Reviving Sanctification:
Reclaiming a Wesleyan Distinctive of Holy Transformation for Renewal of Methodists in the Twenty-first Century

1. *Have you faith in Christ?*
2. *Are you going onto perfection?*
3. *Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?*
4. *Are you earnestly striving after it?* [1]

Each year, across the United Methodist denomination, in front of an assembled body of clergy and laity, ordinands are formally asked nineteen questions by their bishop before they are accepted into full connection prior to their ordination. The questions are attributed to John Wesley as ones that helped him in his discernment for the readiness of potential preachers for the early Methodist movement.[2] Today, these historic questions of Wesley serve as a common connection both across the UM connection and with generations of Methodist clergy over the centuries.

Ordinands are prepared for these questions. A seminary degree that explores and investigates the life and theology of John Wesley and the people called Methodist has helped prepare individuals for this moment. For many ordinands these questions are simply part of the ritual: asked and answered in fulfilment of what is required. The historic nineteen questions require only a one word response in comparison to the eighty to one hundred pages of writing each ordinand previously submitted to their respective Board of Ordained Ministry exploring their knowledge of theology and competency for ministry. Still, the questions Wesley asked seek something different than articulating the theoretical and theological nuances of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Wesley's questions probe at personal experience and commitment for faithful membership in the Methodist connection. Each clergy member approaches these questions with varying degrees of reverence that can be considered, by some, historical artefacts with little relevance for today. No formal poll exists, but anecdotes abound of candidates crossing their fingers behind their backs, mouthing an inaudible response or coughing

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[1] The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016). 262-3.

[2] *Book of Discipline*, 263.

for questions two, three, and four—those questions concerning sanctification—a distinctive of Wesleyan theology.[3] And seasoned clergy, who might have once affirmed each question (save one)[4] with an enthusiastic 'yes' have admitted that their response has waned with time or the questions themselves become all but forgotten as the pressures and demands of pastoral ministry began to exact its toll.[5] The reality is that the present day importance of Wesley's questions regarding a preacher's personal experience of sanctification is largely ceremonial, as it is not necessarily sought after as a condition of Christian faith.

Early Methodism, Sanctification, and the Christian Disciplines

Though these questions regarding a person's experience of perfecting love may seem remote today, for early Methodists—both preachers and laity alike—sanctification was the purpose of Christian living. The entry bar for joining Methodist Societies may have been 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins,'[6] but salvation through Christ is merely a threshold stage by which a believer is initially sanctified, renewed in the image of Christ. The ongoing work of sanctification is intended to grow a Christian disciple in Christlikeness; to be made perfect in love as Christ loved. Early Methodists, particularly those participating in band meetings, expected and sought a deeper dimension to their Christian life referring to it as 'entire' or 'full' sanctification or even 'Christian perfection.' These terms are synonymous with one another and a multiplicity of biblical images such as 'holiness,' 'perfect love,' 'baptism of the Holy Spirit,' and even language of renewal in the *imago Dei* were used to describe the experience of sanctification. Mary Tatham, a leader in the early Methodist movement in Bristol, described sanctification in terms of inner transformation, 'But how may a believer know when he is sanctified? By the change which he finds effected in him, his entire re-

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[3] Carolyn Moore, *The Nineteen Questions to Kindle a Wesleyan Spirit*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 19.

[4] The expected answer to question #18, 'Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?' is a resounding 'No!'

[5] Moore, *The Nineteen Questions*, 9.

[6] John Wesley, 'The General Rules of the United Societies' *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 9:70.

creation in the divine image and full renewal in righteousness and true holiness.'[7] Lester Ruth points out the variety of ways in which early Methodism referred to sanctification revealed 'a people who were more concerned with the evangelical *propagation* of spiritual experiences than with detached explanations of them.'[8] Therefore, the whole of the early Methodist enterprise sought to develop a particular way of life through which persons sought God's grace to be perfectly renewed in the image of Christ.

Central to their way of life as a people called Methodist were the means of grace, those 'outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end—to be the *ordinary* channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.'[9] Whether the means of grace are labeled as chief means (e.g. prayer, searching Scriptures and Lord's Supper), parsed out as instituted, prudential, and ordinary means, or divided into works of piety or works of mercy, spiritual disciplines that constituted the means of grace were inextricably linked to the Methodist movement. First called Methodists by others, the name persisted within the movement because it 'fit this group well because of its extremely strict, regimented, methodical involvement in religious activities.'[10] The means of grace referred to those particular activities that individuals engaged in as well as provided a pattern or rhythm that formed a way of life for which Methodists were known.

Yet the means of grace, or disciplines of faith, are never efficacious in and of themselves. Wesley preached:

> But we allow that the whole value of the means depends on their actual subservience to the end of religion; that consequently all these means, when separated from the end, are less than nothing, and vanity; that if they do not actually conduce to the knowledge and love of God they are not acceptable in his sight; yea, rather, they are an abomination before him; a stink in his nostrils; he is weary to bear them—above all if they are used as a kind of 'commutation' for the religion they were designed to subserve.[11]

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[7] Paul Wesley Chilcote, *Early Methodist Spirituality: Selected Women's Writings* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 167.

[8] Lester Ruth, *Early Methodists Life and Spirituality: A Reader*. (Nashville: Kingwood Books, 2005), 103.

[9] Wesley, 'Means of Grace,' *Works*, 1:381.

[10] Stephen A. Seamands, 'Submitting to be More Vile: The Quest for Holiness and Its Cost,' in *The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal* ed. Paul W. Chilcote (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 128.

[11] Wesley, 'The Means of Grace,' *Works*, 1:381.

The point and purpose of engaging the classical disciplines of Christian faith is to encounter God's love that his grace can work to renew the life of the Christian disciple, thus beginning to effect change both within her and the world as she encounters it. Robert Mulholland explains that 'when we continue to offer the discipline, that discipline becomes a means of grace through which God works and moves to transform that dead portion of our body into life in the image of Christ.'[12] Wesley does maintain that God can work to sanctify regardless of the disciplines, '… retain a lively sense that God is above all means. Have a care therefore of limiting the Almighty…He can convey his grace, either in or out of any of the means which he hath appointed.'[13] Whether the discipline is considered a work of piety (e.g. prayer, searching Scriptures, Lord's Supper) through which the disciple grows in deepening love for God or a work of mercy (e.g. feeding the hungry, providing shelter, or caring for the ill) through which the disciple might share God's love for others, the disciplines are actions consistent with the life and ministry of Christ. A disciple's participation in the disciplines opens up the disciple to the presence of divine grace, sanctifying her that she might be continually transformed in Christlikeness through on-going, faithful discipleship.

Early Methodists sought the spiritual disciplines that they might continually know renewal in Christ and be fully sanctified. Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, renown for her work to educate destitute children and for spiritual guidance she provided in early Methodism, describes 'the means of grace were as marrow to my soul.'[14] She does not categorise works of piety and mercy in her writings, but refers to particular spiritual disciplines regularly and without undue ceremony. In a letter to a Mrs. Dalby, Fletcher writes private prayer is 'the truest touchstone' for growing in faith and holiness.[15] Her journals and biography refer to frequent prayer meetings throughout 1761-2 with other members of the Methodist Society that were 'four hours engaged

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[12] M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Spiritual Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IN; InterVarsity Press 1993), 133.

[13] Wesley, 'The Means of Grace,' *Works*, 1:395.

[14] Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher: Consort and Relict of Rev. John Fletcher Vicar of Madeley, Salop. Compiled from her Journal, and other Authentic Documents.* (Nicholasville, KY: Schmul Publishing Company, 1997) 37.

[15] Chilcote, *Early Methodist Spirituality*, 282.

when I really thought we had not been above one.'[16] Her ministry to open schools in East London and Yorkshire for impoverished children is testimony to the works of mercy she regularly engaged in as part of her faithful discipleship. Responsible stewardship in all things, even in the burning of candles, was a discipline as she sought and encouraged others 'to live only to and for God.'[17] For her, and other Methodists, participating in the disciplines throughout the course of their daily lives became almost as natural as breathing.

The Discipleship Matrix

As important as the disciplines are to the Christian life, faithful discipleship, the way in which persons are renewed and sanctified in grace, can never be reduced to what a disciple does. The means of grace or disciplines are one component of four that I believe are essential to what I call the practice of discipleship. When considered holistically and in relationship with three other particular aspects of Christian living; virtues, *telos*, and *ethos*, the disciplines contribute to a theoretical framework of what constitutes faithful discipleship. Drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, these four components of Christian life and living find mutual and necessary relationship with one another in his definition of practice. According to MacIntyre, a practice is

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[18]

Appropriating MacIntyre's definition, then, the disciplines are those activities that 'are partially definitive' of and contribute to 'a coherent and complex human activity.' Through this definition of practice, we begin to get an understanding of how disciplines whether they be prayer, searching the Scripture, the Lord's Supper, or any other discipline contribute to renewal in the life of a disciple as they are integrated in relationship with the other three.

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[16] Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 37.

[17] Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 80.

[18] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 187.

Within a schematic called the *Discipleship Matrix* (Figure 1) that depicts the practice of discipleship, each component is in a direct, mutually reinforcing relationship with another. The intersection of the two dialectics creates a vertices which illustrates that all four components are in coordinated relationship with one another. Having documented that disciplines are a necessary component of Christian discipleship, it is possible to see that disciplines lie in mutual relationship with virtues and a coordinated relationship with *telos* and *ethos*. For Wesley, the disciplines were literally a means of grace to serve the end of religion lest they become 'separate from God, it is a dry leaf, a shadow'[19] or even worse, a rotting mass that is the proverbial stink in the nostrils of God.[20] It will shortly be examined how the disciplines helped form the backbone of *The General Rules* thus relating to the *ethos* of the *Discipleship Matrix*. At present, their mutual reinforcing relationship with the virtues will be considered.

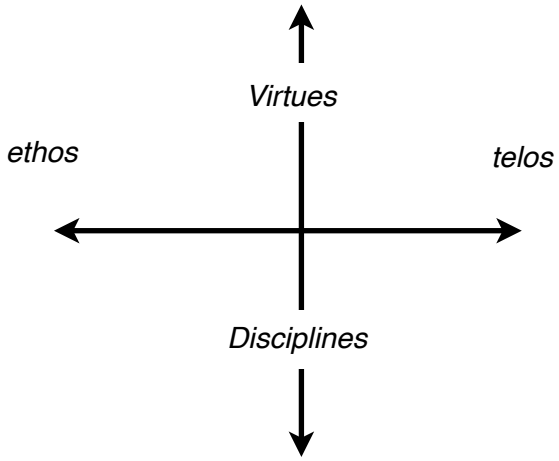

Figure 1
The loci of the *Discipleship Matrix*

Virtues

Being a disciple of Jesus is more robust than doing the things that Jesus did. Being a disciple of Jesus means being a particular type of person. John Wesley understood this when he explained who a Methodist is, not by the actions or deeds they performed, but by their essence of being, in the tract he titled "The Character of a Methodist.' The particular qualities or 'goods' of a person's character that are esteemed are virtues.[21] For Christians, virtues are the result of faith in Christ and are consistent with the fruit of the Spirit and characteristics described in the Sermon on the Mount. Eighteenth century Methodists often spoke in terms of affections or

[19] Wesley, 'The Means of Grace,' *Works*, 1:398.

[20] Wesley, 'The Means of Grace,' *Works*, 1:381.

[21] MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 191.

tempers when referring to motivations within a person's character. Regardless of terminology, primary among the Christian virtues is love. Pure or perfect love, as a synonym for sanctification, is a repeated theme in the writings of early Methodists. Considering her covenant with God, Mary Fletcher understands love must be the motivating factor for her actions. Furthermore, she understood it was necessary, given her position as a leader of a community that dwelt together, to continually cultivate love within her as she cared for and looked after the community as a mother caring for her own household:

> *Love is the end of the commandment.* If I would wish to be such a head as God approves, I must have no spring of action but love. Yet when we have many tempers to suit ourselves to, all their burdens to bear and their every want to supply (even in narrow circumstances), nature is apt to grow weary. It is very easy to give to our neighbour what we can spare, but to pinch ourselves and even to run the risk of debts and distress for their sakes makes the work far more hard. How then shall I get and keep the spirit of love to each which is needful for my fulfilling towards them the place of a mother?[22]

Her journal entry goes on to describe praying for each member so she may 'affix a plan denoting what is the best method of helping that person's infirmities and strengthening their virtues. If I do not thus study the tempers and dispositions of my family, how unlike will my carriage be to that of my heavenly Father toward me.'[23] Fletcher's passages reveal that it is understood Christian disciples will exhibit virtues consistent with the Christian life. The presence of virtue in the life of a faithful disciple is expected by both God and other Christians. Furthermore, virtue can be evaluated for its indelibleness and may be further enhanced within a disciple's life.

As the *Discipleship Matrix* suggests, there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between virtue and discipline. Many novice disciples might believe that submitting to particular disciplines first fostered their love of God, or yielded peace to their soul, or allowed them to be compassionate towards others. Strictly speaking, virtue motivates a disciple to engage the disciplines. Wesley consistently described a Christian disciple as '"having the mind that was in

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[22] Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 79. Fletcher not only understood her role as a mother to many, she encouraged others in leadership to act with a mother's love towards her children. For further reading, see her discussion on page 76.

[23] Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 79-80.

Christ" (Philippians 2:5) he "so walks as" Christ "also walked"(I John 2:6).'[24] Randy Maddox affirms the idea that Christian virtue precedes Christian engagement in the disciplines, 'holy actions do not occur "naturally" or by simple desire—they are motivated and patterned by holy tempers.'[25] Still, at the same time, participation in the disciplines allows the disciple to encounter the presence of God that divine grace might work to further transform his life to more closely emulate the character of Christ. Therefore, the virtue is cultivated more deeply in the life of a disciple by continued participation with a discipline. Fletcher's account describes the struggle it might be for a Christian to wholeheartedly love through a time of hardship. She bears testimony that the desire to love motivates her to pray that she might increase in love for those who deplete her the most.[26]

The ethos

Inasmuch as a disciple experiences ongoing and deepening sanctification as she grows in Christlikeness, discipleship is not merely an individual's pursuit of a goal. MacIntyre defines a practice as a 'socially established cooperative human activity.'[27] Discipleship as a practice of Christian faith is an endeavour that is shared corporately with a particular kind of community. It is within communities of faith that a disciple grows in her faith as she is supported, challenged and nurtured in the company of others. From a Christian viewpoint, *ethos* specifically refers to the culture of a community; it encompasses the actions and values to which a community adheres and governs the faith of its members.

Historically speaking, the *ethos*, for Wesleyans, was structured in terms of *The General Rules* which governed early Methodist societies. The *Rules* were an agreed upon set of standards by which all members of the Methodist societies agreed to 1) do no harm, 2) do good, 3) attend

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[24] Wesley, 'The Character of a Methodist,' *Works*, 9:41. See also, 'Sermon the Mount XII,' *Works,* 1:680; 'The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,' *Works,* 2:593; 'The More Excellent Way,' *Works,* 3:265; 'The Principles of a Methodist,' *Works,* 9:55; 'The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained,' *Works,* 9:225.

[25] Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1994), 178.

[26] The Fletcher passage cited in this section also reveals a nexus between virtues, disciplines and the progressive *telos* of what it means to be a Christian and continually grow in love for God and neighbour. As will be noted later, much of her writing reflects a coherence of two or more components that comprise the *Discipleship Matrix*.

[27] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

on the ordinances of God.[28] (These are activities such as public worship, the reading, teaching, preaching of the Word, prayer, the Lord's Supper, and fasting.) Members agreed to uphold the rules as they 'watch[ed] over one another in live, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.'[29] If a member should choose to not observe the *Rules* or 'habitually break any one of them,' he would be asked to give an account. It was the responsibility of the community to, after providing due admonishment, bear further with the lapsed member to see if he might be restored to community or, if necessary, remove that disciple from society.[30] In short, the *Rules* comprised a 'rule of life' by which Methodists agreed to live and organise themselves as Christian persons living in eighteenth century British society.

Typically, society and class meetings included persons who existed along the spectrum of faith, either seeking salvation (initial sanctification) or salvation to the uttermost (entire sanctification). Band meetings were reserved for those who specifically desired to experience full sanctification. Mary Fletcher lists eight specifics on which she advises those involved in a Yorkshire revival who sought 'holiness' through meeting together.[31] She opens her formal advice with encouragement to only invite persons who share the same purpose:

> First, I would recommend you to be very careful whom you admit into your meetings. Consider no one as member thereof who is not steadily seeking after Christian perfection, that is a heart simplified by love divine and kept each moment by faith from the pollution of sin. Whosoever egresses not with you on this point will greatly interrupt your design.[32]

After dispensing practice advice on conduct and comportment, she bookends her instructions by returning to the communal theme:

> Eighthly, consider yourselves as united by holy covenant to God and to each other, aiming to advance the glory of God all you possibly can…Let no one be discouraged from seeking Christian holiness by untying the see in your life and conversation. We must become a whole burnt sacrifice…We have covenanted to be the Lord's and may not draw

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[28] Wesley, 'The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,' *Works*, 9:70-73.

[29] Wesley, 'The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,' *Works*, 9:69.

[30] Wesley, 'The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,' *Works*, 9:73.

[31] Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher,* 74.

[32] Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher,* 75.

> back one power—no, nor one thought—from his service. Be it then engraved on our hearts as with a diamond pen: 'Thy vows are upon me, O God, I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back.'[33]

Fletcher's comments are aimed at those involved in band meetings which ascribed to a higher standard of scrutiny and accountability than the *Rules* that encompassed the Methodist society and class meetings. Yet, in terms of MacIntrye, her admonishment is that if the integrity of *ethos* is not maintained, members of the group will find pursuit of the goal to be impeded by others.

The telos

MacIntyre's conception of practice involves a *telos* which is the vision of 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-essential-nature,' or the purposed end of human life.[34] For Christians, the *telos* or goal of the Christian life is to have a heart so completely renewed by divine grace that it perfectly loves God and neighbour just as Jesus did. The nature of the *telos* is that it is never fully accomplished or completely realised. In MacIntyrian terms, the goal is 'systematically extended.' Sanctification is a teleological concept. It is the purposed end of the Christian life: to love as Christ did. It also is the ongoing process of growing and grace and knowledge of Christ through the Christian life. The ongoing process of sanctification, day in and day out is Christian discipleship. Wesley taught that when a person experienced forgiveness and justification, she was initially sanctified. And, once initiated in the life of a disciple, sanctification is the perpetual and continual process of having one's heart continually refined by God. The *telos* is expanding even when renewal and transformation in Christlikeness is experienced.

Previous passages used from Mary Fletcher demonstrate that she understood a heart of perfect love as the purposed end of Christian faith. The passage below illustrates that even as she experienced full sanctification, she knew it was possible to grow further in her love for God:

> Fri., June 23, 1786…I have Jesus! And have I not all in him? The words shone with light on my heart that Christ is made of God unto you 'wisdom, and righteousness, and

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[33] Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher,* 77-78.

[34] MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 52.

> sanctification, and redemption." I felt I ought to rejoice in my privilege, the privileges of my present dispensation. I am brought into a state of love. That I do not abundantly grow therein is because I do not abide every moment in a quiet peaceable confidence, believing the Lord will enable me to glorify him in and through everything.[35]

It is important to note that entire sanctification does not elude Fletcher when she states she does 'not abundantly grow.' Her journals bears testimony to the continually expansive quality of the *telos*. Love, consistent with the nature of the *telos*, is ever deepening and grows even as it is experienced.

Just as there is a mutually reinforcing quality between virtues and disciplines, a similar relationship persists between *ethos* and *telos*. Ted Campbell, in noting sanctification as a core belief of Wesleyans, discusses the presence of a rule or *ethos* that guided early Methodist communities. Juxtaposing ancient ascetics with eighteenth century Methodists he writes, 'monastic communities [were] separated from the world living under a rule. The Methodist societies made it possible to cultivate holiness and live in a world in which modernity was rapidly encroaching.[36] Their emphasis, he goes on to say, 'creates a space where ancient saintliness can meet modern life and this it is a gift of grace for the contemporary world.'[37] A hallmark of Wesleyan discipleship is a particular community that supports, nurtures and even challenges its members in their common endeavour in the pursuit of sanctification. As noted earlier, vertices are created when the two dialectics intersect, uniting the four elements in a necessary, coordinated relationship. Throughout many of the passages examined in this essay, Fletcher is unyielding about the ultimate purpose for why she writes. She consistently demonstrates that there is a seamless coordination between who Methodists understood themselves to be, both individually and corporately, in what they did and how they comported themselves as they sought a heart that perfectly loves God and neighbour.

MacIntyre's scheme of practice relies solely on human agency, effort, and skill in pursuit of the *telos*. In virtue ethics, what motivates growth in character and dedication to particular

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[35] Moore, *The Life of Mary Fletcher*, 173.

[36] Ted A. Campbell, *Wesleyan Belief: Formal and Popular Expression of the Core Beliefs of Wesleyan Communities.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010) 233.

[37] Campbell, *Wesleyan Belief*, 233.

activities is human desire to fulfil the *telos*. While human effort is necessarily needed in the process of sanctification, Wesleyans maintain that transformation in Christlikeness is ultimately the work of God's grace and love. The inclusion of divine grace is not accounted for in MacInyre's concept of practice. Growth toward the *telos* occurs because persons continually pursue it. In the practice of discipleship, growth is initiated and completed as a result of divine grace in cooperation with human endeavour. Though grace is not a component of practice, the *Discipleship Matrix* can be understood to be infused and permeated by God's grace as disciples seek to grow in Christlike love and action.

Twenty-first Century Realities

This paper has held up the journals and biography of Mary Fletcher as representative of early Methodism's approach to the Christian life. Her writings illustrate that the components of the *Discipleship Matrix* present and integrated in the early Methodist movement. As a framework that finds its bearing in MacIntyre and virtue theory, the *Discipleship Matrix* demonstrates how the disciplines were an essential component of Christian living, wholly integrated in early Methodists discipleship. It also offers clues for twenty-first century Methodists to diagnose how contemporary efforts for renewal might be approached.

One way the *Discipleship Matrix* illustrates how the means of grace helped renew the lives of individuals, as well as advance the Methodist movement, is the presence of a robust *ethos* that supported and encouraged sanctification in the lives of participants. For early Methodists, inherent in their discipleship was the society, class and band meetings. These meetings provided a way of synthesising and making sense of the disciplines Methodists engaged in, the kind of people they were and the people they were seeking to become. Within contemporary Methodism, these meetings, so critical to the early movement's development, have all but disappeared. Various congregations may host contemporary class or band meetings, but neither are normative of what is considered to being a small group. Historian Kevin Watson laments:

> In order for contemporary Wesleyan communities to successfully reclaim an authentically Wesleyan approach to small group formation, the first step would be for people to recognise the extent of the disconnect between the eighteenth-century conception of

> small group formation and that of the contemporary context. Today, the participants in small groups are passive, and they are engaged in something like studying a book. In the eighteenth century, participants were more active, and the curriculum was their own lives. The topic of conversation was the state of each person's soul.[38]

Watson observes that small groups tend to be 'curriculum-driven and focused on a transfer of information from a perceived expert to a largely passive audience.'[39] Publishers appear to provide niche curricula for small groups of nearly every demographic imaginable. But a programatic approach to small groups does not provide the robust *ethos* to which early Methodists ascribed. Lacking any larger organising principle for congregations and people to order their lives (other than to take courses when the church offers them throughout the year) contemporary small groups do not provide a substantive *ethos*, if it provides one at all.

A Theory of Christian Transformation

I sincerely doubt there is another program or curriculum that needs to be developed in order to invigorate discipleship efforts. But I do believe there are insights from adult learning theory that are congruent with the practice of discipleship that can assist disciples interested in their efforts to be renewed in Christ. Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) examines how learners come to new understanding of themselves and their role within their given context, thus transforming their way of being and how they interact with the world.[40] TLT

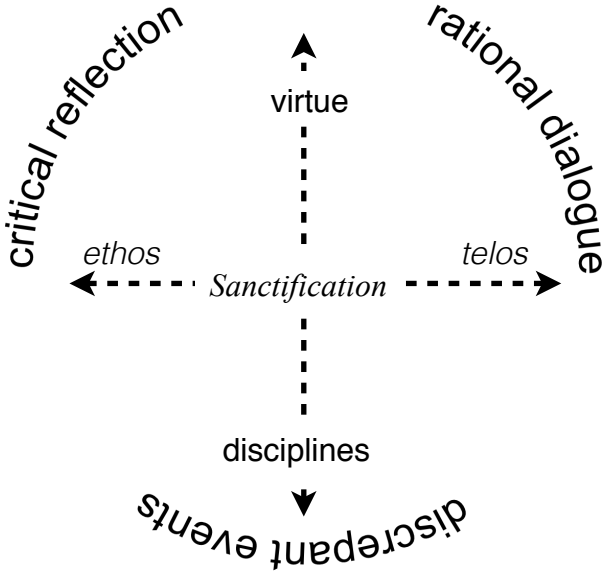

Figure 2
A Theory of Christian Transformation

[38] Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 186.

[39] Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 186.

[40] For further reading on specifics of TLT, please see chapters 5 and 6 of Tammie M. Grimm, (2016) Holistic and Holy Transformation: The Practice of Wesleyan Discipleship and Transformative Learning Theory (Order No. 10805544). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2038862593). Retrieved from https://0-search-proquest-com.oak.indwes.edu/docview/2038862593?accountid=6363 (accessed July 12, 2018).

is not about acquiring new knowledge but rearranging what they already know so that they may see the world in light of new understanding. Three particular aspects of TLT: the discrepant event, critical reflection and rational dialogue have relevance for Christians seeking to grow in faith and Christlikeness. When considered in relationship with the *Discipleship Matrix*, these aspects of TLT provide a theoretical framework for a theory of Christian transformation (Figure 2). This theory of Christian transformation recognises that contemporary efforts in discipleship are typically programmed, often fragmenting and compartmentalising the core elements of the *Discipleship Matrix* from one another. In terms of what this essay has discussed, this theory of Christian transformation recognises we do not live in Wesley's day with the supports and structures he instituted that persons might pursue sanctification or holy transformation. For twenty-first century Christian disciples seeking renewal through participation in the means of grace, such a theory of Christian transformation promotes an integrated, holistic life of faith. A brief overview of the three TLT components and their role in helping shape the lives of Christians provides insights into how learners come to new understandings through the process of transformation.

The Discrepant Event

Learning theorists posit that any change in behaviour is precipitated by an interruption to the learner's experience. Jack Mezirow, a progenitor of TLT, proposes a change in perspective is initiated by a 'disorienting dilemma' or discrepant event.[41] A discrepant event can be understood as an internal crisis to a learner's previous experience that the learner chooses to engage. A discrepant event may be a single moment or an accumulation of incidents that prompt a learner to confront reality as they have experienced it. People encounter what could be called a discrepant event all the time, but choose not to engage it. It is possible to either absorb a new encounter into previous understanding of the world or set it aside as an aberration in order to go on with life as before. In which case, the event is not discrepant and can not facilitate

[41] Jack Mezirow and Associates, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 22.

transformation. But such an encounter is critical. Any journey towards transformation is possible because something occurs that disrupts a person's previous experience of the world.

A discrepant event may infer that the incident which precipitates change has negative connotations. It need not be so. For many early Methodists, the realisation that sanctification was possible and that they could pursue it constitutes a discrepant event. It is not unusual that early Methodists testified with a sense of surprise or delight when they heard of the possibility of full sanctification for the first time.[42] Mary Fletcher records in the early 1760s, 'an earnest desire was stirred up in many hearts after full salvation'[43] upon hearing Wesley preach on it. At another point, she recalls how Sarah Crosby came to Yorkshire and inspired persons to grow in sanctification by meeting together in bands,

> She told them what a wonderful work of sanctification God was carrying on in London. Many were affected by her words, and two or three in this place retained the light and power given to them. These we agreed to met once a fortnight and unite our cry to the Lord that he would pour a spirit of conviction on his people and that the neighbouring societies might be stirred up to seek for purity of heart. We had not met many times before the answer came. One and another begged to join in our Wednesday night meetings. Our number increased to about fifty…[44]

In choosing to engage their realisation that purity of heart was possible, the Methodists in Yorkshire drew up a plan that they might seek it. Meeting together and praying for full salvation does not mean passive waiting but active engagement in the process of renewal as will be illustrated with respect to critical reflection and rational dialogue.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection involves a process that examines the 'underlying beliefs and assumptions' of a learner's experience of the world.[45] To critically reflect means a learner is

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[42] For further reading see journal and letter excerpts of figures such as Catherine Livingstone, Jareena Lee and others in Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality*, 112-119.

[43] Moore, *The Life of Mary Fletcher* 36.

[44] Moore, *The Life of Mary Fletcher*, 74-75.

[45] Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*. 3rd ed. (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, 2007),145.

motivated to assess and evaluate the validity of those foundational truths that helped him create his worldview. Some Christians may feel threatened when a discrepant event confronts them, believing they need to set aside their commitment and trust in God. However, transformative learning theorist Stephen Brookfield points out faith commitments can be made stronger as a result of vigorous critique.[46] For the Christian, critical reflection is not simply cognitive or a totally rational exercise. In terms of Christian faith and discipleship, critical reflection means to be full of discernment, seeking wisdom, following and being responsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. A biblical mandate for critical reflection is present in I Peter 3:15; '…be prepared to respond to those who ask you to give a reason for the hope you have…' Mary Fletcher expands on this advice when she reminds disciples to regularly consider the meaning of their faith:

> Be always ready to give an account to those that ask you a reason of the hope that is in you. In order to do this, let us pray for clear ideas of what we seek and what we possess. Bear in mind that to 'perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord, is no more than you have already promised; first, by your sponsors in baptism; secondly, in your own person when you made those vows your own by confirmation; and, thirdly, whenever you renew that covenant by coming to the Lord's table.[47]

Fletcher offers practical instruction to pray for clarity of thought. The critical reflection process need not be a purely private enterprise. It can, and ought to, for the Christian, include God. Furthermore, Fletcher reminds the believer that the Lord's Supper presents an ongoing opportunity to reflect on and be renewed by the operation of God's grace in their life.

Rational Dialogue

Subsequent discussions that considers new experiences and ideas as a result of the discrepant event often mean learners engage in what transformative learning theorists call rational dialogue. Mezirow describes rational dialogue as 'specialised use of dialogue devoted to searching for a common understanding and assessment of justification of an interpretation or belief.'[48] Rational dialogue necessarily requires conversation partners to help articulate insights,

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[46] Stephen D. Brookfield, *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991, 23.

[47] Moore, *The Life of Mary Fletcher* 76-77.

[48] Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation*, 10.

expressing what is known by the learner that it might be understood. Conversely, the process of rational dialogue helps determine the 'edge of meaning' or what cannot be expressed and needs further exploration for clarity and understanding. Rational discourse is typically collaborative. It is also inherently different than group discussion. Learning theorists have noted trust is a critical element to the learning environment if transformation is a desired result.[49] For Christians engaging in rational discourse to deepen their discipleship, trust is fundamental to the group dynamic. Additionally, the reading and study of scripture, devotional materials, and other relevant material can help enliven the rational discourse process, pushing it past any earlier limit it may have encountered.

In her instruction to those forming bands fellowships to seek full sanctification, Mary Fletcher discusses the collaborative nature of corporate prayer to achieve a common goal:

> See that you fix on your minds: We come together to get our faith increased and expect as much that our souls should be refreshed by our meeting as we do our bodies to be refreshed by our food. Come with a lively expectation and, that your expectation may not be cut off, keep your spirit all the time in continual prayer. United prayer can never go unanswered. Mr. Fletcher, on this head, has a lively observation. "When many believing hearts,' says he, 'are lifted up and wrestle in prayer together, we may compare them to many hands which work a large pump….[50]

Critical reflection and rational dialogue, strictly speaking, are two different processes, but they are dynamic. An interpenetrating relationship exists between the two. Together, in concert with the Holy Spirit, they seek spiritual direction, 'testing the Spirit' in how Christians may address the discrepant event in order to respond appropriately. Critical reflection and rational dialogue provide learners a means of critique for understanding of how the world works and how they as Christians should operate counter culturally within the world. Critical reflection and rational dialogue, whether it be with God in prayer or contemplation within a trusted group, assist disciples to evaluate their lives and consider their actions. In terms of the *Discipleship Matrix*, the dynamic of critical reflection and rational dialogue help Christians, in response to a

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[49] Edward W. Taylor, Fostering Transformative Learning' in *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education* by Jack Mezirow, Edward W. Taylor and Associates. *(*San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 13

[50] Moore, *The Life of Mary Fletcher* 75-76.

discrepant event, connect the dots between the types of people they are and want to become. A theory of Christian transformation emerges when the *Discipleship Matrix* exists in an atmosphere permeated by these three components of TLT. This theory of Christian transformation entails a comprehensive framework in which all components are integrated, offering a robust and holistic approach for disciples seeking to renew and sanctify their lives through faithful Christian discipleship.

Conclusion

Renewing lives and communities in Christ has been a core commitment of Methodism since its beginnings. John Wesley believed helping people know and experience the doctrine of sanctification was critical to his renewal efforts, calling it 'the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up.'[51] Early Methodists believed sanctification was a real experience of Christian living, regularly participating in disciplines as a means to attain the ends of religion: a heart that perfectly loves as Christ loved. They banded in covenantal communities to support, encourage, and challenge one another, seamlessly integrating their whole lives as a people called in their pursuit of growing in Christlikeness and perfect love. Sanctification was so central to their everyday discipleship that Campbell asserts it is, 'a great gift at the heart of historic Wesleyan communities, a gift that, I am inclined to say, Wesleyan Christians could neglect only at the peril of losing what has been at the heart of their distinctive beliefs.'[52]

Unfortunately, the situation today is that we approach Christian life in fragmented, compartmentalised pieces. The presence of the doctrine of sanctification and understanding that entire sanctification can be pursued as a lived reality for Methodists seems to be an historical footnote. What would it mean for Methodists to revive this doctrine for renewing the lives of individuals that they might continually grow in their love for God and share that love with their neighbour? In terms of a theory of Christian transformation, it would be considered a discrepant

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[51] Wesley, letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, September 15, 1790, in Letters, (Telford), 8:238; in Jackson, ed, Works, 13:9).

[52] Campbell, *Wesleyan Beliefs,* 232.

event, if twenty-first century clergy choose to engage it. The means of grace are a time-honoured avenue to renewal, but only if we consider them in light of the whole picture, critical reflecting upon them and dialoging with others, critiquing what we do, how we do them and why we do them. We must consider the whole of our lives, who we are and what we do, both as individuals and a people called Methodists, purposed to grow in Christlike love for God and neighbour. This is what it means to be renewed and transformed. With God's grace it is possible—and not just for clergy on the precipice of ordination, but for all of us, for the renewal of our souls and our communities.

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