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Thirteen: A Story of Growth in Grace Through an Experimental Small Group

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Abstract: In 2016 an experimental small group formed, defined by extreme measures of accountability inspired by John Wesley's early Methodists. The focused theological assumptions of the group were that believers are called to lives of progressive sanctification by the power of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. The key strategic concept was sustained attention and discipline through accountability. This article tells the story of Thirteen while elucidating salient features in Wesley's small-group strategies that were considered in developing Thirteen.

Keywords: *Class meetings • small groups • holiness • means of grace • spiritual disciplines*

Introduction

John Wesley once wrote that 'whoever is habitually inattentive to the presence and will of his Creator, he is a dissipated man'.[1] To *dissipate*, in the passive sense, is to gradually dissolve or disappear in some way, to become less so or to devolve. In Wesley's view, being *habitually inattentive* to the presence and will of God is either a cause or an indicator of someone that has spiritually dissipated, perhaps both. Some pastors, if not many, are deeply burdened for dissipated followers of Christ in their ministries who appear to lack direction, joy, gratitude, and victory in their spiritual lives. Many pastors feel the same way about their own lives too.

Wesley and his Methodists devoted their entire ministry efforts to fighting dissipated Christian culture by establishing bands, classes, and societies wherever they could.[2] Even their mammoth theological productions were motivated by these efforts. The Methodists and their methods were fuelled by an unsatisfied ache to be near to God; to be pure in heart; to find that end for which God had made all mankind. They were not, initially at least, popular. Their methods were crude and simple and unconventional. But they *were* effective. Desiring holy love might have been birthed in the mind and the heart by their theological outlook, but it was nurtured in life by their prayers and disciplined practice.[3]

[1] John Wesley, 'On Dissipation', in *Sermons III*, vols. 1–4 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abington, 1984–1987), 3:120.

[2] Wesley's methods were not completely original, as demonstrated by Peter Bunton in '300 Years of Small Groups—The European Church from Luther to Wesley', in *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, Vol. 11 (1) (2014): 88–106.

[3] 'Because of the strategic significance of the band meeting as the key structure of communal formation focused on growth in holiness, the decline of the band meeting must be seen as an important indication that Methodism was failing in its efforts to "spread scriptural holiness",' (Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 184).

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A host of different and specialized efforts might be employed to address spiritual dissipation in us and others today, but in this article, I want to relate the experience of a modern version of the model used by the Methodists, what has over time assumed the name Thirteen. To do this, I will tell the story that led to the implementation of Thirteen while discussing salient features of the early Methodist model. I will also share the story of Thirteen as it unfolded from within the first, experimental group, as well as the reflections about possible reasons for its success. Though this article is in no way to be considered as qualitative research, I and Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Matthew Mitchell Jr. are currently conducting a qualitative study on Thirteen to better understand its perceived effectiveness and its potential as an effective curricular model for some groups.[4] My intent is to encourage pastors and small groups leaders to reimagine new dynamics in Wesleyan methodologies for spiritual growth as well as to highlight areas of research being conducted regarding the following model. For this reason, I will only briefly bring the literature into the body of this article.

When I first began to learn about the history of Methodism, having grown up a Methodist, I remember thinking to myself, 'Wait, I've never done any of those things,' by which I meant the methods of seeking God that early Methodists used. Clearly, Methodism has, for most of us, become a banner of association or belief around some set of generalized principles. But why are their *methods* so foreign to ours? Are they outdated? Are there cultural issues involved? Historically, according to Andrew Goodhead, Wesley's small bands were eventually replaced with class meetings as 'the "crown" of Methodism's life'.[5] Additionally, he argued that being a 'second generation' Methodist led to a devaluing of the importance of the bands and class meetings, which had become, in Goodhead's words, 'routinized, idealized, and totemized'.[6] Thus, 'The class meeting was the crown of the first Methodists' experiential lives; it became the cross of the later Methodists' settled, regulated, and socially acceptable lives'.[7] Kevin Watson, however, has suggested that the 'larger groups eventually replaced the smaller bands and gradually became more and more like prayer meetings, where people were seeking a direct encounter with God through a corporate search for revival'.[8] According to Watson, the problem is that this sort of pursuit fails to make use of personal accountability as a necessary additive to revival.[9]

Today, however, the value of the Methodist methods has a new opportunity to fall upon a generation of fresh ears who have had the opportunity to recognize the problem with devaluing them. This reassessment has been notably pursued by both D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples*, and Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*.[10] Similarly, reading about early Methodist bands and classes fell fresh on my ears at a time when my normal experience with small groups was becoming negative. The following story is the true account of my attempt to modify and apply some of the Methodist spirit (or the spirit of their methods) to a small group of men for a short amount of time in 2016. I will share the story as it unfolded, suggesting areas of potential research along the way.

The Story of Thirteen

In 2016, I was desperate for God's perceivable involvement in my life. I was an associate pastor in charge of men and young families in a non-denominational, medium-sized church from a holiness tradition in the heart of the Bible Belt of America. Wednesday night men's meeting consisted of anywhere from ten to twenty men of varying ages, gathered in an older cinder-block room lined with chairs and whiteboards. It was an honest group, defined by a faithful upbringing in biblical understanding. Showing up on Wednesday nights was a rhythm not normally broken and one would easily become like family in this group, enjoying disagreements, heated arguments at times, but always a sense of togetherness, anchored by several seasoned men of the church.

When I became the teacher of the Wednesday night group, I was zealous about teaching the Scriptures and portraying an inspirational account of our theological heritage as Wesleyan Methodists. To this day I think that I was a good teacher, and yet I felt incredibly ineffective both as a person and as a pastor. Personally, however, I longed for discernment about my future, power over enduring struggles in my heart, and effectiveness in my ministry. I had been

[4] See Mitchell's dissertation, 'Greenhouse Clergy Groups: Exploring Communities of Practice that Foster an Environment for Pastoral Imagination', (PhD dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2021).

[5] Andrew Goodhead, *A Crown and a Cross: The Rise, Development, and Decline of the Methodist Class Meeting in Eighteenth-Century England* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 144, 243.

[6] Goodhead, *A Crown and a Cross*, 286.

[7] Goodhead, *A Crown and a Cross*, 287.

[8] Kevin M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 185.

[9] The discussion between the corporate pursuit of revival and the private use of the means of grace through communal accountability deserves to be explored (the Asbury University revival is, as of this writing, currently taking place).

[10] Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997).

in many small groups, had even started a few of my own. In all of them there was a noticeable lack of perceivable victory for both me and others. It is not that God's power had never been perceived in my life before. My conversion at a young age and the years that followed were filled with a perception of God's presence, power, guidance, and effectiveness when sharing it with others. But those fires seemed quenched and distant as life went on.

A Surprising Experience in Haiti

In the spring of that year, I decided to take a solo trip to Haiti to visit my dear friend, Dr. Vilmer Paul, whose ministry was multiplying rather quickly into multiple schools and churches.[11] Although Dr. Paul and I had been close friends, I had never visited. Once there, I was shocked that his methods clearly reflected a primitive application of Methodism in which accountability to specific practices played a unique role. On Sunday morning, in a church of about 600 attendees, I watched as members entered the front door of the church and presented small cards to two people at a table. When I asked Dr. Paul about this, he looked at me as if I should know, seeing that we were both trained at the same seminary and learned about Wesley's early practices. As readers may know, church members were getting their cards punched for having attended small groups that morning. To say I was surprised would not do justice to what was happening in my mind.

Regarding this early Methodist practice, D. Michael Henderson writes that the practice of punching tickets 'allowed the Methodist leaders to maintain the integrity of the groups while keeping conflict to a minimum', and that the exclusion of those who refused to cooperate 'was deemed a necessary safeguard and the tickets a convenient restraint'.[12] I did not, at the time, know what to make of this practice by Dr. Paul.

I was also quite surprised to experience a level of gratitude and victory that the congregants testified to continuously during my time there. At every event that I participated in with Dr. Paul, men, women, and young people would regularly stand up and declare all the good things that God was doing in their lives.[13] In addition, over half of Dr. Paul's members were involved in prayer gatherings divided geographically throughout the city every week. How different from my experience! I had *never* had that sort of church-wide sense of victory and gratitude. Instead, my normal church experience, especially in small groups, was that most of us were intensely struggling and not perceiving victory. 'Not perfect, just sinners saved by grace' is an appropriate slogan for what my ministry and church experience had been till that time. It is not that there was a lack of honesty or deep-seated desire for change, only that change never seemed to occur.

It would be a mistake to make the case that Dr. Paul's methodology was directly connected to the *appearance* of great spiritual growth, and that is not my point in sharing it. Instead, the perception of that connection deeply influenced how I began to process my own ministry. I don't claim that it was science, only that it impacted my thinking about my own ministry experiences and motivated me to change.

A Plain Account of Christian Perfection

On the flight back from Haiti, I was trying to process my experience with Dr. Paul while also reading John Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, a book gifted to me by my father after I became a believer eighteen years prior. I had read it multiple times in the past, something obvious by its then-current appearance (it is in far worse shape today). While waiting for a layover flight in Miami, I came across a statement in that book that, conjoined with my time in Haiti, caused a shift to settle in me. Wesley claimed that God offers believers the blessings of a pure heart along with God's active leading in our lives.

Of course, holiness as a way of life wasn't something new to me. I had long since been convinced that we were meant to live in relative victory and under the continued leading of God's presence. In fact, the first time that the concept of holiness became real to me was in my first reading of Wesley's *Plain Account* in 1999. It was the first theological book I had ever read as a believer, and it influenced me a great deal at that time. But it was this very fact that made the struggles of my personal life and ministry so difficult. 'If this is God's plan for us, then what am I doing wrong?' 'Where,' I questioned, 'had that experience of God gone?' 'Okay,' I thought to myself. 'I get this, want this, and it isn't something new.' To be clear, the issue for me personally was not about Christian perfection per se, but simply Christian growth in victory. 'Just be present, Lord!'

[11] Dr. Vilmer Paul and I met in seminary. Dr. Paul is a native Haitian who planted a church, Heavenly Brightness Church, that quickly grew into a large congregation from which was started a school. Eventually, Dr. Paul planted other schools and churches in the area. His ministry is a bright light for the city of Cap Haitien.

[12] Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 143–4.

[13] Kevin M. Watson recently wrote that 'When Methodists have lowered their expectations of what God can do in this life, spiritual and numeric decline have followed' (*Perfect Love: Recovering Entire Sanctification—The Lost Power of the Methodist Movement* [Seedbed, 2021], 5).

As I continued to read *A Plain Account*, I came to Wesley's section on the means of grace. He asks, 'How are we to wait for this change?' He answers,

> Not in careless indifference, or indolent inactivity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God. And if any man dream of attaining it any other way (yea, or of keeping it when it is attained, when he has received it even in the largest measure), he deceiveth his own soul. It is true, we receive it by simple faith; but God does not, will not, give that faith unless we seek it with all diligence, in the way which He hath ordained.[14]

Wesley audaciously claimed that we are to seek after God's work in our lives in specific ways, ways that God himself had designed and instituted for this purpose. Most of these God-designed and instituted ways are historically known as the means of grace.

According to Henderson, the means of grace are a foundational theological principle for Wesley's methods. Henderson writes, 'The idea that human nature could improve with proper care and discipline was an essential plank in the Wesleyan instructional platform.'[15] Similarly Watson writes,

> The Anglican emphasis on the importance of a disciplined practice of the means of grace is a visible influence on the Wesleyan band meeting. Yet, the Moravian emphasis on the importance of a direct encounter by the individual with the Holy Spirit that led to assurance is also a visible influence on Wesley's conception of the band meeting. Thus, the distinct theological contribution of the Wesleyan bands was the conjunction of the Moravian emphasis on justification by faith and assurance with the Anglican emphasis on growth in holiness through disciplined spiritual practices.[16]

The practice of the means of grace was not really new to me. However, Wesley wrote two sentences following his answer above that immediately sobered me and woke me from a deep spiritual slumber. This was because he related the practice of the means of grace to our complaining about the sparing experiences of said holiness. He writes,

> This consideration may satisfy those who inquire, why so few have received the blessing [of a pure heart]. Inquire how many are seeking it in this way; and you have a sufficient answer.[17]

Imagine, if you will, a long pause. Upon reading these words, I felt as though God were speaking directly to me. 'Kenny, you want me to do all these things in your life, about which you complain incessantly, but you do not take the time to seek me in the ways that I've specified for you.' It…was…simple. *I wanted to sit and do as little as possible while being inwardly discontent with God's presence in my life and ministry.*[18]

The Birth of an Idea

The light bulb had gone off. Things must be different in me. Things must be different in how I do ministry. For years I had depended on my wisdom and insight, my passion and intensity, my inspiration to lead others to the discovery of God's presence and power. Now, however, I felt confident that I had been wholly mistaken. The greatest gift I could give was to show people how to use the means that God had ordained for them to seek God themselves.[19] But how? Who would do this with me? These are not the sorts of things people clamour to join. This was the first obstacle. I remember saying to God, 'No one will do this with me.'

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[14] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* ([1872] Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1966), 62.

[15] Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 131.

[16] Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 72.

[17] Wesley, *Christian Perfection*, 62.

[18] As Watson has written, 'At one level, this is an easy way to distinguish between our intentions and our actions. It is one thing to say that I want to be a mature and faithful Christian. It is another thing to express that commitment through consistent action', (*Perfect Love*, 109).

[19] Robert Wuthnow has written that there are two axes of debate regarding how small groups are impacting faith in America. 'One of these has to do with the question of individual responsibility. It focuses on the degree to which an individual should take an active role in the shaping of his or her faith. The other has to do with the question of faith and work.' 'The Small-Group Movement in the Context of American Religion', in '*I Come Away Stronger': How Small Groups are Shaping American Religion*, edited by Robert Wuthnow (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 345.

Over the next few weeks, I felt sure that I needed to start a group that would not be focused on insights, videos, curriculums, or topical studies. There were plenty of those already. As Watson wrote, 'To put this even more directly, this volume offers no support for the types of small groups that are most common in contemporary Wesleyan/Methodist communities, which are curriculum-driven and focused on a transfer of information from a perceived expert to a largely passive audience. The most obvious example of this approach is Sunday School.'[20] Instead, this new group would need to be focused solely on seeking God through these divinely ordained ways, the means of grace. I asked God for guidance. Within the same week two men in my men's ministry independently called me desperate for help. They were weary with defeat. I understood this possibly as a sign but at least as an opportunity. Over lunch that following Sunday, I asked if these two men would be interested in joining me for something that would be very hard and different from what they were used to. One of them stated in tears, 'I'm willing to try anything. Nothing else has worked.' I explained to them the idea of doing thirteen weeks of accountability with daily check-ins. We would meet once a week, absences not allowed. We would each commit to reading a certain amount of Scripture and to praying for a measurable amount of time each day, six out of seven days a week. Additionally, we would fast, do something missionally together, and commit to measurable areas of character improvement. For anyone that did not keep their commitments, they would be removed from the group following attempts to mend the situation.[21] For anyone that did not want to join the group, they would not have to. We would do it whether there were three of us or twenty. My suggestion probably sounded like, 'Hey, we've never been very hard on each other. Let's try it for a change.'[22]

Readers will be able to discern one of my initial working assumptions, which was not a feature of Wesley's groups. The group would need to be exclusive, our version of 'punching tickets', but there were several pressure valves blueprinted into the model. Because our practices would be quite vigorous and new for participants, we wanted to include moments in which the pressure was off. To accomplish this, we limited the commitments to six of seven days, one day being used for making up on failed commitments. Second, the group was limited to thirteen weeks, the idea of which was that our efforts would be long enough to be valuable but short enough to be doable.[23] Additionally, it was thirteen weeks instead of twelve weeks because the first week would be used as an opportunity to get out before officially starting. These were attempts to address problems of commitment by using a close-ended model rather than an open-ended model and by incorporating times of relief. 'Keep going, you can rest on Saturday,' or 'Keep going, only three more weeks,' or 'Just finish, if you see no difference in your life when you are done, then you never have to do it again.' That last statement could have proved dangerous, but it worked.

The following week I announced to our Wednesday night men's group that we would have an interest meeting regarding this experimental group. Surprisingly, we had nine men show up and initially commit. We decided that a text group would be the best method for checking in, despite the concern that it would feel legalistic ('just get the check mark'). We were not able to use this experiment in place of Wednesday night men's ministry or any other regular service time, so we had the added difficulty of finding time to meet. We decided that the group would not happen if we had to ask people for what worked best for them. Instead, we raised the stakes by having it after Wednesday night men's group. Additionally, we decided to strictly enforce the time to start and finish since most of the men in our group had families at home. Furthermore, everyone could participate during the first week without any commitment afterward, as a sort of trial and 'count the cost' week.[24] To continue in the group after week one, however, everyone had to fast for twenty-four hours on the start day of the second week. Everyone had to seal in their commitments in a measurable way: how much time in prayer each day and what Scripture reading plan? The whole thing was extreme for all of us, but we were weary with defeat and willing to fight for some traction in our spiritual lives. At week two, everyone had stayed, and the adventure began.

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

[21] Compare Wuthnow's observation that 'many members emphasized just accepting yourself, going with the flow, rolling with the punches…. Consequently, the idea of discipline was transmuted into one that said, in effect, that the real challenge in life is just to accept things as they are', ('The Small-Group Movement', 359).

[22] Wuthnow noted that the informality of modern small groups in some ways may work against its presupposition that 'spiritual development is not easy'. He states, 'Informal norms of support and encouragement may also work against the hard efforts actually required to develop one's spiritual muscles,' ('The Small-Group Movement', 347).

[23] Though his suggestion is by now outdated, Robert Wuthnow suggested that by the early 1990s, small groups that had limited terms made up the smallest percentage of groups out of eleven markers (14 percent), ahead of groups that have contracts (18 percent). Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and the Quest for a New Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 136. He notes this in 'The Small-Group Movement' as well (377). However, there are models more recently that take this approach, such as The Journey Church in New York, which operates on ten-week rotations. See Nelson Searcy and Kerrick Thomas, *Activate* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008).

[24] Cf. Wuthnow's advice, 'The Small-Group Movement', 361.

The Experiment Begins

Our meeting time together was planned to be rather strict and straightforward. We would read a list of core values and commitments, trading off who read what each week. Everyone had to participate without exception in every question and element of our meeting. The idea was that to finish such a strenuous effort, we would have to be reminded regularly why we had started at all. Although we read Scripture, we never discussed it. Instead, we asked three questions: What are you grateful for? How did your commitments go? How can we pray for you? There was always a mystery question as well, such as, 'What are you desiring to keep secret?' In answering questions, everyone was asked to keep their responses to the point, no dissertations allowed. We *always* finished on time. One other thing we did that was unique: after the first week, everyone had to fast for 24 hours prior to the second meeting, without which participants could not continue. Similarly, the final week included a 24-hour exit fast that was resolved with a big feast.

There are several aspects of how we arranged our meetings that need to be discussed. First, we required everyone to participate in reading the values (alternating), in praying and being prayed for, and in answering the questions, no exceptions. This is noted as a peculiarity of early Methodism by Henderson.

> It seems incredible, but *every* Methodist spoke at *every* meeting *every* week…. There was no allowance for mere listeners or watchers. The success of the entire system hinged on the assumption that everyone would participate.[25]

Henderson notes what happened when this was no longer required:

> By the time the requirement of participation had been dropped as a condition for membership, the entire Methodist group system had crumbled and Methodism became just another religious denomination with no particular methodological distinction.[26]

Ouch!

The second aspect worth discussing is that of self-ownership. A. Lamport and Mary Rynsburger reported in a 2008 study that there is an essential difference between child and adult education. Unlike children, adults are 'driven by self-direction' and tend to 'resent imposed learning'.[27] The application of this for small groups is for leaders to 'allow for considerable ownership of the group's direction'.[28] In Thirteen, no one was ever told how much time to spend praying or what Bible reading plan to follow. The rules were that each participant would share with the group what they felt they needed to commit to. Each person chose their own plan and commitments. The same was true for areas of character development. The question would be, 'What do *you* think you need to work on?'

Most of the core values, commitments, and questions that were asked were derived from Wesley directly. For instance, reading our general commitments to the group each week included the following, 'Toward this end, I will *arrive on time* and endure for three months; *be serious and speak the truth*, *refrain from speaking ill of anyone*, *keep all confidence without exception*, *forward my brothers in all Scriptural Christianity*, and *be willing to be told my faults plainly and clearly by those who care for me.*' Additionally, we chose one of Wesley's regular band questions each week as our mystery question, such as 'Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?'[29]

A third aspect lies in the fact that the group was *not* a Bible study. Every week a passage would be read but not discussed. Passages were chosen that most reminded us that we are called to be holy. However, we wanted to avoid elaborate talks that would not change our practice. We already had plenty of insights in our lives that we were not living out. This idea is captured best by Wesleyan scholar Matt Friedeman, whom I have heard say on numerous occasions, 'If you make disciples by sitting around and talking, do not be surprised if your disciples sit around and

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[25] Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting,* 142 (italics in the original).
[26] Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting,* 142–3.
[27] Mark A. Lamport and Mary Rynsburger, 'All the Rage: How Small Groups Are Really Educating Christian Adults, Part 2: Augmenting Small Group Ministry Practice—Developing Small Group Leadership Skills Through Insights from Cognate Theoretical Disciplines,' in *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, Vol. 5, no. 2 (2008): 411.
[28] Lamport and Rynsburger, 'All the Rage,' 411.
[29] Henderson gives a general overview of some of these in *John Wesley's Class Meeting*, 116–21.

talk.'[30] In 2014, Jim Egli and Wei Wang published 'Factors that Fuel Small Group Growth', in which they include the following powerful observation:

> Previous rounds of this research project surprisingly revealed no correlation between the amount of time that group leaders spent in the preparation of their group lessons and any of their group growth outcomes (Egli, 2011, p. 26). The results were so conclusive that we dropped the question asking about time spent in lesson preparation from recent versions of the survey. Yet many churches spend a bulk of their group leader training focusing on how to prepare for teaching a lesson or leading a Bible discussion.[31]

Certainly, there are some dynamic people to whom others will naturally be drawn to listen and learn from, but for many of us pastors, our incredible biblical insights and dynamic personalities will not move others into action. This was certainly the assumption we were working with. I genuinely thought that I was a great teacher, but lives remained as they always had been. I also felt sure that if we began to study the Bible (which is important), then the group would be dominated by particular personalities. So, we removed it. Instead, the understood outcome of the groups was for each participant to take ownership of God's word and presence in their life, something not available in a church service alone.[32]

The final noteworthy aspect of our arrangement lies in the role of the fasting. The first week was treated as a trial week, as noted already. At the end of the first week, participants would have had opportunity to give our group a trial run. On week two, those who chose to stay were only allowed to stay if they completed a 24 hour fast leading into the second meeting. There are several reasons for this. For one, it added a choice. Participants had the opportunity to get out, but once they were in, it was understood that they were verbally agreeing to allow us to speak truthfully and bluntly for the remainder of the thirteen weeks to keep them on track. Another reason that the fast was important was to create expectation. The ability of participants to complete the fast allowed them and the group to believe that they were serious about participating.

Though viewed differently among participants looking back, it was not a glorious start from my own perspective. Two weeks in and there were complaints beginning to rise from within and without. I was engaged in several conversations about the group in which it was expressed that some people felt that wives were being neglected and that these extreme measures of accountability were overkill.[33] There was a lack of enthusiasm from within as well. Three weeks went by and though the commitments had been kept, the atmosphere was far from encouraging. Frankly, it was a bit miserable. This was hard for all of us. But then something began to happen. Men began to open up and share things in response to the probing questions. They began confessing deep-seated sins that cannot be publicly named. They also began to share ways that God was speaking to them that they had not experienced before. They began adding to their commitments, things like, 'I want to say three encouraging things to my wife each day.' We began expressing gratefulness for things in our lives as a matter of intentional discipline. We began to speak directly to each other, saying things that were meant to arouse action rather than excuses, especially when someone tried to make any.

Another turning point that stands out was when one our men prayed for us to 'kick the enemy in the grill'. Regardless of how someone might feel about this sort of statement, it awoke a deep-seated sense that we were at war. When one or more of us were not doing well during any specific week, the others would chime in and rhetorically ask, 'Did you sign up for something easy?' The text messages became a place for defying the enemy and throwing up our rebellious flags against defeat. We felt like soldiers. Each ring of the text to check in reminded us that someone was fighting at that moment against the devil and his schemes. We brought up stories like when Sampson faced his enemies with nothing more than the jawbone of a donkey. There were no excuses and when we made any, they were quickly smothered by a group of men that simply would not have it.

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30 Matt Friedeman, *The 5Q Method of Discipleship: Five Questions that Will Change Your Life* (Jackson, MS: Teleios Press, 2021), 8.

31 Jim Egli and Wei Wang, 'Factors That Fuel Small Group Growth,' in *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, Vol. 11, no. 1 (2014): 149.

32 As Dallas Willard has said, 'the greatest contemporary barriers to meaningful spiritual formation into Christlikeness is overconfidence in the spiritual efficacy of regular church service. They are vital, they are not enough, it is that simple' (*Renovation of the Heart* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002] 250). Quoted in Yau Man Siew, 'A Case Study in Adult Discipleship: Stories of Apprenticeship to Jesus at an Urban Anglican (Episcopal) Church', in *Christian Education Journal*, vol. 18 (2) 2021: 203.

33 Upon reading my account of this difficult beginning, most of the participants did not recall that things were so bad at first. My own negative outlook on its beginning may be attributed to conversations that took place outside of the group participants.

In the same way that I remember a few outside voices of criticism at the beginning, new voices arose toward the end who expressed how evident it was that what we were doing was effective in those participating. I remember specifically two texts in which wives respectively reached out to encourage me to keep doing whatever we were doing. When the thirteen weeks were ending, we did an exit fast to end the group. We met and had the best steaks that anyone had ever tasted while discussing the lessons learned. Although some wanted to continue the group (something common, I have learned), I insisted that we should not, so as to preserve the integrity of what we began with boundaries. I then gave each participant a gift for having finished the race. As I recall, the gift I gave was Richard S. Taylor's *The Disciplined Life* (1962).

All in all, we had learned something. God wanted to be sought and we were tasting His power and presence in a way that we had not before; and we were doing this *together*. Doing in community these hard things in a vigorous way where excuses were not very useful or accepted created an incredible bond alive still today, though many of us are in different parts of the country now. It did not start with an experience but with simply taking God up on his promises. If we would seek him according to the ways he had determined, then he would respond. He did. Our original vision, which we read every week, was 'to see men experience effective Spiritual change in their lives by entering a serious and accountable atmosphere for three months at a time consisting of high commitment, definable goals, biblical values, and daily accountability'.

Looking Back and Moving Forward

We had multiple groups after the original, including one together with our wives. At the end of that year, the group had become known simply as 'Thirteen' and was often identified as the most powerful thing in the participants' lives that year. I remember that coming up quite often. One of the variables of success appears to be a particular hunger for help in spiritual growth.[34] When asked to convey how participants reflected on the impact of that group, only one indicated that there was no positive change in behaviour; the reason offered was that the habits of focus were not already lacking in their practice. Additionally, actions tend to build confidence where learning does not. Several participants mentioned that they had a new confidence in their ability to *do*. They had *completed* their commitments, which built up their confidence in the role of raw discipline within community.

I have never since had a group that was ineffective, but none compared to the original groups of that first year. The success of Thirteen at that time was clearly not tied to my leadership skills because I don't, or at least didn't, have them. It was only when I got out of the way that things began to change. And how relieving might that be? For a pastor to be able to facilitate and move out of the way.

What was clear was that whether we were experiencing God's perceivable presence in our lives at first or at all, we were most definitely not sitting idle. Instead, we maintained 'a close attendance on all the ordinances of God' to battle our own inward and outward dissipation through a habitual attentiveness to God's presence. Years prior, while in seminary, Matt Friedeman took our class one day to do 'works of mercy' in Jackson, Mississippi. Upon returning I felt invigorated and made some comment to Matt about this feeling. He responded, 'Sometimes it just feels good to do *something*.' I believe that describes the way that we felt. It just felt good to do *something*, the doing of which allowed us to put the rest into God's hands.

Looking back, one factor that appears to have been related to the success of Thirteen is what Malcom and Hulda Knowles have noted as a shared perception that change is needed.[35] I have thought much about this over the years, comparing which groups did better than others. It appears that those groups who wanted help the most were also

[34] Peter Gubi, a Moravian ordinand, wrote in 2011 that he had before found much help in personal and emotional development in small groups. And yet, he wrote, 'I found no formal small-group space provided in my training for "processing" my personal and spiritual development, which has surprised and alarmed me' (Peter Madsen Gubi, 'An Exploration of the Impact of Small Reflexive Groups', in *Practical Theology* 4, no.1 (2011): 50). Relevant to Gubi's personal experience is Alice W. Mumbo's recent data that 'one of the most motivating factors for adults to be involved in Christian education programs in the local church is the biblical mandate for growth in one's faith' ('The Rationale Motive of Adult Christians' Participation in Education Programs among Episcopal Churches in Southern California', in *Christian Education Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2018): 21). This finding was in comparison to six other factors: social contact, education preparation, family togetherness, social stimulation, cognitive interest, and church/community service (p. 20).

[35] Malcolm and Hulda Knowles, *Introduction to Group Dynamics*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Follett, 1972). Referenced in Lamport and Rynsburger, 'All the Rage', 396.

the ones that found the most benefit.[36] Relating to this, Lamport and Rynsburger make the following observation for small groups:

> Notable for the church small group leader in these factors is both the relational and factual dimensions; group members need strong attachment to the group to weather the challenge of change but also require objective content (Scripture) in order to understand the need to grow spiritually (change), how to grow, and the results of growth.[37]

Lamport and Rynsburger suggest that the 'idea of groups as "creating opportunity to practice change" is also worth examining; are there ways that the small group leader can deliberately encourage members to take steps of growth within the group context?'[38] At first glance, the nature of Thirteen appears to meet Lamport and Rynsburger's suggested criteria, but much more research is needed to measure the value of Thirteen as a model.

As we move into the future, it would be prudent for Wesleyan and Methodist scholars to give more empirical weight to the choices we make regarding small groups.[39] For this to happen, much more work needs to be done, including detailed research and study groups that analyse various forms of spiritual discipleship through small groups. Although there is a fair amount of literature on the subject, it appears to be both inaccessible and bearing little weight for local pastors. We need to put our practices to the test and be willing to follow the data where it leads. This would be best accomplished by creating a more confident relationship between research scholars and front-line pastors.

Summary

I have attempted to relate one account of an attempt to accommodate Wesleyan *methodologies* to contemporary small group ministry. To do this I briefly shared the story of the experimental Thirteen, penetrated with perceived insights regarding its effectiveness alongside of its particular Methodist framework. I have also suggested that more serious research and qualitative work needs to be done to measure the potential value of Thirteen as a curricular model for future use, something being conducted as of the writing of this article. Finally, I have suggested that empirical study of small group models needs to become a more important part of our scholarly work.

[36] Having surveyed the original groups' individual reflection on that time, only one participant conveyed that they were not greatly impacted by Thirteen (while another did not respond to the survey). The participant expressed that the disciplines of both piety and character were not a new experience. He also expressed that he joined the group to influence the other participants as a sort of mentor.

[37] Lamport and Rynsburger, 'All the Rage', 397. This is also related to what Jack Mezirow calls 'a disorienting dilemma' in which case participants in Thirteen were faced with understanding their moral failures in light of a habitual failure to practice the means of grace (*Learning as Transformation* [San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000], 22). Referenced in Ellen L. Marmon, 'Transformative Learning Theory: Connections with Christian Adult Education', in *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, vol. 10 , no. 2: 426. Compare also the 'kairos moment' of M. Breen and S. Cockram in *Building a Discipling Culture*, 2011; referenced in Christopher B. Beard, 'Connecting Spiritual Formation and Adult Learning Theory: An Examination of Common Principles', in *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, vol. 14 (2): 258. As a disorienting dilemma or kairos moment, participants realize that their current methods are not producing the results they long for.

[38] Lamport and Rynsburger, 'All the Rage', 397.

[39] Scott Boren and Jim Egli wrote in 2014, 'Very few pastors and church leaders have the time to understand and compare the divergent models' ('Small Group Models: Navigating the Commonalities and the Differences', in *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, vol. 11 (1) 2014: 152. In all of the models compared by Boren and Egli, none of them centered on accountability but appeared to diverge upon recruitment methods, ecclesiology, and the distinction between outreach and content focus.

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