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Ecclesia Semper Sanctificanda: *Historic Models of Catechesis and the Cultivation of Social Holiness*

Abstract:

This study aims to show how the maintenance of holy life and love *in* the church requires intentional and continual cultivation *by* the church. If the church is to be continually sanctified then it must intentionally invest in the sanctification of its members. The article examines three historic examples of catechesis in order to exhibit models whereby the church has taken seriously the task of forming disciples who display holiness of heart and life. This article looks at the *Didache* and *On the Apostolic Tradition*, as well as John Wesley's use of societies, class meetings, and band meetings to encourage sanctification within the catechesis process. Finally, this paper offers a few thoughts on the critical need for the implementation of similar catechetical models in the church today. This paper was originally presented at a Social Holiness Colloquium held from April 26-27, 2018 at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Keywords: sanctification, catechesis, John Wesley, *Didache*, *On the Apostolic Tradition*

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Introduction

In 1674, the minister Jodocus van Lodenstein coined the Latin phrase, "*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*." For those not fluent in Latin, translated into English van Lodenstein's statement asserts, "the church reformed must continually be reformed."¹ Over the years, van Lodenstein's words have been interpreted a number of ways, mostly incorrectly; thus, it is helpful to note what van Lodenstein *did not* mean by the phrase in order to properly understand what he *did* intend. Van Lodenstein's purpose for calling the church to continual reformation was not to suggest that constant adaptations, adjustments, or improvements must be made to the church's doctrine, worship, or government. Matters of external reform, which he desired to maintain, had already been accomplished by Reformers in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Furthermore, van Lodenstein was not advocating for any kind of continuous social progress to ensue within the church. Instead, van Lodenstein's primary concern was for the internal component of religion, i.e. the heart. He wanted to ensure the church did not lose sight of the need for the constant reformation of individual's lives; thus, for the church reformed to continually be reformed, van Lodenstein believed the church must attend to the cultivation of human hearts and lives.²

It is van Lodenstein's notion of the church continually being reformed through the constant reformation of individual's lives that I wish to explore, only with a slight twist. Rather than claiming the church must continually be *reformed* through the cultivation of its members, I want to suggest that the church must continually be *sanctified* by cultivating social holiness; thus, I have entitled my study "*Ecclesia Semper Sanctificanda*," which translated into English means, "the church must be continually sanctified."³ The central claim of my study is that the maintenance of holy life and love *in* the church requires intentional and continual cultivation *by* the church. To put it another way, the church must be continually sanctified by intentionally investing in the sanctification of its members.

In my attempt to explore dynamics of the cultivation of social holiness within the ecclesial community, I have chosen to examine models of catechesis extant in the history of the church. Since a myriad of catechetical examples throughout the church's history could (and possibly should) be considered, for the sake of brevity, I have limited the current study to a look at three specific models, namely the *Didache*, Hippolytus of Rome's *On the Apostolic Tradition*, and John Wesley's societies, classes, and bands.

The reasons for my choosing these three models are twofold: 1) the models chosen depict the earliest demonstrations of catechesis in the church in general and in the Wesleyan tradition in particular; 2) held together, the three models reveal important principles of catechesis necessary for the lifelong cultivation of sanctification in both new and longstanding disciples.⁴ I begin my study with an examination of the *Didache* and *On the Apostolic Tradition*, commenting on the ancient church's devotion to the cultivation of holy life and love through a time of pre-baptismal catechesis. From there I turn to John Wesley's society/class/band model as an alternative catechesis, noting how Wesley's system was a practical outworking of his conviction that social holiness signifies growth in community. Finally, I conclude by offering remarks on the critical need for the implementation of similar catechetical models in the church today. Before moving into my examination of historic models of catechesis, however, it is beneficial to say a few words about the concept of social holiness in Wesleyan thought.

Social Holiness in Wesleyan Theology

One of the paramount features of the Wesleyan tradition is its doctrine of Christian perfection. John Wesley expresses his thoughts on sanctification in a letter penned in 1771 to a Mr. Walter Churchey:

Entire sanctification, or Christian perfection, is neither more nor less than pure love; love expelling sin, and governing both the heart and life of a child of God. The Refiner's fire purges out all that is contrary to love, and that many times by a pleasing smart. Leave all this to Him that does all things well, and that loves you better than you do yourself.⁵

For the Wesleys, Christian perfection, i.e. holiness, relates to the state of perfect, holy love, which is obtainable in this life for every believer through grace by the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. The work of Christ's death and resurrection makes it possible for the sinner to not only be saved by grace but also for him/her to be restored to the image of God and made perfect in holy love of God and neighbor. Simply put, the sanctifying grace of God at work in a Christian's life allows a person to both grow in and attain holy love of God and others.

It is important that the work of sanctification is kept in view of the larger activity of God's grace at work in the life of the Christian. The justifying grace of God in the new birth marks a dynamic change that takes

place in an individual's life, resulting in a distinct quality of life that one could not achieve on one's own, namely a life freed from the power of sin. It is in the moment of justification that the process of sanctification begins, ushering in growth in holiness of desire, action, intention, and love. While the process of sanctification is always ongoing, Wesley believed it is possible to achieve the state of Christian perfection (i.e. entire sanctification) in this life. It is at the point of Christian perfection that the Christian believer is fully delivered from the power of outward and inward sin and is made pure in heart, loving God with heart, soul, and mind and loving neighbor as one's self. The work of God in the Christian's heart brings cleansing of sin and the strength to overcome temptation to sin. Likewise, it empowers the believer for obedience and service to Christ's commands and gives him/her a pure, holy love for God and neighbor. Kenneth Collins gives a beautiful image of Christian perfection in his book *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*:

The creature, once steeped in sin, now reflects the goodness of the Creator in a remarkable way...Christian perfection, then, is another term for holy love. It is holy in that believers so marked by this grace are free from the impurities and the drag of sin. It is loving in that believers now love God as the goal of their being, and they love their neighbors as they should.⁶

Because Wesley describes perfection and holiness in terms of pure and perfect love, perfection and holiness must be understood in a social and relational way. In other words, there is a necessary social and relational feature to the ongoing process of sanctification. The primary principle underlying John Wesley's concept of "social holiness" is that holy love needs others for cultivation. There is no division between personal and social piety, which is why in his fourth discourse on the Sermon on the Mount Wesley condemns solitary religion, i.e. religion that exists "without living and conversing with other men."⁷ He writes, "Christianity is essentially a social religion; to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it. When I say, this is essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all, without society."⁸ Likewise, in his preface to the 1739 edition of *Sacred Hymns and Poems*, Wesley pens the following words:

“Holy Solitaries” is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than Holy Adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness. Faith working by love, is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. This commandment have we from Christ, that he who love God, love his brother also: And that we manifest our Love, by doing good to all men; especially to them that are of the household of faith. And in truth, whoever loveth his brethren not in word only, but as Christ loved him, cannot but be zealous of good works. He feels in his soul a burning, restless desire, of spending and being spent for them.⁹

In the preface, Wesley counters an individualized and privatized notion of the Christian faith by speaking to the necessity for Christian fellowship. He sets forth the idea that one cannot know holy love disconnected from other Christians in the church; instead, Christians need one another for the cultivation of holiness. It is only within Christian community that holiness of heart and life is realized and actualized. As Kevin Watson and Scott Kisker state, “...we need each other in order to experience the kind of life that Jesus intends for us to have...,” thus, “... [social holiness is] the context in which the pursuit of holiness [is] possible.”¹⁰

Models of Catechesis

Since Christian faith and life are not known, understood, and lived instantaneously as if by a magical act, the cultivation of holy life and love has always been a crucial component of Christian discipleship. In the earliest days of Christianity, the church developed a method of instruction and spiritual formation in preparation for baptism through a process known as the catechumenate. As the church spread across the Mediterranean and pagan adults began to convert to Christianity, Christian leaders faced the challenge of maintaining purity of the Christian faith in light of cultural diversity, social changes, and governmental pressures. Through the catechumenate, one was able to discover what it means to be a baptized Christian, i.e. one who is identified with Christ, who is part of Christ’s ecclesial body and kingdom, and who is expected to exhibit Christ-likeness in the world. Every individual who wished to join the church was expected to participate in the catechumenate. Though the structures and forms of the catechumenate varied in different times and locations in the

early centuries of the church, the purpose was always the same—formation into an unmistakable Christian way of life and love.

Didache

Sometime within the first few decades following Christ's life on earth, a composition emerged known as the *Didache*, also called the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. Claimed by a number of scholars to originally be a Jewish work used for the instruction of Gentile proselytes to Judaism, the *Didache* was adapted sometime in the first century as a distinct Christian catechesis, detailing ecclesial practices for the cultivation of holiness in those who wished to be part of the church.¹¹ The *Didache* is thus a significant historical document inasmuch as it allows the contemporary reader to peer into the content and customs of Christian discipleship at the close of the apostolic age.

The text of the *Didache* can be broken into four main sections, each focused on a major theme: 1) teachings on Christian ethics; 2) explanation of Christian rituals; 3) description of the ecclesial organization; 4) a concluding statement on the second coming of Christ. Though there is much to be gleaned from careful study of the entirety of the *Didache*, my comments here are brief. For the purposes of the current study, there are two aspects of the *Didache* I believe particularly exemplify the ancient church's devotion to the cultivation of sanctification of its members: first, the manner by which the instruction of the *Didache* promotes love for God and neighbor as the primary rule of Christian life; and second, the way the eschatological vision of Christ's church outlined in the document synthesizes ecclesial life and the pursuit of personal holiness.

As a composite of foundational Christian teachings used for the formation of those preparing for baptism and membership in the early church, the *Didache* consists of instruction derived directly from the words of Jesus Christ recorded in the synoptic Gospel accounts. It is therefore important to note that one significant component of catechesis in the early centuries of the church was Christian education on Christ's teachings and commands. The *Didache* begins by identifying the pathways and blockades of holy living. In particular, the first section of the *Didache* focuses on pathways of righteousness, i.e. aspects of Christian ethics and personal integrity essential to a life of holiness. It opens with the declaration, "There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways."¹² The document then proceeds to sets forth love

for God and neighbor as the primary rule of Christian life, referencing material from the Sermon on the Mount and pointing to Jesus and his teachings as the preeminent constitution of holy life and love.¹³

Another catechetical procedure seen in the *Didache* is a focus on Christian practices. The *Didache* continues its instruction noting how holiness is to be manifest in and through the church particularly as its members “deny themselves for the sake of God and humanity” and learn to be “sacrificially altruistic.”¹⁴ An essential social aspect of holiness is thus seen in the *Didache* as the document names ecclesial practices such as tithing, fasting, Christian fellowship, charity, confession, and hospitality as means of cultivating holy living.¹⁵ (Interestingly, this list is not too unlike what Wesley names as means of grace.) There are a couple of noteworthy observations to make at this point. First, as opposed to individualistic approaches to spiritual discipline, the *Didache* encourages spiritual practices to take place within, or at least along with the Christian community. Secondly, the *Didache* is clear that it is not the practices themselves that make one holy, but rather it is obedience to Christ that cultivates the fruit of holy life and holy love. In its description of each of the ecclesial practices previously named, the *Didache* provides both a generalized statement about the practice to be done and an explanation for the practice based on Jesus’ life and teachings, namely Christ’s command to love one another as he has loved. For instance, when the document advises readers to give all their first fruits to the prophets or to the poor, it claims this is to be done “in accordance with [Christ’s] commandment.”¹⁶ Likewise, the *Didache* states that believers ought to gather together for fellowship and perform acts of charity, “just as you find in the Gospel of our Lord,”¹⁷ and to show hospitality and to welcome everyone, “in accordance with the rule of the gospel.”¹⁸ It is important to note, then, that though the *Didache* encourages a number of worthwhile spiritual practices, holiness is based in a person’s reflection of Gospel-Life and Gospel-Love.

The *Didache* promotes not only a set of practices that are to be done within or alongside the ecclesial community, it also addresses the cultivation of a distinct Christian ethos, especially one that preserves Christian purity in the midst of a pagan society. For example, the third chapter of the *Didache* urges the catechumen toward a pure life and encourages him/her to “flee from evil of every kind, and from everything resembling it.”¹⁹ The document cautions, “See that no one leads you astray from this way of the teaching, for such a person teaches you without regard

for God. For if you are able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect."²⁰ Accordingly, the *Didache* details moral expectations for Christian life, such as urging the person to not be "jealous, nor quarrelsome, nor of hot temper; for out of all these murders are engendered."²¹ A number of the ethical principles outlined in the *Didache* are taken straight from the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount; however, a number of others address cultural vices, encouraging a Christian ethos that stands in stark contrast to specific social norms. For example, chapter three of the document considers how Christians are to maintain a life of chastity amidst a culture of rampant sexual promiscuity. It states, "My child, be not a lustful one; for lust leads the way to fornication; neither a filthy talker, nor of lofty eye; for out of all these adulteries are engendered."²² Chapter five directly addresses practices and dispositions that are antithetical to the Christian life. It states:

[The] way of death is this: first of all, it is evil and completely cursed; murders, adulteries, lusts, fornications, thefts, idolatries, magic arts, sorceries, robberies, false testimonies, hypocrisy, duplicity, deceit, arrogance, malice, stubbornness, greed, foul speech, jealousy, audacity, pride, boastfulness. It is the way of prosecutors of good people, of those hating truth, loving a lie, not knowing the reward of righteousness, not adhering to what is good or to righteous judgment, being on the alert not for what is good but for what is evil, from whom gentleness and patience are far away, loving worthless things, pursuing reward, having no mercy for the poor, not working on behalf of the oppressed, not knowing him who made them, murderers of children, corrupters of God's creation, turning away from someone in need, oppressing the afflicted, advocates of the wealthy, lawless judges of the poor, utterly sinful.²³

The *Didache* includes many similar pointed instructions on ethical behavior since such guidance is necessary for the catechumen to grow in true Christian faith and character. It is expected of every catechumen to exhibit Christian character based in unmistakable Christ-like behavior and love; thus, since holy love for God and others is the core principle that underpins and permeates sanctified life in the ecclesial community, sanctified ways of life in the world need cultivation.

Another interesting quality of the *Didache* is the way it synthesizes ecclesial life with the pursuit of personal holiness. To appreciate this synthesis, it is crucial to understand the eschatological mindset of the early

Christian Church. There existed in the early centuries of the church what Martin Werner calls an “eschatological sense of imminence.”²⁴ Werner’s claim alludes to the notion in early Christianity that Jesus would return to earth to establish his kingdom within their own lifetime. It was therefore essential to the early church that its members maintain a holy life until Christ’s second coming so he would return to find a pure bride. The eschatological outlook is prevalent in the prayer of thanksgiving prescribed in the *Didache* to be said proceeding the weekly Eucharist meal: “Remember, Lord, Your Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in Your love, and gather it from the four winds, sanctified for Your kingdom which You have prepared for it.” Of significance is the way the prayer details the ongoing character of the church in light of the eschatological vision. The church is called to be “sanctified” for life in God’s Kingdom. The prayer thus not only points to an eschatological reality but also solidifies the ecclesial and personal intention of the *Didache*: sanctification. Since the eschatological vision of the early church was that Christ’s return would be imminent, the church felt a deep-seated need to be about the continual work of sanctifying itself. Correspondingly, chapter four of the document gives the instruction, “In church you shall confess your transgressions,”²⁵ and chapter fifteen admonishes the ecclesial community to “correct one another, not in anger but in peace.”²⁶ Moreover, the final chapter of the *Didache* commands the church to “Gather together frequently, seeking the things that benefit your souls, for all the time you have believed will be of no use to you if you are not found perfect in the last time.”²⁷ The church therefore dedicated itself to the maintenance of holy life and love in order to be found blameless at the return of Christ.

As a final note, it should be acknowledged that the *Didache* is itself an example of how the eschatological vision of the early church synthesized ecclesial life and the pursuit of personal holiness. Accepting the *Didache* as a model of early church catechesis, we are given a glimpse of how the church gave intentional investment to the cultivation of holiness in its members. Contemporary Christian sociologist John S. Knox reflects: “What can be surmised (and with a fair amount of confidence) is that *The Didache* aided a great number of people in the early church (and perhaps even today) to focus, through liturgy and moral practice, on what it means to be a Christian. Faith was not just a feeling of spirituality; it required a great deal of effort and respect in its expression within the church and in the world.”²⁸

In general, catechesis is indicative of the principle that for new disciples to be made, current disciples must invest and participate in the disciple-making process. The catechumenate is thus a reciprocal relationship whereby catechesis is equally formative for the whole community of faith when proper investment is made. The *Didache* stands as an example of how intentional teaching and worship allows the church to commit itself to the sanctification process, entering into spiritual practices for the persistence of holy life and love.

On the Apostolic Tradition

The second ancient model of catechesis examined in my study is *On the Apostolic Tradition*, written by Hippolytus of Rome around 217 A.D. Indicative of practices already established in the church by the early third century, Hippolytus compiled *On the Apostolic Tradition* as a manual for church leaders.²⁹ The handbook provides a detailed account of ecclesial rites and procedures including thorough instruction on how to conduct the catechumenate. Chapters 15 through 21 of the *Apostolic Tradition* specifically focus on the proceedings of the catechumenate, stipulating a method for the church to invest in the discipleship of catechumens in preparation for baptism. Undoubtedly, Hippolytus's instructions make it clear that the goal of the catechumenate is to help people come to faith in Jesus Christ and learn to live holy lives; thus, Hippolytus displays fervent concern that catechumens' motives for membership in the church are pure and that they are committed to sanctification.

Hippolytus begins his instruction on the catechumenate with an explanation of how to handle neophytes, i.e. those who are beginning to inquire about the Christian faith. He writes:

Those who come to hear the word for the first time should first be brought to the teachers in the house, before the people come in. And they should enquire concerning the reason why they have turned to the faith. And those who brought them shall bear witness whether they have the ability to hear the word.³⁰

To be part of the catechumenate, according to Hippolytus, a person had to submit to an initial vetting by the church. Unquestionably, the church had high expectations for the catechumen, ensuring the person was serious about and committed to the Christian faith. Not only did the individual need a sponsor who would vouch for them and their suitability for the

catechuminate, but he/she also had to enter into discernment with and vetting by the church. This discernment and vetting process was a means of evaluating the motivation underlying a person's desire to become a Christian and his/her commitment to sanctification. Accordingly, Hippolytus continues his instruction by detailing a long series of questions that examine the lifestyle of the neophyte. William Harmless gives a good summary of the questions:

Did these new inquirers have a mistress? Were they slaves trying to please a master? Were they charioteers, gladiators, sculptors of idols, actors, brothel-keepers, theater producers, city magistrates – in other words, anyone connected with the pervasive apparatus of paganism, its idolatry, its violence, its impurity?³¹

The purpose for such intense examination was to reveal any characteristic in the person's life that stood in contrast to Christ-likeness. As any unholy behaviors became manifest through the interrogation, Hippolytus' command is that the person must "cease or be rejected" from the catechuminate.³² Hippolytus understood that to be a Christian is to no longer identify with the life of sin but instead to be distinguished by new life in Christ; thus, repentance of sin is a necessary antecedent to holiness. It was therefore expected of the neophyte to make a firm commitment to re-orientation of life and behavior if he/she was to enter the church. Repentance and willingness for change was not something that would eventually occur in the course of catechesis; instead, a commitment to the sanctifying process needed to be a present resolve within the catechumen at all times.³³ It was the role of the church, therefore, to discern and purge any impure motives, behaviors, and people.

It is undeniable that *On the Apostolic Tradition* elucidates the high standard the ancient church had for its adherents to demonstrate a distinct Christian way of life and love. There was notable expectation for those in the church to exemplify holiness. To reiterate what I have already stated, such holiness does not come naturally, it must be cultivated. The standards outlined for the catechuminate in the *Apostolic Tradition* are therefore quite strict precisely because the church believed commitment to Christ-like life and love demanded steadfast cultivation. Catechesis was the process of the Christian beginning to understand him/her self in identity with Christ and in new relationship with the world. Such re-orientation took time. This is why after a catechumen passed the initial interview and vetting

Hippolytus instructs, "Catechumens should hear the word for three years."

³⁴ In preparation for re-birth in baptism, the catechumenate served as a time of intentional instruction and formation, inciting knowledge of and strengthening commitment to the Christian life. The catechumenate was more than an educational process, however; the final goal of catechesis was the cultivation of holy Christian life. To finish the above quote regarding the length of catechesis, Hippolytus writes, "Catechumens should hear the word for three years. But if a man is keen and preserves well in the matter, the length of time should not be considered but his manner alone should be considered."³⁵ Certainly, instruction is a key part of the catechetical process as the standard time outlined for learning the content of the faith was three years; nevertheless, Hippolytus points to the fact that it is ultimately the life that the individual exhibits that is the true proof of conversion. In other words, the goal of the catechumenate was the cultivation of holy life and love. During the entire period of their catechetical instruction, therefore, catechumens were carefully examined and scrutinized concerning their moral life, particularly at the point they became candidates for baptism.³⁶ Regarding the catechumen's preparation for baptism, Hippolytus dictates:

From the time at which [the catechumens] are set apart, place hands upon them daily so that they are exorcised. When the day approaches on which they are to be baptized, let the bishop exorcise each one of them, so that he will be certain whether each has been purified. If there are any who are not purified, they shall be set apart. They have not heard the Word in faith, for the foreign spirit remained with...them.

Though there is some debate over Hippolytus' meaning of the word "exorcism" here, it is generally agreed upon that his central focus concerns the purging of evil from the catechumen, especially evil desire from the heart. In preparation for baptism, the ancient church believed such an intense time of exorcism was necessary because there is no place for evil desire within the heart of the Christian. Evil desires lead to sinful behaviors, whereas true faith produces holy desire, which results in righteous action. Subsequently, once the three-year probation time concluded and catechumens were deemed ready for baptism, Hippolytus prescribes yet one further interrogation: "Have they honored the widows? Have they visited the sick? Have they done every good work?" Although Hippolytus and the early church certainly valued doctrinal knowledge and theological

proficiency, the true proof of conversion was seen in a lived-out faith displayed through charitable practices. Moreover, holy life and love were expected to persist after baptism; thus, Hippolytus instructs the newly baptized Christian to “hasten to do good works and to please God.”³⁷

On the Apostolic Tradition depicts the cultivation of social holiness by highlighting the church’s intentional investment in catechumens in order to form them in the faith they confess. Since the purpose of catechesis is to make holy disciples of Jesus Christ, for such discipleship to take place, earnest commitment to change must be evident. Sanctification is not a passive process and catechesis should not be lackadaisical. *On the Apostolic Tradition* therefore serves as a good reminder that complete re-orientation of life, behavior, and love takes persistent devotion of catechumens and catechists alike.

Early Methodism

At this point, I have exclusively addressed pre-baptismal models of catechesis in the ancient church. Turning attention now to the early Methodist movement, I wish to examine Wesley’s discipleship structure of societies, classes, and bands as an alternative model of catechesis. It is my belief that the values undergirding Wesley’s society/class/band system contain principles similar to ancient approaches to catechesis – John Wesley simply (and suitably) developed a model for his own socio-historic context.³⁸

One of John Wesley’s most enduring legacies is his emphasis on small group formation. In fact, it has been claimed that Wesley’s insistence on small groups was an essential component to the growth of the eighteenth-century British revivals.³⁹ In the early years of his ministry in England, John Wesley came to the stark realization that holiness of heart and life did not characterize the “Christians” he met day-to-day. Furthermore, Wesley began to discover that very few of his fellow Christians in the Church of England had a proper understanding of scripture, theology, and doctrine. Convinced something needed to be done to spark renewal within the Church of England, John Wesley established a system of small groups as a framework to help people grow in holiness of heart and life.

First, Wesley arranged societies, which were structured as a gathering of people from a particular region or parish who met periodically for Bible study, prayer, mutual encouragement, and preaching. Usually the gatherings were held during the week in order for members to attend services

in their local parish churches. In societies, leaders taught key Methodist doctrines as one of the aims of the gathering was to present scriptural truth in a clear and compelling manner. Within the Methodist societies, smaller groups called bands and classes met. Every member of a society was also a member of a class meeting and/or band meeting. Classes provided an entry-level experience of social holiness for the early Methodists and were mixed regarding age, spiritual maturity, gender, marital status, and social standing.⁴⁰ The primary focus of the class meeting centered on behavioral change through examination of the status of one's soul and his/her life with God. Growth in perfect love was the ultimate goal. Band meetings, however, were for those who desired to grow in love, holiness, and purity of intention. The bands consisted of 4 to 6 members of the same sex and social status. In the band meeting, members "sought to improve their attitudes, emotions, feelings, intentions, and affections."⁴¹ Bands committed to the regular confession of sin in order to grow in holiness of heart and life. Members were accountable to one another regarding life and sin, they prayed for one other, and encouraged one another toward love, good works, and holy living. Kevin Watson claims that the band meeting "was the engine of holiness in early Methodism."⁴² Wesley realized that essential to sanctification was the grace of God and the care of others. The band meeting thus provided an ideal environment for people to grow in social holiness.

John Wesley firmly believed in the sanctifying work of God, therefore he desired to see dedication to an altered life in those who wished to be part of the Methodist movement. Echoing Hippolytus, Wesley writes in his "Plain Account of the Methodist Societies": "There is only one condition previously required in those who desire admission into this Society, a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins."⁴³ Society members were thus expected to show dedication to repentance of sin and commitment to holiness. If one truly desired to "flee from the wrath to come," Wesley believed it would be exhibited through a re-orientation of life. Wesley writes, "...wherever this desire is fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation."⁴⁴ Specifically, Wesley believed the fruit of the desire for salvation was made manifest through what he called the "General Rules," i.e. do no harm, do good, and attend upon the ordinances of God.⁴⁵ In other words, growth in sanctification produced fruit of holy love.

Every Methodist was expected to keep the three general rules. Once a person was accepted as a member of a Methodist society, he/she was placed in a class in order to submit to the continual examination of life and confirm his/her commitment to growth in holiness. Every quarter, all members of Methodist societies who showcased proper Christian living were issued a ticket allowing them entry into the society meeting. Accountability in the smaller band and class meetings became the means of discerning proper from improper persons. Wesley reflects:

In a while some of these informed me they found such and such an one did not live as he ought... I called together all the *Leaders* of the *Classes*...and desired that each would make particular inquiry into the behavior of those whom he saw weekly. They did so. Many disorderly walkers were detected. Some turned from the evil of their ways. Some were put away from us.⁴⁶

Undeniably, John Wesley sought to make disciples in the way of life that holy love demands. Though he believed it was not necessary for a Christian to sin, he recognized that Christians often did sin after coming to the faith. His concern was that unconfessed and unrepentant sin would fester and devolve into more devastating sin. For this reason, if someone was unwilling to submit to the examination of life in a class or band meeting, or if his/her life did not reflect growth in holiness, the person was removed from the Methodist society.

Because such earnest commitment to holiness requires constant examination and cultivation, Wesley set leaders in place to foster growth in class meetings. The class leader was a crucial position in the early Methodist movement as he/she had the role of being the spiritual leader of the people in the class. The leader kept track of attendance and visited anyone who missed the weekly gathering. Additionally, the class leader fostered discussion, modeled vulnerability, and provided encouragement and support to those in the group as it was needed. In essence, the class leader cultivated growth in social holiness. Kevin Watson reflects on the nature of the class meetings:

The phrase that best captures what the Methodists believed was so important about the class meeting was “watching over one another in love.” Early Methodists were asked to invite others into their lives and to be willing to enter deeply into the lives of other people so that together they would grow in grace. They were

committed to the idea that the Christian life is a journey of growth in grace, or sanctification. And they believed that they needed one another in order to persevere on this journey.⁴⁷

Wesley was convinced the class and band meetings were “the sinews” that held together the Methodist societies.⁴⁸ As Lester Ruth once quipped, “In early Methodism, faithfulness to Christ was judged by the smallest gatherings rather than the largest.”⁴⁹ For Wesley, the band and class model was so important for growth in holy life and love that he believed their decline in practice would result in the diminishment of Methodism itself. In his “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” Wesley urges, “Never omit meeting your class or band...These are the very sinews of our society; and whatever weakens, or tends to weaken, our regard for these, or our exactness in attending them, strikes at the very root of our community.”⁵⁰

The early Methodist small group structure is exemplary of the cultivation of social holiness through continual and intentional investment in discipleship. As I stated earlier, for new disciples to be made, current disciples must invest and participate in the disciple-making process. Disciples making disciples who encouraged one another toward scriptural holiness was expected in the early Methodist societies, classes, and bands. The devotion of the early Methodists to one another in these groups established reciprocal relationships in the cultivation of social holiness. For example, John Wesley made extensive use of lay preachers who were wholly devoted to the work of preaching and visitation. These lay pastors met weekly in Class and Band meetings, confessing sin and urging one another toward growth in holiness. The same lay pastors dedicated themselves to visiting their parishioners, caring for the poor, and leading society meetings. Consequentially, society members (both men and women) became leaders of schools, ran orphanages, visited the sick, and evangelized in local poorhouses. Simply put, through mutual care for one other, holy life and love begat holy life and love.

Conclusion

Throughout my study, it has been my aim to show how the maintenance of holy life and love *in* the church requires intentional and continual cultivation *by* the church. If the church is to be continually sanctified then it must intentionally invest in the sanctification of its

members. I have therefore examined three historic examples of catechesis in my presentation in order to exhibit models whereby the church has taken seriously the task of forming disciples who display holiness of heart and life. In conclusion, I want to offer a few thoughts on the critical need for the implementation of similar catechetical models in the church today.

Located in an ever-evolving and quickly progressing culture, the church of the twenty-first century faces a number of challenges that can easily tempt it to compromise its integrity. One of the most pressing of these challenges in the American church is the transition to a secular age. As Charles Taylor argues, Christianity has not only been displaced as the default belief system in the Western world, it has also been belligerently disputed by a variety of alternatives.⁵¹ Taylor notes that Christianity is merely *an* option, and for many a questionable one. Even the church itself has trouble agreeing on how to address prominent cultural matters such as sex, marriage, gender, immigration, race, etc. Given realities such as the fragmentation of culture, the polarization of politics, and the fracturing of denominations, it is unsurprising that the world has ceased to see the church as a sanctified and sanctifying body.

Undoubtedly, catechesis is needed in the church today. The time is ripe for both church leaders and laity to get serious about the work of the lifelong cultivation of holiness. But in a secular age, what should catechesis look like? In a general sense, I believe it should look like it always has, namely the intentional formation of belief and behavior oriented in Christ-like life and love. Since there are a number of methods, models, and approaches that might be employed to accomplish such a goal, I am wary of dictating a specific rubric of catechesis as the single golden standard. Instead, as I conclude, I want to highlight six principles I believe are necessary for the lifelong cultivation of sanctification through catechesis. Whether focused on new converts or longstanding disciples, the following principles are relevant to any concentration on discipleship in the church.

1. Commit to repentance

First, one of the primary goals of catechesis should be repentance. Since the goal of catechesis is a transformed life sanctified by the grace of God, such conversion cannot occur without repentance. A common mantra in today's culture is that each person is sufficient "just the way they are," but this could not be further from the truth of the Gospel. Though each person certainly has inherent value, no one is sufficient within his/her own self because everyone is born into the sinful nature. The sin present in our

lives blocks our relationship with God, harms us, and harms others;⁵² thus, we need the grace of God, the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit at work in us to completely reorient us in holy life and love. Approaches to catechesis should therefore expect and assert commitment to total transformation of heart and life.

2. *Address sin*

Secondly and similarly, catechesis should include a focus on sin. Because we are all born into the sinful nature and sin separates us from God and from one another, sanctification requires the eradication of sin, including both wrongful actions and evil desires. Catechesis should then help us acknowledge our sin, teach us to confess our sin, and encourage us toward change. Furthermore, the natural result of an accent on sin is a better understanding of forgiveness and grace. Not only do we encounter the great love of God as we wrestle with sin, but we also experience the tender care of the Christian community. Consequentially, the acknowledgment and confession of sin helps the church learn to grow as a community of love and forgiveness.

3. *Emphasize deliverance*

Third, accompanying attention to the eradication of sin is the need for emphasis on healing and deliverance. Specifically, catechesis should emphasize deliverance through the intentional purgation of evil in the heart, mind, and life of the disciple. *On the Apostolic Tradition* details how the purgation of sin and evil was a crucial phase of the pre-baptismal process in the ancient church. The practice offers today's church a reminder that the atoning work of Christ attended by the Holy Spirit in an individual's life brings not only freedom from the guilt of sin but also freedom for holy life and love. Exorcism of evil results in purity of desire in the heart of the disciple while bringing healing and wholeness to the life of the disciple. Catechesis must therefore emphasize deliverance from spiritual forces of evil and wickedness and freedom for holiness.

4. *Impart a Christian ethos*

Fourth, catechesis should impart a distinct Christian ethos, especially one that preserves Christian purity of behavior and love in the midst of a secular society. Of course, an ethos is not something meant to be merely known and accepted but is a moral principle expected to be lived; thus, a focus on Christian behavior is necessary, especially concerning how Christian life stands in distinct contrast to secular life in the world. For disciples old and new to maintain a Christian ethos in the midst

of immense secularism, the constant examination of life is needed. As the *Didache* notes, gathering together frequently and correcting one another in peace are primary ingredients of growth in Christian perfection through social holiness.⁵³ Proper models of catechesis must then work toward instilling a distinct Christian ethos in disciples through mutual admonition of obedience to Christ-like ways of life and love.

5. *Incorporate practices of communal discipline*

Fifth, models of catechesis should incorporate practices of communal discipline. One foundational facet of communal discipline is learning the content of the faith with one another. It is important for disciples both old and new to commit to growth in knowledge of scripture and belief of the Triune God. Another feature of communal discipline is mutual commitment and adherence to Christian practices, i.e. communal means of grace. A striking component of the previously examined historic models of catechesis was how the whole church committed itself to the sanctification process by joining together in spiritual practices. It was important for the church to enter together into discipline for the persistence of holy life and love. The accounts demonstrate how the church of the past understood that growth in holiness of heart and life occurs in community. In more recent years the church has increasingly emphasized individualistic approaches to practices of spiritual discipline; however, practices such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving serve as formative disciplines that bind the community together in the pursuit of life with God and each other. It is important then for the contemporary church to consider how such practices can be incorporated in a more ecclesial manner today.

6. *Cultivate devotion to one another*

Finally, since the underlying concept of social holiness is that growth in perfect love requires others, catechesis should seek to foster Christian devotion to one another. Through catechesis, we should learn how to continually “watch over one another in love.” In many ways, this final point is the buttress for the other three principles. One cannot know holy love disconnected from other Christians. It is only by the work and grace of God within Christian community that holiness of heart and life is realized and actualized. To reiterate once again, the maintenance of holy life and love *in* the church requires deliberate and persistent cultivation *by* the church. Simply put, whether new or longtime disciples, we must invest in each other’s growth in holiness. Sanctification is not passive and catechesis should not be lackadaisical. If the world is to behold a sanctified

church, continual and intentional dedication to sanctification must be given to its members.

End Notes

¹ W. Robert Godfrey, "Semper Reformanda in its Historical Context," *Tabletalk Magazine*, November 1, 2014, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/semper-reformanda-its-historical-context/>.

² *Ibid.*

³ In 1947, the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth adapted van Lodenstein's axiom in order to popularize an ecclesiological conviction extant among a number of theologians regarding the need for the church to continually re-examine itself in order to maintain purity of doctrine and practice. A move away from a focus on religion of the heart, Barth's paraphrase declares, "*ecclesia semper reformanda*," which translated into English means, "the church must continually be reformed." My phrasing is a further adaptation of Barth's.

⁴ Additionally, I have chosen to extrapolate on the *Didache* and Hippolytus' *On the Apostolic Tradition* because they are the most prominent sources that outline catechetical instruction from the first two centuries of the church.

⁵ Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 12:432.

⁶ Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 302-303.

⁷ Jackson, *The Works of John Wesley*, 5:296.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (repr., London: William Strahan, 1739), viii-ix.

¹⁰ Kevin M. Watson and Scott T. Kisker, *The Band Meeting: Rediscovering Relational Discipleship in Transformational Community* (Franklin: Seedbed, 2017), 13.

¹¹ The exact dating of the *Didache* is unknown, as is the location from where it originated. Scholars such as William A. Jurgens believe it was first developed and used in Syria by Christians around 140 A.D. See "Didache," in *Faith of the Early Fathers*, ed. William A. Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 1. Jewish affinities agree on an earlier date, noting its development around 50-70 A.D. See Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Faith, Hope, and Life of the Earliest Christian Communities, 50-70 C.E.* (New York, NY: Newman Press, 2003), 12-45. In general, the dating and purpose of the *Didache* is a topic of much controversy. See Jonathan A. Draper, *The Didache in Modern Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 212-22;

Hubb van de Sandt and David Flusser, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and Its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 273-291.

¹² J.B Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer eds., “The Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” in *The Apostolic Fathers* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 251. Note: Translated into English, *Didache* means “the two ways.”

¹³ The teachings at the beginning of the *Didache* are based on a summary of Jesus’ response to the Pharisee in Mathew, i.e.: And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matt 22:37-40 NASB)

¹⁴ John S. Knox, “The Didache: A Moral and Liturgical Document of Instruction,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/904/>.

¹⁵ See Lightfoot & Harmer, “Didache,” 250 - 267.

¹⁶ Lightfoot & J.R. Harmer, “Didache,” 267.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 263.

¹⁹ Ibid., 253.

²⁰ Ibid., 257.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Martin Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma: An Historical Study of its Problem* (A & C: New York, 1957), 22.

²⁵ Lightfoot & J.R. Harmer, “Didache,” 257.

²⁶ Ibid., 267.

²⁷ Ibid., 269.

²⁸ Knox, “The Didache: A Moral and Liturgical Document of Instruction.”

²⁹ There is dispute whether *On the Apostolic Tradition* is descrip-

tive of actual practices of the early third century or if it is Hippolytus' prescribed preference for how the church should conduct practices. Another disputed question is how much of the work was actually written by Hippolytus. See Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *Apostolic Tradition: Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Mineapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 2-5.

³⁰ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 97-98.

³¹ William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 41.

³² Hippolytus, *Apostolic*, 100.

³³ Harmless, *Catechumenate*, 41.

³⁴ Hippolytus, *Apostolic*, 103.

³⁵ Hippolytus, *Apostolic*, 103.

³⁶ James White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 46.

³⁷ Hippolytus, *Apostolic*, 113.

³⁸ Since paedobaptism was the normative practice in the Church of England in John Wesley's day, one would be hard-pressed to find many people living in England who were not baptized as infants, pre-baptismal catechesis was not practiced.

³⁹ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Franklin: Seedbed, 2014), 20.

⁴⁰ Watson and Kisker, *The Band Meeting*, 14.

⁴¹ Mark A. Maddix, "John Wesley's Small Groups: Models of Christian Community," *Holiness Today*, November/December 2009, <http://www.holinesstoday.org/john-wesley-small-groups-christian-community>.

⁴² Watson and Kisker, *The Band Meeting*, 86.

⁴³ John Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People called Methodist in a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Perronet, Vicar of Shoreham in Kent," vol. 9 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 257.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 260-261.

⁴⁷ Watson, *Class Meeting*, 26.

⁴⁸ John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," in *Works*, Jackson, 11:433.

⁴⁹ Lester Ruth (Research Professor of Christian Worship at Duke Divinity School) in discussion with the author, March 2009.

⁵⁰ Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," 11:433.

⁵¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 20.

⁵² Watson and Kisker, *The Band Meeting*, 44.

⁵³ Lightfoot & J.R. Harmer, "Didache," 257, 267.