

Comments on Holy Conferencing
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John Wesley never used the phrase, “holy conferencing.” But he did use a similar phrase – “Christian conference” – and he also spoke about how Christians exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit will engage in “holiness of conversation.” The most important point about this kind of discourse between and among Christians is the strong Wesleyan belief that it can serve as a means of grace. That means that holy conferencing has the ability to bring us into a greater knowledge and experience of God. It can help us to love God and love one another as Christ would have us do. Thus, in thinking about how to engage in conversation in this way, it can be helpful to look at a few images from Wesley’s own example of what holy conferencing looks like.

Take, for instance, Wesley’s statement about the nature of a Methodist Society:

Such a Society is no other than ‘a company of men “having the form, and seeking the power of godliness”, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation’.¹

We can also look at Wesley’s statement about the advantages of the Methodist class meeting:

It can scarce be conceived what advantages have ben reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to ‘bear one another’s burdens’, and ‘naturally’ to ‘care for each other’. As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for each other. And ‘speaking the truth in love, they grew up into him in all things which is the head, even Christ; from whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, increased unto the edifying itself in love.’²

And, then, we can read Wesley’s statement about the nature of “Christian conference” from the body of early Methodist doctrinal material commonly called the *Large Minutes*:

Christian conference. Are you convinced how important and how difficult it is to ‘order your conversation right’? Is it always ‘in grace’?

¹ Wesley, *The General Rules of the United Societies* (1743), ¶2, in *Works* 9:69.

² Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (1749), ¶II.7, in *Works* 9:262.

‘Seasoned with salt’? Meet to ‘minister grace to the hearers’? Do not you converse too long at a time? Is not an hour commonly enough? Would it not be well always to have a determinate end in view? And to pray before and after it?³

In the case of this description of Christian conference, it is worth pointing out that Wesley includes it in a list of the instituted means of grace (along with Prayer, Searching the Scriptures, The Lord’s Supper, and Fasting). Thus he understands it to be a real means of grace, and not only that, but a means of grace instituted by Christ Jesus himself.

- Where is the Scriptural warrant for conference as a means of grace instituted in the same way as prayer, the Lord’s Supper, etc.? See John 13:34-35; John 15:12-17; and Matthew 18:18-20.

One of the things we should note about the kind of conferencing or conversation that we see in these Wesleyan examples is that they do not simply attempt to rise to the level of the playground admonition, “Everybody just play nice.” It’s not that such a piece of advice is bad. It just doesn’t go very far. And here we might look at ways in which Wesley’s counsel tends to try and embody the Scripture passage in Proverbs 27:17: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (NIV).

We see this, for instance, in Wesley’s descriptions of the role of the class leader in the *General Rules*. There, Wesley describes the class leader’s function as follows:

It is his business: (1). To see each person in his class once a week at the least; in order

To receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the poor;

To inquire how their souls prosper;

To advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require.⁴

As we can see here in the instructions laid out for the class leader, the kind of conversation that Wesley means by Christian conference is one that is really going somewhere. Also helpful is a section from the *Rules of the Band Societies*, where we read a list of questions asked of each person before he or she joined a band. These include the following (and pay special attention beginning at question #6):

1. Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
2. Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ?
3. Have you the witness of God’s Spirit with your spirit that you are a child of God?
4. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
5. Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
6. Do you desire to be told of your faults?

³ Wesley, *Large Minutes* (1780, 1789), ¶48.5, in *Works* 10:923.

⁴ Wesley, *General Rules*, ¶3, in *Works* 9:70.

7. Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?
8. Do you desire that every one of us should tell you from time to time whatsoever is in *his* heart concerning you?
9. Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?
10. Do you desire that in doing this we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
11. Is it your desire and design to be on this and all other occasions entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart, without exception, without disguise, and without reserve?⁵

Now, these types of guidelines obviously do not translate into many different contexts without some serious examination of the purpose they are intended to serve and the context in which they are intended to be used. (They would not, for reasons I hope are clear, be good to implement in a task force setting that is supposed to be working on a curriculum study. Nor would they work well for a short-term class utilizing the curriculum itself.) But they do drive at one of the purposes of holy conferencing generally, and I mean that in just this way: Wesleyan conferencing is not just about being nice or even hospitable. Those considerations must be there, but oftentimes the relatively “thin” understanding of niceness in our culture means that being nice means not saying things you would normally want to say. The Wesleyan understanding is just the opposite. It holds that you absolutely must say what you mean, and say what needs to be said, and only asks that it be said out of a motivation of love and in order to better love those who are engaged in conversation.

This is summed up in relatively succinct way in Wesley’s 1746 sermon, “The First-fruits of the Spirit,” where he elaborates on part of what it means to “walk after the Spirit” (from Romans 8:1):

They who ‘walk after the Spirit’ are also led by [Christ] into all holiness of conversation. Their speech is ‘always in grace, seasoned with salt’, with the love and fear of God. ‘No corrupt communication comes out of their mouth, but (only) that which is good;’ that which is ‘to the use of edifying’, which is ‘meet to minister grace to the hearers’. And herein likewise do they exercise themselves day and night to do only the things which please God; in all their outward behavior to follow him who ‘left us an example that we might tread in his steps’; in all their intercourse with their neighbor to walk in justice, mercy, and truth; and ‘whatsoever they do’, in every circumstance of life, to ‘do all to the glory of God.’

These are they who indeed ‘walk after the Spirit’. Being filled with faith and with the Holy Ghost, they possess in their hearts, and show forth in their lives, in the whole course of their words and actions, the genuine fruits of the Spirit of God, namely, ‘love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, temperance’, and whatsoever else is lovely or praiseworthy. They ‘adorn in all things the gospel of God our Saviour’; and

⁵ Wesley, *Rules of the Band Societies*, in *Works* 9:77-78.

give full proof to all mankind that they are indeed actuated by the same Spirit
'which raised up Jesus from the dead'.⁶

Notice the way that Wesley is invoking the notion of holy conferencing, with phrases such as “all holiness of conversation,” and “in all their intercourse with their neighbor [walking] in justice, mercy, and truth,” and “they possess in their hearts, and show forth in their lives, in the whole course of their words and actions, the genuine fruits of the Spirit of God.” What this suggests about holy conferencing I would say includes a few fundamental things: *first*, that holy conferencing depends on the presence of the Holy Spirit; *second*, that it is a means of grace that cannot be separated from our experience of present salvation; *third*, that it is engaged in order to love God and neighbor; *fourth*, that it can be tested and that the proper test is whether it is productive of the fruits of the Spirit; and *fifth*, that it ought rightly to be done for its proper end—which is the glory of God.

⁶ Wesley, “The First-fruits of the Spirit” (1746), ¶¶1.5-6, in *Works* 1:236-237.