Liberty University

**Reflection Paper IV**

A Paper Submitted to

Submitted to Dr. Rodney Dempsey,

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of

Historical and Practical Discipleship

DSMN 820 – D01

by

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August 9, 2020

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Introduction

A thorough consideration of the philosophy and practices of discipleship is aided by considering the thoughts and activities of those who ministered during the later days of the Reformation. Several men arose during the seventeen-hundreds and the eighteen-hundreds who displayed a passion for sharing the gospel and transferring what they knew to other believers. These men are interesting to study, as one can see that they each wrestled with their understanding of God’s Word and came to a moment that can be called a “crisis of belief.” As they embraced Jesus as Lord, they diligently pursued a relationship with Him and had a significant encounter with the Holy Spirit, which was transformative in their ministries.

This paper will specifically consider the discipleship model created by John Wesley and describe how his class system worked. The paper will also discuss the lives of George Whitefield, Charles Finney, George Muller, D. L. Moody, and General Booth. Each man brought a unique thought to ministry, and these views will be highlighted for use in modern discipleship. The paper will move on to consider how these men evidenced fruit-bearing and obedience and how contemporary disciples can expect to have the same focus in their disciple-making activities.

**Wesley Band/Class/Society Model**

John Wesley was born in 1703, as the fifteenth child in a family of nineteen children. Only ten of those children survived infancy. Wesley’s father served as a pastor in the Church of England, and Wesley followed his father, grandfather, and great grandfather in being ordained as a minister in the Church of England.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Wesley did not merely adopt his father’s faith but struggled to understand his faith. He was deeply impacted by Law’s books *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call*, which inspired him to be totally devoted to God.[[2]](#footnote-3) He pursued his religious studies at Oxford, where he founded a society of individuals who sought to minister to the people around them. This small group of students included his brother, Charles, and George Whitefield, who became famous as a hymn writer and a preacher, respectively. Wesley set out to America but was disappointed by his impact there. Yet, he was greatly influenced by the Moravians he met on the boat to America and the thoughts they shared regarding instantaneous salvation, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and justification by faith.[[3]](#footnote-4) These thoughts changed his mindset, and he was excited to share the ideas with all that he could. He saw great numbers respond to the gospel and the idea that the work of the Holy Spirit could immediately change them.

Wesley operated under the principle of expecting those who accepted Christ as Lord to seek more knowledge about God’s Word and be obedient in applying the commands of the Lord to their lives. In view of this, he encouraged people to join a “society,” which would be understood as synonymous with the idea of “congregation.” Henderson described the society as “The primary function of the society was cognitive instruction; it was the educational channel by which the tenets of Methodism were presented to the target population.”[[4]](#footnote-5) The methods used for instruction could be described as following a preaching format. Henderson shares that “little or no provision was made in this particular mode for personal response or feedback.”[[5]](#footnote-6) Wesley and his brother were instructors until the groups expanded beyond their ability to serve, and then lay preachers were authorized to serve these societies. They also established “stewards” whose responsibilities included double-checking that the guidelines laid down were being followed and reporting infractions to the minister in charge.[[6]](#footnote-7) The stewards were also given the task of assessing the physical needs of the society members and finding ways to meet them.[[7]](#footnote-8)

The next group that Wesley established was called the “class.” Henderson describes the class in this way: “Whereas the society was an instrument for cognitive acquisition, almost to the exclusion of any interpersonal dynamics, the class meeting was a tool for the altercation of behavior, to the virtual exclusion of any data-gathering function.”[[8]](#footnote-9) These groups were not meant for lecturing but emphasized the present and personal growth of the members by another fellow seeker. They focused on discussing three things: things not to do, positive behaviors, and helpful practices to be maintained.[[9]](#footnote-10) These gatherings were not separated by gender, and both genders could serve as leaders in these groups. They were also not limited by age, social standing, or spiritual readiness.[[10]](#footnote-11) Henderson points out that, “The subject matter of a class meeting was a personal experience, not doctrinal ideology or biblical information.”[[11]](#footnote-12) These groups were where the members encountered the *koinonia* experience of intimate fellowship and loving concern.

The third group that Wesley promoted was described as the “band.” Henderson explains that,

The bands were voluntary cells of people who professed a clear Christian commitment and who desired to grow in love, holiness, and purity of intention. The group environment was one of ruthless honesty and frank openness, in which its member sought to improve their attitudes, emotions, feelings, intentions, and affections.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Bands were segregated by gender and by age, and they were directed to meet weekly. These groups were typically composed of four individuals who would ask each other a set of questions that were expected to be answered with complete honesty and candor. These groups were not open to visitors, and the members became extremely close to each other. The questions focused on the individual’s walk with Christ, and the members shared their honest feedback with each other about what they saw in the other person’s thoughts and actions, as well as what was revealed to them by the Holy Spirit.

Wesley believed that “holiness” was the grand doctrine of Methodism, which God had providentially entrusted to the Methodists.[[13]](#footnote-14) These groups all worked together to enable believers to grow closer to the Lord and develop as a holy people in a pagan world, and to empower them to share the gospel and serve others as the Lord commanded.

**Helpful Aspects of the Reformers to The Crossing Church**

The five men reviewed in the following sections are men who God raised during the seventeen- and eighteen-hundreds to lead hundreds of thousands to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as they preached and served throughout Britain and America. Each of these men has characteristics and thoughts that would serve The Crossing Church well to emulate.

George Whitefield

Whitefield had many accomplishments and positive characteristics, but two stand out when considering his works. The first is that he earnestly sought the Lord and sought out the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, which brought great power to his preaching. He experienced many impediments to his ministries, such as his frail stature and the fact that many churches refused to allow him to speak within their walls. Whitefield simply persevered and would arise each day to do the best he could according to his health, and he eagerly preached outdoors when he was unable to gain access to the church facilities. His outdoor preaching drew tens of thousands, and he was able to make himself heard by exerting the strength he had while being supported by the Holy Spirit. The Crossing Church disciples would do well to recognize the impact they can have when empowered by the Holy Spirit, regardless of their natural abilities and strength.

Charles Finney

Finney proves to be very interesting in that his intellect aided him in searching out the Lord, rather than driving him away. He was a trained lawyer and used his logical thought processes to process Scripture and come to useful applications of the Word. His debates with the local pastor demonstrate how he was able to respectfully disagree with interpretations that were presented and prepare himself to explain his thoughts by delving into the Word and allowing the Holy Spirit to teach him. Finney had a life-changing experience when the Holy Spirit came upon him, and he sought that relationship for the rest of his life. His abiding in the Spirit had a profound effect on those who came into contact with him and his ministry.

The Crossing Church disciples would be wise to passionately study God’s Word as Finney did so that they can be taught by the Holy Spirit how to apply it to their lives and give a good explanation of that Word to the lost around them.

George Muller

Muller’s life is an interesting life to study since he lived his early life as a person of privilege and with the attitude of a scoundrel. He turned from that attitude to one of devotion to God, aided by a small group that he attended. The leader of that group invested time in Muller and discipled him even as he studied at seminary. He desired to become a missionary but was not approved to do so by the responsible parties. He decided to minister where he was, married a godly woman, and lived in a holy manner. He pastored people well and developed a heart of compassion for orphans. He exercised tremendous faith that God would supply the resources that were needed to care for the children, and God was faithful to do so.

The Crossing Church disciples can reflect upon Muller’s life and understand that their past sinful ways do not disqualify them to be used mightily by God. In addition, they should develop a loving heart toward others and trust God to solve problems that only He can overcome.

D. L. Moody

D. L. Moody was born into a family of simple means. He worked diligently to improve his situation and developed his skills to influence others as a salesman of shoes. Once he accepted Jesus as Lord, he energetically pursued serving God. He sought an opportunity to help children and was challenged to find children to teach. He went out and found eighteen young people, and from that starting point, he increased the number of students to fifteen hundred. He was innovative in his approach to attracting students and worked hard to structure the school to take care of these children. He dreamed big and figured out ways to solve the problems that arose as God blessed his ministry. He became an expert on Sunday School and shared what he learned with others. His preaching was powerful, and yet, he discovered he lacked the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. He sought this power, and the Holy Spirit’s presence became tangible in the services he directed.

The Crossing Church disciples would do well to consider how Moody sought to pursue the challenges the Lord put before him. He applied diligence and creativity to solve problems. He also proved to be passionate about maintaining his relationship with God.

General Booth

Booth grew up in poverty but realized his need for Jesus at a young age. He passionately pursued learning God’s Word even though he was not educated in school. His passion led him to preach from corners in his hometown. He faced ridicule for doing this, but he kept at it and learned how to communicate better over time. He kept learning about God and doing ministry after his other work, and after a time, was invited to be a lay minister. In time, he became a pastor and revivalist. His heart was drawn to evangelism, and he and his wife led evangelistic campaigns where thousands came to know the Lord. Booth formed the Salvation Army to seek out and lift up fallen humanity. He saw needs and worked to establish a framework for others to join him to serve others and lead them to Jesus.

The Crossing Church disciples should pay attention to Booth’s efforts to prepare himself and overcome his lack of education to serve God well. They should also recognize that each disciple needs to have a heart for evangelism and meeting other’s needs so that they can hear the gospel when it is shared with them.

**Obedience and Fruit-bearing by Disciples**

Each of the ministers who have been discussed exhibited the desire to serve God well. These men did not simply acknowledge that ministry needed to be done; they wholeheartedly engage in pursuing God’s purpose for their lives. They listened to the Lord and obeyed His directions for their lives. In each case, they suffered hardship as they prepared to be used by God. They studied His Word and applied it to their lives. As they did this, they were confronted with their sinful nature and chose to set aside their sinful behavior to live their lives as holy people who served God first with their lives.

They exerted great effort in maintaining their relationships with God, and God blessed them with the power of the Holy Spirit. That power allowed them to be used by God to reach hundreds of thousands with the gospel, as well as set up ministries that discipled new believers and cared for human needs. Each of these men produced spiritual fruit in a manner that is amazing to consider. All of these men were passionate about their service and continued to serve until God called them home. It is hard to imagine such men choosing to stop their ministry and retire after running a hard race. They remained engaged through all of their days.

A modern disciple can learn much from their example. They demonstrated obedience in their service to God, and God empowered them to bear much fruit.

Conclusion

Wesley’s discipleship methods proved to be very impactful as he implemented them to help believers become effective in ministry. He wisely applied his abilities to develop a way for people to move from a congregational gathering to a small relational group, to an intimate accountability group. These same methods are used in many ministries today, but the effectiveness has been diluted. Wesley’s passion and leadership helped these methods to be effective and serve as a good reminder to the modern minister. Likewise, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, George Muller, D. L. Moody, and General Booth lived lives of tremendous impact. They overcame their sinful ways and chose to serve God with their complete devotion. Their ministries exemplified what it means to be obedient to God’s Will and to be used to bear much fruit for the Kingdom of God. Each of them had a unique path that allowed them to be used by God as their journeys led them to lost people. Modern disciples can learn from their examples and allow God to direct their paths and empower them with the Holy Spirit to bear much fruit.

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3. Ibid., Location 1745. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Michael D. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples,* (Wilmore, KY: Rafiki Books, 2016), Kindle Edition, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Michael D. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples*, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ibid., 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid., 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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11. Ibid., 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Michael D. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples*, p. 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Ibid., 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)