences and experiences that shaped his faith and theology. I have defined his position on discipleship as the pursuit of personal and social holiness and discussed the brilliance by which he organised the Methodist movement and provided a structure which promoted spiritual growth, accountability and holiness.

I identified his virtues as a leader and disciple as being intentionality, discipline and close proximity to those he served, resulting in a

I have reflected on the modern practices in discipleship by considering how modernity has influenced our experience and offering some insight as to how this may be addressed. I have examined the impact of the seeker sensitive movement in shaping theology today, and identified key gaps and tensions between the modern practice and Wesley's methods.

I have provided a theological framework which draws on Wesley's theology and practice in a way that is better contextualised for the modern world by promoting a sense of shared responsibility within the church and providing some guidance on key areas to define and communicate in different contexts.

In conclusion, Wesley's contribution to the field of discipleship continues to empower the Church long after his death. His works and practices prove to be invaluable resources as we seek a return to the simplicity of pursuing holiness in community.

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