

(03-02-25) The Means of Grace (8)

Class Meetings Acts 4:32-37 & 5:42

We have had time to delve into the means of grace for the past seven Sundays. Let me remind you of the meaning of the means of grace. “The means of grace refer to the ways through which we can receive God's grace. In other words, they are methods for experiencing God's loving and transforming presence, which helps us grow in our faith and deepen our relationship with Him. As we engage with these means, we are renovated to embody Christ's character within us, aided by the Holy Spirit.”

Today, we will explore the last means of grace in our sermon series, which is “Class Meetings.” Have you ever participated in class meetings before? Have you ever heard of class meetings?

I'd like to direct your attention to the screen to see the list of the means of grace in our denomination.

Works of Piety

Individual Practices – reading, meditating and studying the scriptures, prayer, fasting, regularly attending worship, healthy living, and sharing our faith with others.

Communal Practices – regularly share in the sacraments, Christian conferencing (accountability to one another), and Bible study.

Works of Mercy

Individual Practices - doing good works, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to the needs of others.

Communal Practices – seeking justice, ending oppression and discrimination (for instance Wesley challenged Methodists to end slavery), and addressing the needs of the poor.

Can you find the class meeting on this list? It is not present. For a long time, the class meeting was considered an important means of grace. However, it has disappeared. This is why it's called a 'forgotten but essential' means of grace. Consider this quotation from John Wesley regarding the class meeting.

“Never omit your Class or Band; never absent yourself from any public meeting. These are the very sinews of our Society; and whatever weakens, or tends to weaken, our regard for these, or our exactness in attending them, strikes at the very root of our community.” (John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” in *The Works of John Wesley* (2002), 11:433.)

The Band Meeting was organized according to sex, age, and marital status and usually had about six people. They were homogenous groups that met together for more intimate fellowship with the goal of transformation.

John Wesley believed that the class meeting was essential to the foundation of Methodism. He believed that if the class meeting was threatened, Methodism itself would be in danger. Kevin Watson, an expert on John Wesley's Small Group Ministries at Asbury Seminary, believes that the decline of the class meeting is one of the major reasons for the decline of American Methodism over the last several decades. That is why John Wesley said, "Those who will not meet in a class cannot stay with us." So attending the class meeting every week was a requirement for participating in Methodist Societies during that time.

Then what is the Class Meeting?

Today's Scripture provides us with the Biblical background of small group ministries, including the Class Meeting.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, his disciples stayed in Jerusalem until they received the promised gift, the Holy Spirit. During this time, they faced threats from the religious leaders in Jerusalem but they were bold and courageous in dealing with the persecution after they encountered the resurrected and ascended Christ. Finally, on the day of the Pentecost, they received the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of unity, power, and grace. Today's Scriptures provide a clear picture of a church that is filled with the Holy Spirit.

They prayed to God for deliverance from persecution, and He answered their prayer by leading them to establish small group ministries to help those in need in the early Church. When they prayed to God for protection, He helped them focus on the needy among them.

First of all, the Class Meeting expresses the church's unity and accountability to its members, as we can see in the early church.

"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."
(Acts 4:32, 34-35 NRSV)

Let me share how John Wesley officially started the Class Meeting.

In 1742, a group of Methodists was trying to figure out how to pay off a building debt in Bristol, England. Captain Foy suggested dividing the Bristol Society into groups of twelve people. Each group leader would be responsible for visiting

everyone in the group every week to collect one penny from each person. Someone expressed the concern that this would prevent the poorer members from participating. Captain Foy volunteered to take the eleven poorest members of the Bristol society into his group. He would visit them, and if they were not able to pay a penny, he would cover the cost for them. He then challenged other people to do the same thing. Later, each group leader reported to John Wesley about the needs and difficult situations of their small group members. As a result, John Wesley started to meet the needs of his church members by establishing the Class Meeting.

Secondly, the Class Meeting is a wonderful vehicle for evangelism and missions. **“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”** (Acts 4:33 NRSV)
“And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.” (Acts 5:42 NRSV)

The members of the Class Meeting felt cared for by their leader and fellow members. So they invited others to join the Class Meeting to receive care and to share their lives together.

Thirdly, the Class Meeting is where people can be nurtured, trained, and educated so that they can grow to be leaders in God’s kingdom movement. **“There was a Levite from Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”** (Acts 4:36-37 NRSV)

Barnabas was one of God's answers to the prayer of the church in Jerusalem when they prayed for deliverance from persecution. Apostle Paul was invited by Barnabas to join the newly formed Church in Antioch. Together, Barnabas and Paul were commissioned by the Church of Antioch for their first mission trip. Barnabas also introduced Paul to the Church of Jerusalem, and later, Paul collected offerings from the churches in Asian Minor and brought them to the church of Jerusalem to support its poor members. Barnabas must have been nurtured and trained through the small groups in the early Church. Because of his training, he was able to invite the Apostle Paul to participate in the ministries and missions of God’s Church for both Gentiles and Jews of his time.

In the early Methodist Class Meeting, someone would open the meeting with prayer, followed by the group singing a hymn or two. Then the class leader would start by asking the question, **“How is your soul?”** As participants shared their answers, the class leader or another member would offer encouragement or advice. People were essentially giving testimony to their experiences of God over

the past week. It seems that God utilized this, as the testimonies of others often had a contagious effect. Many individuals experienced conversion simply by taking part in a class meeting.

Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke candidly shared their thoughts on how we can grow through the Class Meeting.

“We have no doubt, but meetings of Christian brethren for the exposition of scripture texts may be attended with their advantages. But the most profitable exercise of any is a free inquiry into the state of the heart.” Frederick Norwood, ed., *The Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (1979), 147.

This means that if we can share our life stories and the states of our minds honestly, we can grow together and become a more faithful reflection of God’s grace and love.

There was a church member who lost his job and couldn’t pay the rent for his apartment in the city. He and his family prayed to God for help in finding a job and a new place to live. He was a member of a class meeting at his church. After openly sharing his situation with his members, they earnestly prayed for him and his family. The following week after his small group meeting, he received a call from his small group leader. The leader said, “I have a space in my house that my family hasn’t used since my kids left for college. Would you like to come and live in my house? After hearing about your situation, I was moved by God to help. My wife and I discussed this, and we would be happy to invite your family to stay with us.” The church member was so happy and grateful because he couldn’t afford to rent a house or an apartment right away. Can you guess how long the family stayed with their class meeting leader? Six months. After six months, he was able to find a job and move into a new house.

Let me quote Peter Cartwright on class meetings. He was a Methodist revivalist and preacher and was defeated by Abraham Lincoln for a seat in the United States Congress. “May the time never come when class meetings shall be laid aside in the Methodist Episcopal Church.” (Peter Cartwright, *The Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (1856), 520).