

# Study Guide

to

## THE JOHN WESLEY CODE

FINDING A FAITH THAT MATTERS

JAMES STUART



PHILIP GARSIDE PUBLISHING LTD

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ISBN 978-0958268240

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# Introduction

In *The John Wesley Code*, James Stuart argues that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism can help Methodists find a new vision for Methodists today if they are prepared to listen and learn from him. He paints a challenging portrait of Wesley, profoundly transformed and driven by the love of God, who chose to stand alongside the poor and dislocated people of his day and offer a message of healing, hope and personal transformation.

Because Wesley was so in touch with the presence of God's grace and love in his life, he can offer us fresh, new ways for ministry in a post-modern society. This Leader's Guide helps readers of *The John Wesley Code* learn not only about Wesley but also imagine new ways of being church today. Participants in study groups will have the opportunity to explore first Wesley's practice of ministry, second his theology of ministry and third consider the kind of people Methodists and others can become because of the love of God at work in their lives. There will be opportunities through the study group for members to share with one another their emerging new visions for the church and develop deeper relationships with one another that will last far beyond their time together. That is why it is recommended that the final gathering include a shared meal and act of rededication to Christian ministry and service.

## Starting a Study Group

### Format

This study guide is designed for six or twelve weeks of study and exploration using the book *The John Wesley Code*. The guide recommends twelve weeks to cover the material, however, the guide can be adapted to the needs and time constraints of the group. It is recommended that the first eleven sessions last about one and a half hours. The guide can also be used as a foundation for a weekend retreat alternating the sessions with recreation, rest, other activities and concluding with a meal of celebration.

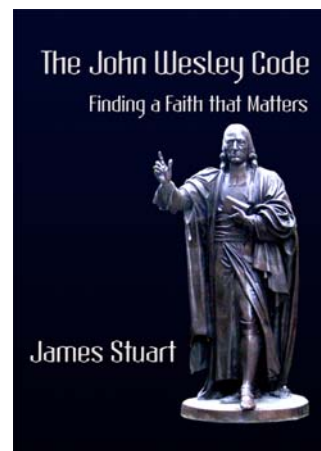
### Helps for Leaders

1. Be clear in announcing the time and place of the meetings. Try to meet in a pleasant, comfortable room where chairs can be set in a circle.
2. Invite the group to choose their leadership style. One person directing the discussion through the twelve weeks, or two persons working together, or each member taking a session in turn.
3. Each session contains several kinds of questions. Some focus on the contents of the book. Do not neglect these for it is important for group members to have some understanding of Wesley's world. The second set of questions deal with the meaning and implications of Wesley's ministry. And finally there are some questions which invite participants to share their own ideas and feelings.
4. There are no right and wrong answers so participants should feel free to share their ideas without fear of being criticised. Most important is to encourage the expression and exchange of ideas and insights gained from the book.

5. It is not imperative that the group address all the questions for each session. Try to focus on those which seem most important to the group.
6. Encourage everyone to participate in the conversation and try to avoid having one or two people monopolise the discussion.
7. The leader of the group for the evening should keep the discussion focused on the questions for the session and if the group goes off on a tangent, gently move the discussion back to the question or move on to the next question.
8. Each member of the group should take responsibility for what he/she says and encourage openness and trust by being willing to share. All contributions from group members should be treated with respect and seriousness.

## Materials Needed

1. *The John Wesley Code: Finding a Faith that Matters*, James Stuart 2008, Philip Garside Publishing Ltd. Every member of the group should have his/her own copy. Copies can be ordered from Epworth Books Ltd, Wellington, New Zealand.  
Email: [sales@epworthbooks.org.nz](mailto:sales@epworthbooks.org.nz)  
Website: [www.epworthbooks.org.nz](http://www.epworthbooks.org.nz)



2. Notebook, pen or pencil or other writing paper. Group members might find it helpful to keep a record of the ideas and insights they gain during the 11 (or 12) sessions. These could be shared later with the congregation.
3. A light supper of coffee, tea and biscuits may be shared either during or after the session.
4. A copy of the Study Guide notes for each session.

# Session One – Setting the Context

## Objectives:

- To place Wesley in his historical context
- To introduce the group to a contemporary of Wesley, William Hogarth, who gives us honest images of Wesley's age.
- To begin to get to know each other.

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A whiteboard or chalk board plus markers
- Pens and paper
- Copies of discussion guide for session 2 for distribution.

## Beginning

Welcome the members of the group and ensure that everyone has a copy of *The John Wesley Code*.

Invite them to pair off and interview each other in preparation for introducing each other to the group. Allow approximately ten minutes for this. Encourage participants to ask the following questions:

- Why did you come to this group?
- What do you hope to learn about Wesley?
- Are there any other reasons for participating?

Once the interviews are complete, assemble the group and let each person spend around two minutes introducing his or her partner and say why he or she came to a group studying John Wesley.

## Brainstorming:

At the top of the whiteboard or chalkboard write:

“My initial impressions of Wesley's World”

Ask group members to suggest words, phrases, images, that describe their perception of the society during Wesley's time. Since this is a brainstorming exercise, participants should offer their impressions quickly without commenting or elaborating on them. Take about ten minutes.

Record the words on the board. Ask the participants to copy the material on the board into their notebooks. Have the participants take a few minutes to look at the Hogarth engraving on pg 12 and ask them describe the kind of world the engraving depicts.

## Reflection:

Invite participants to skim silently through the introduction and chapter one (pp 1–19) of the book. Since this material should have been read by participants prior to the session, take about five minutes.

## Discussion:

Begin the discussion of the material in the Introduction and Chapter One of the book.

Cuban theologian, Israel Batista, refers to the Bible as a ‘storehouse of meaning.’ In what ways does the life and ministry of John Wesley constitute a storehouse of meaning for the Methodist people?

The book suggests that Methodism today suffers a bad case of amnesia. Methodists have lost touch with their roots and are ignorant, for the most part regarding Methodist origins. If we don't know our roots how can we imagine our future?

Wesley's life was characterised by numerous contradictions. He was forced, so to speak, ‘to step outside the boundaries of accepted church polity,’ and the socio-cultural reality and engage in ministry from a base among those who had been excluded. (pg 3)

Do you agree with this assessment?

Wesley often said he preferred the liturgy and worship of the Church of England to worship in the chapels of Methodism. Nevertheless, he believed there was no way he could remain a loyal Anglican while guiding the Methodist movement. This dilemma remained until he died. How has this shaped the Methodist Church?

Why do you think it took so long for Wesley to discover ‘the deeper significance’ (pg 13) of the night when he was rescued from the fire at the Epworth parsonage?

Often we look back on our lives and, to our surprise, discover events in our past that changed the direction of our lives. Take a few minutes and reflect on your own life and then, if you feel comfortable, share such a moment with the group.

## Looking Ahead:

Remind participants to read carefully chapter two of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they may have.

Invite the participants in preparation for the next session to write down and be prepared to share their impressions of the Methodist Church today. Encourage them to be honest.

Announce the time and place of the next meeting. Ask participants to reflect on the questions in the Study Guide for Session two.

## Closing

If the group has someone who plays the piano or is musically inclined, the group may want to close with a hymn by Charles Wesley. There are Wesley hymns in just about every contemporary Christian hymnal.

Then have the group form a circle and reflect silently for a minute on the evening.

Invite the participants to join hands and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all. Amen.

# Session Two – Consider Expedience

## Objectives

- To explore the emergence of Methodism in England under the leadership of John Wesley
- To examine two fundamental components of early Methodist practice: itinerancy and connexionalism

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk board
- Extra copies of the discussion guide for session two
- Copies of the discussion guide for session three.

## Beginning

Welcome everyone and if any newcomers have joined the group, invite them to introduce themselves.

Take two or three minutes to sit quietly and ask participants to think about their expectations for the group.

Invite the participants to turn to pp 21–22 and reflect on the Hogarth engraving “Some of the Principal Inhabitants on the Moon.” Ask them to share their impressions. Does the engraving raise any questions for them?

## Reflecting

1. What does the word ‘expedience’ mean to you?
2. Wesley was constantly ‘redefining’ the Methodist movement in response to the challenges and conditions of the day. He argued that Methodists were to be distinguished by their ‘love of God’ (pg 21). What did Wesley mean and how do we respond to Wesley’s understanding of the Methodist movement?
3. Is there anything common to the writings of Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor and William Law that guided Wesley’s understanding of ministry?
4. Both itinerancy and connexionalism, while not new with Wesley, were creative and innovative initiatives in ministry. What relevance do they have to ministry today and how might they shape ministry today? Do they suggest to the group new forms of ministry relevant to modern society?
5. The book argues that necessity or the principle of expedience guided and shaped the Methodist movement. Is this principle still viable and, if so, how might it shape ministry today?

## Application

Invite the group to look at the current operative model of ministry in their parishes. Then after discussion, ask the group to list the ‘expedient’ changes they would suggest in order to make their parish ministry more relevant to their community.

After this exercise take a few minutes to consider any questions participants may have regarding the material covered or that arose during their preparations for this session.

## Looking Ahead

Remind participants to read carefully chapter three of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they may have.

In preparation for the next session ask the participants to record one personal faith experience in their notebooks. Invite them to think about sharing this experience with the group at the next session,

Announce the time and place of the next meeting. Ask participants to think about the questions in the study guide for session three.

## Closing

Sing or recite a Wesley hymn selected by a member of the group.

Form a circle and reflect silently for a minute or two on the evening.

Join hands and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

# Session Three – Trust Experience

## Objectives

- To introduce the group to some of the major intellectual debates that formed and shaped Wesley's world.
- To examine how Wesley came to affirm the importance of personal experience for the Christian journey.

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk board plus felt pens or chalk
- Notebooks and pens/pencils
- Extra copies of the discussion guide for the session
- Copies of the discussion guide for session four.

## Beginning

Tell participants this session will explore the importance of personal experience in the Christian life. A key component of the Methodist movement was its emphasis on 'an experiential faith' (pg 43). As the author points out, "Wesley was tired of endless debates about Christian doctrine at the expense of Christian experience." (pg 43)

Invite the members of the group to share their own faith experiences if they feel comfortable doing so. No one should be pressured to do this. Take a few minutes to reflect quietly on this sharing time.

Turn to pp 45–46 and examine Hogarth's engraving "The Four Times of the Day." What does the engraving say about the place of the established church in Wesley's day? Why do you think Hogarth added the motto – *Sic Transit Gloria Mundi* (Thus passes the glory of the world) – below the clock? What do you think he was inferring about life then?

## Discussion Questions

1. Wesley lived at a time when significant social changes were taking place. These changes included the introduction of new technologies such as the steam engine, the emergence of a new model of economics – free market capitalism – and the acceptance of Cartesian dualism with its operative distinction between physical substance and spiritual substance (cf pg 37f). Wesley was conversant with all these changes and in response he advocated, an experiential faith. Why is experience so important to the Christian faith?
2. Wesley was introduced to the thought of John Locke by his mother Susanna. Susanna used many of the principles of Locke in the education of her children. In 1725 Wesley first read Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* and incorporated what is called 'Lockean Sensibility' (cf pg 38f) into his understanding of the Christian faith. What do you think Wesley means when he observes, "The little which we do know of God... we do not gather from any inward impression, but gradually acquire from without?" (pg 43)

3. The author observes that a paradigm shift in theology took place in Methodism, "from assent to a creed to experiential faith and practices." (pg 45) Why was this shift so important and in what ways might it change one's understanding of the Christian faith?

Note: The term 'paradigm shift' is primarily a concept used in modern science. In general it means the transformation of the frame in which people thought, felt and lived. The shift brings into view something beyond the existing frame and changes the meaning of all the elements of the frame. Things make sense in a wholly new way. This is why the Methodist movement is sometimes referred to as a second Reformation. (cf Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* University of Chicago Press, 1996)

## Application

Invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect quietly on how they became a Christian and involved in the life of the church. What role did personal experience play in their decision?

Ask them to share their reflections in groups of two or three.

Have the group come back together to share any new insights.

Take a few minutes to consider any questions participants may have regarding the material covered or that arose during their preparations for this session.

## Looking Ahead

Remind participants to read carefully chapter four of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they may have.

In preparation for the next session ask participants to reflect on how groups achieve consensus and overcome their differences.

Announce the time and place of the next meeting.

## Closing

Sing or recite another Wesley hymn selected by a member of the group.

Form a circle and reflect silently for a minute or two on the evening.

Join hand and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

# Session Four – Seek Consensus

## Objectives

- To gain a greater understanding of the social and political world of Wesley's day.
- To explore the ways the Methodist movement addressed the painful and disempowering social realities of 18<sup>th</sup> century England.
- To examine how Wesley built a movement that empowered and liberated poor people.

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk board plus felt pens or chalk
- Notebooks and pens or pencils
- Extra copies of the discussion guide for the session
- Copies of the discussion guide for session five.

## Beginning

Tell participants this session will explore the social/political realities of Wesley's world and how he built a movement in response to them. It is important to understand that Methodism was a genuine Christian response to the alienation and poverty of the Industrial Revolution. Given Wesley's social background, he was probably the most unlikely leader of a transformative movement like Methodism. Nevertheless in spite of his autocratic ways and aristocratic roots, he seems to have had extraordinary organisational skills.

Invite the group to reflect on the ways God's spirit moves among us. They might like to share some initial responses.

Turn to pp 63–64 and ask the group to look at Hogarth's engraving, "The Sleepy Congregation." What comparisons with contemporary church life does the engraving evoke for the participants? Ask the group to reflect on their own church community. Is it a 'sleepy' congregation? The author concludes, "It is hard to imagine that the poor and working class Methodists would have felt welcome in such a congregation." Ask the participants whether they agree or disagree. Allow some time to discuss their responses.

## Discussion Questions

1. One of the major political policies of the 18th century was Enclosure. As the author points out, literally thousands were forced off their traditional land. The social historian, E P Thompson, called Enclosure, "a form of class robbery." Behind Enclosure was a deliberate political policy of creating the labour necessary to run the new industries of England. Methodism was a concrete response to the dislocation and poverty created by Enclosure. Do you agree with this analysis and do you see any parallels in society today?
2. Wesley chose not to confront the dislocation of Enclosure front-on, rather he developed a movement that addressed the needs of the poor, the most vulnerable group. He also realised that this seriously challenged the polity and practice of the Church of England. This created a serious

'contradiction' for Wesley. Ask the group to discuss whether Wesley should have challenged the English class system and the political realities behind it head-on or was he right in building an alternative movement?

3. Wesley was strongly influenced by the Moravian community established by Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf. What insights about the nature of the Christian faith community did Wesley gain from the Moravians and how did these insights influence the emerging Methodist movement. Do you think there is a place for the recovery of these disciplines in the ministry and outreach of local church congregations?
5. Wesley organised Methodist polity in the form of societies, classes and bands. Because of this well-organised structure, Methodism helped to develop leadership skills among the poor which enabled them to rise above the constraints of poverty and social dislocation. Methodism was also a very egalitarian movement involving both men and women in lay ministry. What can the Methodist Church today learn from Wesley's movement-building efforts? (cf Malcolm Gladwell's assessment of Wesley in his book, *The Tipping Point*, pg 172 f)

## Application

Invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect on the ministry and mission of their local parish.

Ask them to identify what they think needs to happen to revitalise the mission of their local church and make its ministry more relevant to and transformative of their local community.

After this exercise take a few minutes to consider any questions participants may have regarding the material covered or that arose during their preparations for this session.

## Looking Ahead

Remind participants to read carefully chapter five of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they may have.

Before concluding invite the group to reflect silently on what they believe might be the vision of their church for today.

Announce the time and place of the next meeting.

## Closing

Sing or recite a Wesley hymn selected by a member of the group.

Join hands and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

# Session Five – Honour the Vision

## Objectives

- To explore Wesley's personal vision for Methodism and how he adapted his vision in response to those forces which threatened to undermine it.
- To identify some of the specific struggles which helped Wesley clarify his vision for the people called Methodists.
- To reflect on how the church today can respond to the social forces and issues of the day.

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk board plus felt pens or chalk
- Notebooks, pens and/or pencils
- Extra copies of the discussion guide for the session
- Copies of the discussion guide for session six.

## Beginning

Tell participants this session will identify and explore some of the crucial issues which forced Wesley to articulate a clear and compelling vision for the Methodist movement. The author has identified four critical turning points: Moravian stillness; the question of free grace; the doctrine of Christian perfection; and the question of separation from the Church of England.

Invite the group to reflect on how they would respond if they were asked by a stranger why they became a Christian.

Set up a role play where one member takes on the role of a non-Christian who is trying to understand why his/her friend has become a Christian. Invite another member of the group to play the role of the Christian and argue the case for Christianity to a non-Christian friend.

## Discussion Questions

1. Life is about the choices we make. Wesley must have realised this early in his life. We might ask what might have happened in Wesley's life if he chose to remain at Oxford to teach theology; if he had avoided contact with the Moravians; if he hadn't differed with his close friend George Whitefield over the nature of God's grace; if he had remained a compliant member of the Church of England. Ask the participants to discuss why they think Wesley chose to follow 'the road less travelled'?
2. One of the ways the leader of a movement gives life and direction to a movement is by articulating its vision and making a case for the movement. The author includes an Appendix (pp 187–192) of apologies or defences of Methodism in response to its critics by Wesley. Movements die without a vision. As the book of Proverbs observes, "The people perish where there is no vision." (Proverbs 29:18) Invite the group to discuss why vision is so important to the life and vitality of a movement.

3. Perhaps the most enduring contradiction of Wesley's life was his relationship to the Church of England. On the one hand he was intensely loyal to the Church of England but on the other hand he engaged in practices which profoundly challenged the polity and practice the Church of England. He said he was guided by two principles, "I will not separate from the Church; yet in cases of necessity I will vary from it." (pg 80) Invite the participants to discuss Wesley's rationale. Do they agree or disagree?

## Application

Invite the participants to identify what they think is the vision which informs and guides the ministry of their local church. Ask them to share their thoughts with the rest of the group.

In light of the previous session four and this session, have they gained any new insights regarding the vision that informs their local church and their larger denomination? Are there changes they think are necessary?

Take a few minutes to consider any questions participants may have regarding the material covered or that arose during their preparations for this session.

## Looking Ahead

Remind participants to read carefully chapter six of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they may have.

Announce the time and place of the next meeting.

## Closing

Invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect silently on the evening.

Sing or recite a Wesley hymn selected by a member of the group.

Join hands and form a circle and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

# Session Six – Learn Compassion

## Objectives

1. To examine how Wesley related theological concepts to real human problems such as poverty, social alienation and estrangement.
2. To explore Wesley's understanding of Christianity as a social religion offering 'plain truth to plain people.' (pg 93)
3. To gain a greater understanding of how integral the concept and practice of compassion is to an authentic Christian faith.

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk board plus felt pens/chalk
- Notebooks plus pens and pencils
- Extra copies of the discussion guide for the session
- Copies of the discussion guide for session seven.
- Copy of Wesley's Sermon 'Scriptural Christianity.' cf E H Sudgen (ed) *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley*, Sermon IV, pp 87-111.

## Beginning

Take a few minutes to review previous sessions which, according to the author, have focussed on the essential principles of Methodism. These principles guided the practice of Methodism. However, behind these principles were certain theological imperatives which became the *raison d'être* of Methodism. This sixth session begins the exploration of these theological imperatives.

Invite the participants to take a few minutes to reflect on the engraving of Hogarth: "Industry and Idleness – The Idle Prentice Executed at Tyburn" (pp 90–91). Ask them if they see any glimpses of compassion in the engraving.

## Discussion Questions

1. The book argues that the 'essential act' of Christianity is compassion. The gospel of John, for example, seems to confirm this, "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son..." (3:16) The book further contends that acts of compassion can be subversive in that Christians are sometimes called to act in ways that challenge and critique the powers of the day. As Wesley observed when the Methodist movement started to grow "all the world rose up against them." (pg 94) Why did compassion first as an imperative and then second as an act become so central to Methodism?
2. As the author observes it was no accident that Wesley devoted approximately one fourth of the *Standard Sermons*, the theological manifesto of Methodism, to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Wesley called the Sermon on the Mount, "a practical manual of Christian conduct." This fact has often been ignored by the Methodist community. When explaining why he included 13 sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, he argued that, "Christianity is essentially a social religion

and to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it." (pg 96) What do you think Wesley meant and do you agree or disagree with him? Why?

3. Invite the group to reflect on the life of their local congregation. Is their faith community a place of compassion not just towards each other but towards the wider community? Why do you think his sermon "Scriptural Christianity" created such a furore for the university? Wesley seems to suggest that when Christians take their faith seriously and act in accordance with compassion, they can encounter considerable resistance. Do you think this is true?
4. Methodism was born among the poor. It was a theological response, the author suggests, to poverty and social alienation. But it was a particular kind of response. Wesley put in place the kind of initiatives that enabled the poor to become the 'agents of their own liberation' (pg 101). Do you think this is important and if so, what can local faith communities do to enable similar kinds of initiatives today.

## Application

Invite the participants to reflect on their own lives and identify moments when they were either recipients or witnesses to acts of compassion. Have them divide into groups of three or four and share their experiences. How does the expression of genuine compassion change our lives?

Invite a member of the group to read the story of 'The Woman caught in Adultery' found in John 8:11. What does this story teach us about the power of compassion to change our lives?

Take a few minutes to consider any questions participants may have regarding the material covered or that arose during their preparations for this session.

## Looking Ahead

Remind participants to read carefully chapter seven of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they may have.

Announce the time and place of the next meeting.

## Closing

Invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect silently on the evening.

Sing or recite a Wesley hymn selected by a member of the group.

Join hands to form a circle and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

# Session Seven – Follow Providence

## Objectives

- To gain an understanding of the meaning and significance of the concept of Providence.
- To explore the relationship between human reason and what Wesley called divine providence.
- To reflect on the ways God speaks to us and gently guides our lives by ‘acts of providence.’

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk board plus felt pens or chalk
- Notebooks, pens and/or pencils
- Extra copies of the discussion guide session eight.

## Beginning

Tell participants this session will explore the ways God guides our lives through acts of providence. Invite the participants to sit back, relax and look back over the events of their lives. Are there any moments or events when they sensed they were being led or guided by God’s love?

Ask the participants to turn to Hogarth’s engraving “Gin Lane” (pp 121–2) and reflect on what life is like without the presence of providence. Hogarth’s engraving may seem like an exaggeration but there is a ‘hardness’ to life in a world empty of divine providence.

## Discussion Questions

1. The author contends that the language of providence was an essential component of Methodism. To people whose lives were being torn apart by change, dislocation and exploitation, Wesley and the early Methodists offered an alternative way – the way of providence. This way, Wesley affirmed, was not an accident of history, but could be discovered if people were prepared to use their reason and open their eyes. Do you agree and if so, why? If not, why?
2. The book also contends that the theology of providence is implicit in what Methodists called ‘the optimism of grace.’ Wesley himself declared he came within “a hair’s breadth” of both Deism and Calvinism (pg 114). He went on to argue that human beings were “not left without a witness within themselves.” (pg 115) What do you think he meant and why is this such a central issue for Christians?
3. The Christian doctrine of providence, for Wesley, was a paradox, or in the words of the 20th century martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The God who makes us live in this world without using God as a working hypothesis is the God before whom we continually stand.” (pg 119). This seems to be the ‘paradox of providence’ with which we all must live. However, the rise of Methodism is incomprehensible apart from providence. Why is this so and how might we respond to this paradox in our lives?

## Application

Invite the participants to take a few minutes to quietly reflect again on the course of events in their own lives and identify the most defining moment in their lives when they believe they were being led by God. Ask them to share this moment with, if they wish, others in the group.

Luke in his gospel reports that “Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51) suggesting that Jesus was being led by providence. Why did Jesus have to go to Jerusalem and what does this teach us about trying to live a Christian life?

Take a few minutes to consider any questions participants may have regarding the material covered or that arose during their preparations for this session.

## Looking Ahead

Remind participants to read carefully chapter eight of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they may have.

Announce the time and place of the next meeting.

## Closing

Invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect silently on the evening.

Sing or recite a Wesley hymn selected by a member of the group.

Join hands to form a circle and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

# Session Eight – Live by Grace

## Objectives

- To consider how the affirmation of free grace became the defining and unifying principle of the Methodist theology and practice.
- To review the development of the theology of sin in Christianity.
- To explore how Wesley came to offer a new and liberating understanding of grace as ‘free for all and in all.’

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk board plus felt pens or chalk
- Notebooks, pens and/or pencils
- Extra copies of the discussion guide for the session
- Copies of the discussion guides for session nine.

## Beginning

Tell participants this session will explore the importance of the theology of grace to the emergence of the Methodist movement. Invite the participants to reflect on the signs of grace in their own lives: those moments when they have offered or been offered forgiveness, moments when they have known and experienced love, when they have been empowered to speak out against injustice, to offer hope to others.

Ask the participants to look at the Hogarth engraving, “An Election Entertainment.” (pp 138-9) and reflect on the state of ‘democracy’ in England in Wesley’s day. Are there any signs of grace in the engraving?

## Discussion Questions

1. Grace became the defining principle of the Christian life for Wesley. His recovery of the message of grace from the inertia of traditional Christian theology was a huge breakthrough. The traditional interpretation of the human condition because of what the early church leaders Tertullian and Augustine called ‘original sin’ led to a host of onerous political, social and psychological consequences. What does the affirmation of free grace imply about the human condition?
2. The author argues that while Luther emphasised the importance of faith and Calvin argued for divine sovereignty, Wesley shifted this emphasis to free grace, ‘free in all and free for all.’ By doing this, Wesley observed, he only deviated from reformed theology by a ‘hair’s breadth.’ And yet, that made all the difference. How might this emphasis on free grace shape Methodist practice and polity?

3. Wesleyan Arminianism is often the term used to describe the Methodist theological tradition. Because of this Methodists were charged with Pelagianism, that is, placing a greater emphasis on human freedom at the expense of divine sovereignty. Wesley could never accept the doctrine of predestination which seemed to be the inevitable consequence of a theology of divine sovereignty. But, most important, Wesley argued that such teachings as predestination, “destroyed Christianity and represented Jesus Christ as a hypocrite.” (pg 136). Do you agree with Wesley and, if so, how does this help us understand the nature of God?

## Application

Invite the participants to reflect on the life and practice of their local church. Does their local church put into practise the principle of free grace in their ministry to each other and their outreach to the wider community? Identify the attitudes and practices that, as it were, ‘get in the way’ of free grace. List them on the white or chalk board and discuss why this happens.

In Paul’s epistle to the Romans, the theme of grace occurs over fifteen times. Paul holds that Christians are “justified by grace” (3:24), that they have “access by faith to grace” (5:2). Paul argues that grace is the very heart of the Christian faith. What evidence of grace have the participants experienced in their own lives and how have these experiences shaped their understanding of God?

Take a few minutes to consider any questions participants may have regarding the material covered or that arose during their preparations for this session.

## Looking Ahead

Remind participants to read carefully chapter nine of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they may have.

Announce the time and place of the next meeting.

## Closing

Invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect silently on the evening.

Sing or recite a Wesley hymn selected by a member of the group.

Join hands to form a circle and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

# Session Nine – Love Unconditionally

## Objectives

- To consider the emergence of a genuine Methodist theology.
- To understand how the experience of love, human and divine, became the determinative theological imperative of the Methodist movement.

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk board plus felt pens or chalk
- Notebooks, pens and pencils
- Extra copies of the discussion guide for the session.
- Copies of the discussion guide for session ten.

## Beginning

Ask the participants to take a few minutes and remember moments in their lives when they have been the recipients of acts of love from others: an offer of forgiveness, the embrace of one's partner, or children, the affirmation of a good friend or children, a genuine compliment. Invite those who feel comfortable doing so to share one of their special moments with the group.

Now ask them to reflect on what they perceive to be experiences of God's love in their lives. Can they identify any characteristics of what they understand to be God's love that distinguish such an experience from the experience of human love or are they the same? Allow a few minutes for discussion.

## Discussion Questions

1. This session will explore the theological renaissance which occurred almost two hundred years after the emergence of the Methodist movement, because of George Croft Cell's book *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (1935).

There were many reasons, as the author points out, for this 'delayed' theological response. For many years Wesley's theological importance was ignored but as Methodism evolved from a movement to an institution (an established church), the need for theological reflection became essential to its integrity. Ask the group to reflect on and list some of the theological emphases and interpretative motifs that have become important aspects of Methodist theology.

2. The author identifies 'love' as the essential and enduring theological imperative of the Methodist movement. This has particular relevance to a secular modern society. Wesley came to this conclusion through his own personal experiences; his involvement in the Holy Club; his unrequited love for Sophie Hopkey; his lack of contact with the native American community in Georgia; his despair arising from his encounter with the Moravians, and finally his transforming 'warm heart' experience at Aldersgate.

All these disparate experiences enabled him to discern the power of love at work in his life. This love, said Wesley, 'established his soul'. (pg 154) In response the established church closed its doors to him and Wesley was left to build and guide the Methodist movement outside the walls of the established church. Ask the group to discuss whether they think the Methodist Church today is guided by this imperative of love. What kind of Christian faith community can the power of love create?

## Application

In 1762, Hogarth completed an engraving which he called "Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism" (pp 155–6). Hogarth was responding to the concerns of Bishop Joseph Butler regarding what he thought were the 'dangers' of the Methodists. He called the Methodists 'enthusiasts.' The engraving attacks the kind of religious enthusiasm that leads to all kinds of excesses. Wesley worked hard to respond to such criticisms. The author includes an appendix of 'apologies' Wesley wrote in defence of the Methodist movement (pp 187–192). Ask the group to reflect on the engraving and discuss how the Christian faith communities can distort the imperatives of love turning worship into a gratuitous show.

Invite the group to read chapter 15 of John's Gospel, in particular John 15:13, and share their responses to John's understanding of love.

Take a few minutes to consider any questions participants may have regarding the material covered during their preparations for this session.

## Looking Ahead

Remind participants to read carefully chapter ten of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they may have.

Announce the time and place of the next meeting.

## Closing

Invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect silently on the evening.

Sing or recite a Wesley hymn selected by a member of the group.

Join hands to form a circle and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

# Session Ten – The People Called Methodists

## Objectives

- To explore how Methodism had its real beginning in the genuine heart experience of one person, John Wesley.
- To examine the connection between ‘a warm heart’ and ‘an open mind’ and how the one ought to lead to the other.
- To examine further how ‘a warm heart; and ‘an open mind’ inevitably creates a ‘catholic spirit,’ an openness to the love of God and, in response, love towards others.
- To discover how the qualities of ‘warm hearts’, ‘open minds’ and ‘catholic spirits’ inevitably shaped people who in their day to day living embodied the meaning of the ‘whole’ Gospel.

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk board plus marker pens or chalk
- Notebooks, pens and/or pencils
- Extra copies of the discussion guide for the session
- Copies of the discussion guide for session eleven.

## Beginning

Wesley wrote a number of treatises on what he called ‘the character of a Methodist’ because he believed the integrity of the Methodist movement grew out of the character or authenticity of the people who called themselves Methodists. Their lives, he argued, spoke louder than their words. Invite the participants first to discuss as a group what they think the word ‘character’ means and then brainstorm on the white or chalk board all the synonyms they can think of for the word ‘character.’

## Discussion Questions

1. Every year around the world Methodist churches set aside a Sunday in May and call it Aldersgate Sunday. They do this to remember Wesley’s ‘heart warming’ experience on 24 May 1738 at the Moravian Society meeting room on Aldersgate Street, London. After Aldersgate Wesley was a changed man. What, do you think happened at Aldersgate, that so radically transformed Wesley from ‘a 34 year old zealot’ into the founder of the people called Methodists? (cf pg 168)
2. Wesley often argued that “orthodoxy or right opinion is a very slender part of religion.” (pg 171) What do you think he meant and how might a Christian remain grounded in the faith while retaining an open mind?
3. The author argues that Wesley was ecumenical long before ecumenism came into being. Wesley believed that grace opened one up to the fullness of the love of God. This ‘openness’ to grace transformed not only one’s heart and mind but also one’s spirit. As Wesley observed, “Love done gives the title to this character: catholic love is a catholic spirit.” (pg 174). What do you think Wesley meant?

4. The word gospel has a variety of meanings in the Christian tradition. It can denote the four gospels in the Bible, it can refer to the many other or extra-canonical gospels, it can refer to doctrines or teachings of Christianity, it can refer to something we agree is true in the sense of the gospel truth. The author contends that Wesley “constructed his gospel from a broad range of sources” (pg175), that “Wesley’s gospel emerges clear, consistent and integral.” What is the gospel in a Methodist context and how might it be embodied in the life and practice of the Church?

## Application

Invite someone in the group to read aloud the scenario, A Matter of Absolute Duty, on pp 178–9. Ask the group to reflect on what they think the gospel means for them as they listen to the reading. After the reading take a few minutes for quiet reflection. Then ask the members of the group to try to identify where they think the gospel is found in the reading. Encourage them to share their insights.

Read aloud the parable of the prodigal son found in Luke 15:11–32. Ask the participants first to listen to the parable and then share what they think is the gospel in the parable.

Take a few minutes to consider any questions participants might have regarding the material covered or that arose during their preparations for this session.

## Looking Ahead

Remind participants to read carefully chapter eleven of *The John Wesley Code* and write down any questions they have.

Announce the time and place of the next meeting.

## Closing

Since the next meeting of the group will conclude the study of the book ask each participant to bring with them a symbol of the change(s) they may have experienced during the study. The symbol can be a drawing, a poem, a sculpture, a photo, anything that represents for them some significant change or transformation they have experienced.

Sing or recite a Wesley hymn selected by a member of the group.

Join hands to form a circle and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

# Session Eleven – Quo Vadis

## Objectives

- To identify some of the implications of Wesley's life and ministry for the church today.
- To examine some of the causes of what the author calls 'Methodist amnesia.'
- To consider some of the possibilities still residing in Methodism that can lead to renewal and a new vision not just for Methodism but also for other Christian faith communities.

## Materials

- Copies of *The John Wesley Code*
- A white or chalk plus marker pens or chalk
- Notebooks, pens and pencils
- Extra copies of the discussion guide for the session.

## Beginning

Invite the participants to take about five minutes and reflect on their own local faith communities. Ask them to list in their notebooks, the:

1. Problems facing their communities
2. Possibilities for ministry in their local communities.

Ask them to share with the larger group what they have listed in their notebooks.

## Discussion Questions

1. The author argues that Methodism today suffers from 'a bad case of amnesia.' Do you think this is true or do you disagree? Give reasons for your conclusions.
2. The author believes there are three qualities of Methodism that can assist it in responding to the challenges of today:
  - a malleable polity
  - theological flexibility
  - communal integrity.

Why are these qualities so important and relevant to a post-modern secular society?

3. Are there other qualities of Methodism that are particularly important to a relevant ministry today?

## Application

Wesley words from his sermon, "The Law Established through Faith" (1749) were written during the early days of Methodism, yet they came to embody the heart and soul of the movement, "Love is the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things. Love will endure when heaven and earth flee away; for love alone never fails." (pg 185). Ask the group to share what they think Wesley meant and why they think his words are still relevant today?

Ask a member of the group to read Romans 5:5-11. Then invite the group members to reflect on and discuss what they think Paul means and in what ways Paul's words are still relevant to today's world.

Finally, invite the members of the group to share with the group the symbols they have brought along and the significance of the symbols. Ask the group to decide what they want to do with the symbols. Are there any particular ideas or projects they hope to initiate in their faith communities and/or their local communities?

## Closing

Thank the members of the group for their participation and encourage them to keep in touch with one another.

Read and or sing Wesley's hymn, "A Charge to Keep I Have" (*With One Voice* 487, and other hymnbooks).

Ask each member in silence to commit themselves to one task they intend to undertake to renew their faith journey.

Join hands to form a circle and close with the grace:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
The love of God  
And the communion the Holy Spirit  
Be with us all.  
Amen.

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## Session Twelve (Optional) – Shared Meal

The group may want to meet one last time for a shared meal or 'pot luck' supper which includes friends and family members.

The leader of the group may want to suggest this and, if the group wishes to do so, organise a twelfth meeting.