

Unit 7: Methodist Historical DNA and Modern Cell Churches: Is There A Match?

Lecture: Question: Was Early Methodism a Cell Church?

Over the past weeks we've looked at a variety of cell churches; this week our attention turns to historic Methodism in England. All of the cell churches we have looked at credit Wesley's organization of small groups as their inspiration if not the model they copy. In their enthusiasm, sometimes some inaccurate historical claims are made, projecting modern cell church methods back onto Wesley's movement. We are now equipped - as best as we are able, not being historians but merely tourists - to consider the question of this lecture: was early Methodism a cell church?

Standing in the center of our reminisces, we can make some generalizations about cell churches, particularly with regard to the perspectives I've brought to our guided tour. And we can discuss a valuable question: in your opinion, does early Methodism qualify as a cell church? Three concepts from the Doctor of Ministry project help me to establish a matrix of common factors related to cell churches. These are my generalizations; they may or may not be helpful to you. We can use that matrix to help us compare and contrast cell churches with each other. The three matrix concepts are:

A. The Four Systemic Problems that prevent disciple making,¹ which are:

1. *Not making disciples.*
2. *Institutional world view.*
3. *Prairie DNA.*
4. *Stranger evangelism.*

B. The Four Priorities of the cell church,² which are:

- #1: *Jesus is Lord, leading to prayer and goals. (Matthew 28:18)*
- #2: *Evangelism or Working in Prevenient Grace. (Matthew 28:19)*
- #3: *Leadership Development or Working in Sanctifying Grace. (Matthew 28:20)*
Equipping Tracks
Management Structures
- #4: *Cells are the best means to fulfill these priorities (I fulfill my purpose best in a group.)*

C. The Five Stages of Spiritual Maturity,³ which are: *Newborn (aka Infants or Eddies), Child, Teen, Parent, Grandparent.*

WAS EARLY METHODISM A CELL CHURCH?

A. The Four Systemic Problems:

© Early Methodism was entirely focused on making disciples, if you look at this one famous instruction that Wesley gave to his "helpers" or lay preachers: *You have nothing to do but to save*

¹See *Chapter One: Systemic Problems*, p. 5-35, <http://www.disciplewalk.com/Resources.html>.

²These are defined in *Seminar One: Diagnosis*, p. 10-23, <http://www.disciplewalk.com/Resources.html>.

³These are defined in *Seminar One: Diagnosis*, p. 30-41, <http://www.disciplewalk.com/Resources.html>.

souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those who want you, but to those who want⁴ you most... Observe: It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care merely of this or that Society, but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance; and, with all your power, to build them up in that holiness, without which they cannot see the Lord.⁵ This is the early Methodist discipline: a focus on saving souls.

A healthy church has been described in this class as a partnership between two systems: a “two winged church” consisting of a *worship system*⁶ and a *discipleship system*.⁷ Institutionally, Wesley preserved his organization as a movement within the institutional Church of England, where it functioned as the discipleship system in partnership with the local Anglican parish church.

Early Methodists earned and used influence with their friends and neighbors to encourage participation in the Methodist Society. This sort of networking by laity is the essence of cell evangelism.

John Wesley’s Societies did not practice ministry to strangers, but ministry that created community through long term relationships of influence. To convert people without the relational support that will disciple them fully toward sanctification is like fathering children and then abandoning them. Wesley resolved not to preach where he could not include everyone in class meetings for spiritual community: *I was more convinced then ever that the preaching like an apostle without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connexion; and the consequence is, that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.*⁸ Those who had an interest in the Lord were welcomed into lifelong spiritual families and provided support.

⁴Need.

⁵Wesley's *Twelve Rules of a Helper*, "Minutes of Several Conversations" (1789), in *Works*, VIII, 310.

⁶The worship system provides a place for worship and the administrative subsystems to maintain it: governance, finance, personnel, property and programming. All traditional church systems fit in to the worship system. Worship systems cycle, are task oriented and focus on conformity and smooth operation. The worship system corresponds to Senge’s *Balancing process*, Troeltsch’s *church*, Hegel’s *thesis/synthesis* and the diffusion of innovation’s *pragmatic majority* of middle adopters, late adopters and laggards (84%).

⁷The discipleship system provides a process for transformation and change. It is teleological and goal oriented, with clear steps and a clear end result. It is relational and involves people in a network of influence that builds community while preserving respect for the individual. The linking usually involves small groups and rapidly develops and matures individuals for leadership. In cell churches where the discipleship system involves thousands of small groups, detailed management systems have evolved to control the system and equipping tracks have developed to rapidly train group leaders. The discipleship system corresponds to Senge’s *Reinforcing process*, Troeltsch’s *sect*, Hegel’s *antithesis* and the diffusion of innovation’s *innovative minority* of innovators and early adopters (16%).

⁸John Wesley, “Journal” (August 25, 1763), *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 3:144. This reflects a 90% loss of the faithful when there is worship available in the parish church without participation in a cell type community as a means of sanctifying grace.

⊗ Wesley's writings are apologetic and focused on protecting his Societies from legal interference under England's laws regarding dissenters and conventicles. Consequently, his direct command that one "has nothing to do but save souls" is directly to his lay preachers but not, to my knowledge, ever to his laity. Evangelism in the Wesley's writings *seems* to be an activity of the "clergy" rather than the laity; this makes sense when we understand the political situation of the time. Evangelical preaching might be tolerated, but an evangelizing laity was not normal in the Anglican church and would likely be considered subversive and illegal. Consequently, we don't discover the day to day role of the laity in evangelism. Instead of evangelism, we seem to have a focus on holiness which has nothing to do with saving souls.

Wesley's management of detail within his discipleship system was prudent and excellent, resulting in a smoothly running, disciple making machine. As discipleship systems are based on relationships, they are usually ephemeral; Wesley's endured. As Whitefield confessed, "...my brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labours. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand..." Unfortunately, when the relationship with the church of England was lost, the organizational machinery of the discipleship system very quickly became a controlling institution which welcomed sinners less and less openly as it became a church of its own.

On the prairies of the United States, Wesley's discipleship system was abandoned; prairie churches were controlled by insiders functioning in cell meetings. Prairie DNA, however, is found in both England and America. In prairie DNA, the lost are encountered in services of evangelistic worship events (prevenient grace), experience a salvation event through a preacher (justifying grace), and enter small groups for spiritual growth and nurture (sanctifying grace). Cells, by Comiskey's definition, have personal evangelism as their primary purpose; cells make disciples. In traditional church DNA, small groups are filled with people who've entered the church through attendance at worship services; the only evangelistic act in the traditional worship system church is to invite outsiders to come to the worship event. Wesley could sing a hymn on a street corner and draw a crowd to hear him preach; this model is no longer effective in our society for evangelism. Fixing the worship system church by making it "emergent" or adjusting a worship service to make it more attractive to lost people is nothing new and is not going to work. As in Yoido, the first step into the church in the 21st century is to find a community of faith within a small group prior to encountering the church at worship. It does not appear that Wesley's class meetings or bands were organized to practice personal evangelism.

B. The Four Priorities of the cell church: *Jesus is Lord, Evangelism, Equipping, Cell Priority.*

⊗ Jesus is Lord of the Wesleyan Methodists. Evangelism is the focus of the preachers; they are to focus in saving souls in all that they do. The discipleship system of sponsorship, trial band, class meeting, band and select society is an excellent equipping track with but one fault. Wesley's equipping track so positively matured his people that they emerged from poverty within three generations and as grassroots leaders helped Liberal and Labour movements come to political power. Involvement in the class meeting was a requirement for participation in the Methodist Society.

⊗ While Wesley saw himself as and taught his followers to be "bible Christians," the focus is on culturally defined holiness; the choice to obey all the commandments includes the command to fulfill the Great Commission itself. If the energy spent in pursuing holiness through Wesley's

equipping track had been expended on converting and discipling the lost, the world would have become entirely Christian long ago. To Wesley, as to all traditional Christians in the centuries since, conversions happen in worship services and small groups are filled up with persons converted there. In a true cell church, the nonbeliever's first contact is through participation in the cell, and then worship. In a traditional church, evangelism is the goal of the preacher; in the cell church, evangelism is the responsibility of EVERY Christian without exception and every program of the church is subordinated to that purpose.

Class meetings do not divide or multiply as cells do; persons are assigned to a class meeting based on where they live and remain together forever as a lifelong nurturing unit. (Although one leaves the class to participate in band; one does not participate in both.) When small groups do evangelism, they grow so large that division is necessary; if there is no policy, rules or need for division, there is no evangelism by the small group.

C. The Five Stages of Spiritual Maturity:

☺ Wesley's equipping track raised people up as spiritual leaders and helped them find their ministry. Within the select society, they took responsibility for others as class leaders and band leaders, but there is little said about a parental sort of responsibility for others.

☹ If leaders are raised up to become spiritual parents, there will be multiplying growth as generations of families form new families.

The Wesleyan discipleship system was always more focused on holiness than evangelism; while field preaching drew large crowds, Wesley's Societies statistically "constituted only a fraction of one percent of the populace" in any given year.⁹ The crowds did not enter the societies; they are not an example of rapid evangelistic church growth similar to the church of Acts or modern cell churches. The Methodist society made disciples; individual Methodists, however, did not make disciples who make disciples who make disciples. Leaders were raised to a level of servant maturity but not to the point where they would become spiritual parents of multiple generations of disciples as commanded in 2 Timothy 2:2.

Conclusion: Early Methodism is "cellish" but not a cell church. It is the basic original pattern, however, both for cell churches that rapidly grow by multiplying generations and for traditional "come structure" churches that bring people into faith through worship and mature them in small groups. It's not a cell church unless those mature disciples go back out into the world to make disciples and personally fulfill the Great Commission; acts of mercy are insufficient.

WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL THEN OF "METHODIST DNA"?

On the American prairie Methodists abandoned John Wesley's discipleship system in order to become a traditional church based on a "come structure" approach. Cultural conditions due to rural isolation made this strategy very successful in the 1800s; people hungry for interaction would come from their farms to the camp meeting or into church just to be with other people. The camp

⁹David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992), 131. Wesley's pattern by itself will not reverse the current membership decline.

meeting was so successful that it doubled the proportion of church members in America from one in fifteen to one in seven between 1800 and 1850.¹⁰ The great “two a day” checkerboard church planting that began after the Civil War replicated these small “come structure” churches every five to seven miles apart in the rural countryside.¹¹ From 1860-1920 the Methodist Episcopal Church grew from one million to well over four million members,¹² far outperforming Wesley’s societies in England. Over half the congregations present in the predecessor denominations in 1900 or organized since no longer exist.¹³ At one time the old ways worked very well.

The old ways that once worked on the prairie fail today because the world has changed. There is no more rural isolation. The world today has more attractive buildings than the church. Society offers more exciting and entertaining events than the church. The old church softball league in the church yard is replaced by a multitude of agencies from the YMCA to schools to park districts offering a wide diversity of sports in expensive facilities. ***There are no isolated areas left where the church can be simultaneously mediocre and superior because there is no competition from the world.*** The church’s amateur attempts at social service are dwarfed by the deep pockets and dedicated professionals working in government and social service agencies ranging from welfare to Big Brother-Big Sister. The world has secularized and improved the quality of all these attraction ministries, and now the church cannot compete. It is not that there is a migration of rural people to urban areas; there is a migration of urban culture to rural areas. It is all urban now, and the prairie DNA church can neither cope with the change nor compete with a secular world that has adapted to current reality. The gap between church reality and current reality can be measured in decades.

The need today is not to plant institutional churches, emergent or traditional, in densely populated areas where there are no United Methodist Churches. The institutional church is unable to make disciples and is unable to attract the lost to come to its events and worship. Lost people are not interested in anything that will make their life busier; if they were, many opportunities more rewarding than worship (in their opinion) are available to them. If that was not enough, better worship than any local church can provide is available via internet broadcast, seven days a week, 24 hours a day, in the comfort of one’s own home at a time convenient to one’s own schedule. Worship will not draw in the lost in this century.

¹⁰Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism: Power & Politics On God's Frontier* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1981), <http://religiousbroadcasting.lib.virginia.edu/powerpolitics/C6.html> (accessed May 1, 2007), 102. Cf. Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2006), 206-210.

¹¹Evers, *History of the Southern Illinois Conference*, 148. Southern Baptists averaged four hundred missions a year in the 1890s and thirteen hundred in the 1990s, a daily average of 3.6 a day. Lyle Schaller, *The Interventionist* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 195-196.

¹²Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., “Part Two: The Nineteenth Century,” in John G. McEllhenney, ed., *United Methodism In America: A Compact History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 91.

¹³Lyle Schaller, “What Should Be The Norm?” *Circuit Rider*, September/October 2003, 17.

Lecture Unit 7: *Was Early Methodism A Cell Church?* by David Kueker (www.disciplewalk.com)
Major League Disciple Making: A Guided Tour of the Best Research on the Cell Church (IFD580) - www.beadisciple.com

Nor will it be enough to encourage people to invite their friends and neighbors; Putnam's work on social capital indicates that the social network links between people are literally disintegrating. People are withdrawing from each other in our society and they no longer know anyone to invite them to church. The come structure church is a dinosaur on the brink of extinction. Come structures don't work; nobody comes.

Only a discipleship system that develops relationships with lost people and draws them into the network of small groups that function as a community of faith can generate the church growth desired to reverse membership decline. People are no longer looking for a friendly church; today they are just looking for friends. If a cell church discipleship system that focuses on people evangelizing people is added to the worship system of a church, it will work. It's not necessary to change the traditional worship system, just to add the right kind of discipleship system.