

## Lessons in Discipleship from the early Methodists

I don't know about you, but I'm always a bit suspicious when I hear of mega evangelistic rallies in parts of Africa at which tens of thousands of people are converted at a single meeting. I can't help but wonder what happens next in such a situation after the big preacher has gone and local believers are left with the daunting task of follow up. Decision is one thing, discipleship is quite another.

That's certainly how John Wesley saw it. He once remarked *"I am more and more convinced that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place should be half-awakened and then left to themselves to fall asleep again."* In terms of evangelistic preaching Wesley was not nearly as gifted an orator as his friend George Whitefield who was one of the greatest communicators of his day, but Wesley's effectiveness (humanly speaking) lay in his ability to make disciples. He wrote *"The Church changes the world not by making converts but by making disciples."*

Making disciples – that was his secret. He wasn't in the business of counting heads – he wanted to establish fellowships of men and women who took faith seriously and helped one another grow to Christian maturity. Because that just wasn't going to happen in the local parish church Wesley set up Methodist societies which existed alongside parish worship and were intended as places of spiritual nurture for new believers.

In 1743 he described his idea of a Methodist society. He wrote *"Such a society is no other than a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their own salvation."* The requirement for membership was "a desire to save your soul and flee from the wrath to come". You did not have to be able to say that you were saved – only that you were seeking to be so. You were on the way.

It was at this point that Wesley's discipleship strategy kicked in. Every member of a Methodist society had to become part of a class. This was non-negotiable. A class comprised about a dozen or so adults mixed by gender, age, social standing and spiritual maturity. It was led by a trained lay person. It was not a Bible study group and or a gathering for teaching. Rather every week each member had to participate speaking openly about the true state of their soul. The emphasis was on mutual confession and the development of Christian character.

Although originally the class system was created as a way of organising financial giving and exercising discipline, Wesley quickly began to realise its true potential. He saw his preaching as awakening people to their need of salvation. The next stage was to get them into a class. The weekly class meetings, as ordinary folk shared in openness, honesty and vulnerability, were very often the means of moving interested people to the point of conversion and commitment. This was no hard sell. It was simply the principle that healthy flocks produce new lambs.

What a lesson for us and what a concept to recover! The evangelism happened as the group, led by an ordinary lay member of the society, created an atmosphere in which God's Spirit could move and speak into people's hearts. We call it by different names today. It may be a house group, a cell group, an Alpha course or Christianity Explored but the dynamic can still be the same. Small groups are part of our Methodist DNA. For Wesley they were an essential aspect of what it meant to be a Methodist and to be a disciple. Maybe we need to revisit the idea and make it part of our strategy for church growth.

But there's more! In early Methodism there was yet another strand in the strategy of making disciples. It was called the Band. It was not for everyone but only for those who chose to join. It is reckoned that only about 20% of Methodist people did so. A band was a group of no more than six or seven members, all of the same sex, age and marital status. It was for professing believers only and its aim was to see each person press on to holiness. We would call it an accountability group today. When you joined you knew that at every meeting you would be asked some very searching questions such as *"Do you desire to be told your faults? What known sins have you committed since our last meeting? What temptations have you met with? How were you delivered?"* It sounds like scary stuff but you get the impression that these early Methodists had got hold of something that we may have forgotten. They knew that the Christian life of discipleship is not meant to be a solitary journey but a shared pilgrimage with other members of the body of Christ.

To operate Methodist societies, with their classes and bands, Wesley put as many as one in ten of his members (men and women) into leadership positions. In this way ordinary believers often with little educational background or social standing were empowered to exercise spiritual gifts and ministries to the enrichment of all. No-one was overlooked; everyone had a role to play and ministry belonged to the whole people of God. Now surely there are lessons there for today's church! It has been said that the modern Church is a bit like a football match – 22 people desperately in need of a rest watched by thousands desperately in need of exercise. Maybe we need to learn again the lesson that church is not a spectator sport – that discipleship, evangelism and practical caring all call for a team effort.