

## **Sunday 06/30/24 – Panama Methodist Church**

**Sermon Title: Chapter 4 “The Class Meeting: Becoming Wesleyan Again” Sermon Series: (Part 4 of 8)**

**(Slides 1-14 will be listed in order throughout this sermon 😊 !)**

**(Slide 1 – (Class Meeting Book Cover Picture)**

**(Slide 2 – (Class Meeting – Chapter 4 - “*The Class Meeting: Becoming Wesleyan Again*”)**

**(Slide 3 – Francis Asbury/Thomas Coke Quote)**

**(Slide 4 – Picture Slide – Death of the CM/Decline of Circuit Riders)**

**(Slide 5 – Hebrews 13:7-8)**

**(Slide 6 – Acts 20:20)**

**(Slide 7 – What Caused the Death of the Class Meeting?)**

**(Slide 8 – What Caused the Death of the Class Meeting? Continued)**

**(Slide 9 – The Slow End to Methodist Circuit Riders – “But Why”)**

**(Slide 10 – What Caused the Death of the Class Meeting? Continued)**

**(Slide 11 – What Caused the Death of the Class Meeting? Continued)**

**(Slide 12 – Movie Clip from “Fury” – “Are You Saved?”)**

**(Slide 13 – Matthew 20:26)**

**(Slide 14 – Galatians 6:9)**

Last Sunday we honored our high school and college graduates, and this morning we are honoring our Sunday School Teachers and Leaders. Some of our students are in a way, also graduating from Sunday School to another class, or perhaps to different Sunday School Teachers and Leaders. I will be talking in part this morning, about the rise of the Sunday School movement, which is good, but also how the Methodist Church and other churches also lost something when this happened. We love Sunday School, we love our Sunday School Teachers and Leaders, and we are so thankful to them and our students!

**(Slide 1 – (Class Meeting Book Cover Picture))**

This morning, however, we are continuing our eight-week sermon series, in part, on the book “The Class Meeting,” by Dr. Kevin M. Watson. This sermon series might seem long and very involved, but it is all to show us, convince us, and prepare us to potentially become part of a small group. If you are already part of a small group, great but if not pray about it. While the early Methodist called their small groups “Class Meetings,” they were not designed to be academic or like going to school. Instead, these groups were and are about growing deeper in our faith in Christ.

I have mentioned since the first week of this sermon series, that the author of “The Class Meeting” book, Dr. Kevin M. Watson identified three general types of small groups. The first, and I would say the most common type of small group, is once again called “Affinity Groups.” These groups are more social in nature, and might include a prayer, but generally have a very small focus on faith development or book/Bible learning.

The next type of small groups are “Information-Driven Groups.” “Information-Driven Groups” generally focus on book learning, Bible studies, or curriculum learning. These are great groups, but often do not go as spiritually in-depth into our hearts and souls as “class meeting” oriented small groups.

These types of small groups that we have been learning about, modeled on the historic Methodist “Class Meeting” are “Transformation-Driven Groups.” They are groups that grow our faith, bring us closer to each other, deepen our faith in Christ, and make the church even stronger than it already is.

The fourth chapter of “The Class Meeting” book that will discuss in part this morning is called, “Becoming Wesleyan Again.”

**(Slide 2 – (Class Meeting – Chapter 4 - “*The Class Meeting: Becoming Wesleyan Again*”)**

In a basic sense, “Becoming Wesleyan Again” just means getting back to the roots of the Methodist Movement of Christianity. Since the founder of the Methodist Movement was John Wesley, sometimes it can be called Methodist or Wesleyan, but the roots are all the same. There are Methodist Churches and Wesleyan Churches, but they go back to the Methodist Movement started by John Wesley. Small groups though have been embraced by many Christian denominations, and churches. Some of the names of these, once again, are small groups, life groups, cell groups, etc. This whole sermon series then is about moving us closer to Christ, and closer to each other.

Once again, every chapter in “The Class Meeting” book begins with a quote, and in chapter 4 of this book, this quote is the quote from chapter 1 with more added to it. This is what the quote from the first two bishops of the Methodist Movement, Bishop Francis Asbury and Bishop Thomas Coke says:

**(Slide 3 – Francis Asbury/Thomas Coke Quote)**

**“We have no doubt, but meetings of christian brethren for the exposition of scripture-texts, may be attended with their advantages. But the most profitable exercise of any is a free inquiry into the state of the heart... Through the grace of God our classes form pillars for our work, and we have before observed, are in a considerable degree our universities for the ministry”.**

**- Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke,  
1798 Doctrines and Discipline**

Our “Affinity Groups” or social groups, our “Information-Driven Groups” are good, but if they do not lead us deeply closer to Christ, then this is a problem.

According to this chapter of this preaching series, starting the later half of 1800’s

“Class Meetings” or small groups began to disappear, as did Methodist “Circuit Riders” or preachers on horseback. Why did the “Class Meetings” or small groups begin to disappear and why did the era of the “Circuit Rider” slowly die out?

**(Slide 4 – Picture Slide – Death of the CM/Decline of Circuit Riders)**

**“The Death of the Class Meeting”/The Slow End  
to the Methodist Circuit Riders**



In a couple of minutes let's look at some of the reasons that the "Class Meetings" or small groups died out, and why the era of the "Circuit Riders" ended. Before looking at some of these reasons though, let's bring some of God's word into this conversation. If you have your Bibles or your Bible apps on your phones, I invite you open your Bible to the Book of Hebrews. Specifically, I would invite you to all open to Hebrews 13:7-8. In this scripture it says in 13:7-8:

**(Slide 5 – Hebrews 13:7-8)**

## **Hebrews 13:7-8**

**<sup>7</sup> Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.**

**<sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.**

In this scripture, the Apostle Paul is talking about those who exercise authority in teaching in the Christian Church, or the Christian Community, but we all have been taught and instructed by many. We have been instructed by parents, teachers, Sunday School teachers, church leaders, Sunday School teachers, etc. Pastors and other leaders who exercise authority are called to speak and preach the word of God, but we have experienced this from many people. The Apostle Paul tells us to imitate the faith of these kind of people, because Jesus never changes.

To grow in faith then, we do not only have to learn from the pastor, but we can all learn from each other too. Did I go to seminary school, have I pastored a bunch of churches? Yes, but that does not mean I know the most about God, that I know the most about Jesus, or the most about the Holy Spirit. This church is filled with strong leaders, and we all have something to offer to each other. This is why creating more small groups, which are so vital to our spiritual growth, and to our future as a church, is so important.

The main verse of scripture I chose for this message today comes from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles 20:20. So if you have your Bibles, open back up to Acts 20:20. The Book of Acts, once again, is the story of the very beginning of the Christian movement, led by the Apostles and early Christian leaders. Acts 20:20:

**(Slide 6 – Acts 20:20)**

## **Acts 20:20**

**<sup>20</sup> I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house,**

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In this verse of scripture, the Apostle Paul in his farewell to the Elders of the church in Ephesus, or the Ephesians, tells them that he has served the Lord with

great humility and with tears in times of testing. Even so, the Apostle Paul did not pull back or shrink from doing what God called him to do, or from proclaiming and teaching the gospel, both to the Ephesians and from house to house.

So, are we focused only on “right living,” meaning how we act and live, or are we also focused on deep faith in Christ, as well? In getting back to some of the reasons that the “Class Meetings” or small groups died out, and why the era of the “Circuit Riders” ended, let’s look at some of these reasons. So just “What Cause the Death of the Class Meeting?” or small groups?

### **(Slide 7 – What Caused the Death of the Class Meeting?)**

#### **“What caused the death of the Class Meeting?”**

- **The rise of the Sunday School movement.**
- **Remember, we LOVE Sunday School 😊!**
- **Sunday School gradually took the place of “The Class Meeting” or Small Groups.**
- **Methodists became more affluent, and churches began to accumulate wealth and status.**
- **Most Methodists wanted to learn from an “expert”.**
- **More emphasis was put into “head knowledge” and right living, than encountering Jesus spiritually.**

This is not true across the board, but some churches wanted to get pastors from Ivy League seminaries, and they would come to church to learn from the “expert,” who was the pastor. If they came to church to learn from the expert, who is the pastor, then who needs a “Class Meeting,” or a “Small Group?” Again, this was not the mentality of all Methodists and some other Christians in the latter half of the

1800's and the early 1900's, but for some they began to see the pastor as the end all be all of knowledge and teaching within the church. Further, if some of these pastors were more scholarly, and less deeply spiritual, you could see how over time some Christians would become more academic and mental than spiritual.

Continuing on to some more reasons that “Caused the Death of the Class Meeting?” or small groups?

### **(Slide 8 – What Caused the Death of the Class Meeting? Continued)**

#### **“What caused the death of the Class Meeting?”**

- **The focus of the Methodist movement shifted from:**
- **Pursuing a deep Christian spiritual experience.**
- **To becoming a “Deeply Committed Christian”.**
- **The “Head vs. the Heart”.**
- **Sunday School is great, and we love it, but Small Groups are needed to!**
- **Do we find we focus more on “head-learning”, or “spiritual growth?” Can we do both?**
- **We are called to grow in faith and in holiness.**


I have visited some churches and been to hear some speakers, and everything was very academic, very philosophical, very intellectual, and very wordy. In some of these sermons or talks most of what was discussed or preached was very much things to think about and ponder, things to learn, and things to understand, but sometimes there was little about our interior spiritual life. I have personally led many Bible studies and book studies. Where these more “head knowledge” or more “heart or spiritual knowledge?” To be honest, I guess it depended on the day. Sometimes we discussed big words, and big ideas, and hear me, there is absolutely

nothing wrong with this! I have enjoyed the little bit of time I have been able to spend every Sunday morning discussing “Eschatology,” or the study of the last things, AKA the “End of Days,” AKA when Christ returns. We have discussed different ideas about “The Rapture,” the return of Christ to earth, and what is true and what isn’t. As an academic nerd, I love that stuff, and will always want to be in a class like that! Growing our faith even deeper in Christ is spiritually important to. My faith has grown from this class, but the small groups that I am discussing really help us to go even deeper spiritually. What I am saying then is, Sunday School and Small Groups are both important. One is generally speaking focused on learning and understanding, and small groups are focused on deepening our faith. These of course overlap, but they generally are different too.

Before finishing up discussing why Methodist Small Groups vanished further, in favor of the Sunday School movement and other reasons, let’s discuss why the era of the Methodist Circuit Rider preachers, or traveling pastors on horseback ended, and how it changed the church.

**(Slide 9 – The Slow End to Methodist Circuit Riders – “But Why”)**

## **The Slow End to the Methodist Circuit Riders – “But Why?”**

- **Methodist Preachers/Pastors over time slowly stopped overseeing many churches.**
  - **Circuit Riders on horseback saw each church or group of Methodists on average every 2-6 weeks.**
  - **Overtime “Circuits” disappeared, as pastors were appointed to individual churches.**
  - **Pastors then over time became more at the center of the life of individual churches and communities.**
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The good news about this shift is that over time you had a pastor in residence. That pastor was there to pray, visit, baptize, marry, and serve the community.

Sometimes what happened though, is that the pastor now appointed pastor, became the end all and be all to the church. I am the appointed pastor to the Panama Methodist Church by Bishop Mark J. Webb, but I am not the end all and be all of the ministry here. Further, the strength of the church is not just pastor.

I think a good pastor makes a big difference in a church, but we are all called to be followers of Jesus Christ. Follower of Jesus Christ grow deeper with Christ and with each other when our faith and our relationships deepen. So, hear this church, you can grow closer to Christ and to each other, and the pastor does not always have to directly be leading the entirety of this process. Instead, the role of a good pastor is teaching God’s words, raising up and equipping leaders, serving, loving, casting vision, administering the sacraments of Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper, and Baptism, and being a servant leader. We are here to train and

equip, and churches that look for the pastor for everything, I think are playing a very dangerous game. In churches that depend on the pastor for everything, the ministry and success of the church then rises and falls solely on the pastor. Yet we are all called to grow in faith and lead in different ways. I am so blessed and happy to be serving a church where the pastor does not do everything.

In getting back to more reasons that Methodist “Class Meetings” or small groups declined, I have some more reasons to discuss:

**(Slide 10 – What Caused the Death of the Class Meeting? Continued)**

**“What caused the death of the Class Meeting?”**

- **More of a focus on clergy with a seminary education. A highly trained “expert”.**
- **Clergy and Small Group leaders sometimes competed for power and influence over the church.**
- **Churches become more “Pastor Centric”.**
- **In some churches the pastor became the expert in all matters.**
- **Small Groups slowly died off, and people came to church more to hear an “expert” teach and preach.**

Do you know what, even after all of the seminary classes I have taken, all the books I have read, all the papers that I have written, and all the tests I have taken, Jesus is still Jesus. The Bible is still the Bible, and many days I learn more about Jesus and see more of the scripture of the Bible lived out by people that never stepped foot in a fancy school before. I remember my late Grandpa Winkelman telling me years ago, when I was one the first ones in our family to graduate from

college, “Paul if you are lucky enough to get an education, use it to better other people, not be better than other people.” Our knowledge, our wisdom, our faith are things that we should share with each other. You might all think you have a lot to learn from me, but in truth, I probably have a lot more that I need to learn from you. Am I the pastor? Yes. Am I here to lead? Yes. We do ministry together though. I have learned a lot in our Band of Brothers small group, as well as our “Class Meeting” or small group that meets on Wednesday nights. My faith has grown deeper, and I have gotten to know people more, and that’s because of the power of the Holy Spirit, not a degree or a piece of paper.

The future of the Christian movement then cannot only be a pastor that is likened to a professor and the congregation likened to students. Why? The answer is, is because we all have a lot to learn from each other. For the folks in this church right now that are twice my age or more, my guess is you have insights into faith in Christ that are deeper than mine.

With this said, here are some final things to consider around what “Caused the Death of the Class Meeting?” or small groups? Let’s look together

**(Slide 11 – What Caused the Death of the Class Meeting? Continued)**

## What caused the death of the Class Meeting?

- Remember that these were the general trends, and this did not apply to every church, and every person.
  - What have we lost or forfeited from no longer having small groups?
  - How is it with your soul?
  - When is the last time that we felt God's presence?
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What happens when our faith deepens? God then use us to deepen the faith of others. People need Jesus, they need to know who he is, for he can change us all, as he has and continues to change the world. In John 3:16, Jesus didn't just tell us to only be good people, Jesus said:

**<sup>16</sup> 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (Jn. 3:16, NRSV).**

Jesus tell us all to not just be good people, but to believe in him. Allow him into your heart to change your life. Allow him to use you to spread his gospel and allow yourself to be open to growing in faith and with each other. This is why small groups are so important. Small groups are also a great way to lead someone to Christ. The historic and timeless goal of our faith is to know Jesus as lord and savior, and to share this with the world. To grow deeper in faith with Jesus, to pursue sanctifying grace, to become more and more like Jesus. Yet, if we only know Jesus in our heads and not deeply within our hearts, then what would our faith look like?

One of the best comparisons I can make to “Head Faith” versus “Heart Faith,” is a very short movie clip I that want to show you from the World War II movie “Fury” with actor Brad Pitt. In this video clip a new soldier is joining the tank group led by the character that actor Brad Put plays. In this movie these soldiers, among thousands of others are getting closer and closer to Germany and ending the war. This particularly tank that actor Brad Pitt leads has a great battle with German dictator Adolph Hitler’s best soldiers, the “Waffen-SS” or armed weaponized SS, or “**Schutzstaffel**” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schutzstaffel>). The Waffen-SS were most radicalized and loyal soldiers to Adolph Hitler, and they would die rather than surrender. In this video clip one of the seasoned tank gunners is asking the new soldier if he has faith in Christ. He asks him because he is telling this this soldier, you will need faith in Christ. Let’s see this short clip together:

**(Slide 12 – Movie Clip from “Fury” – “Are You Saved?”)**

So, once again, this movie clip shows us the difference between a deep committed relationship with Jesus Christ and attending church and getting baptized. When some churches began moving in a direction that was more head knowledge and less heart knowledge or deep faith oriented, this is what sometimes happened. Again, I am not trying pick on an individual person or church, but there is a big difference between being grounded deeply in faith in Christ, versus believing in Christianity, but maybe not taking it nearly as spiritually serious, as we can.

Entering a small group or continuing in a small group that is a “Transformation-Driven Group” can and will grow our faith in Christ and connect up more deeply to each other. My guess is, if you ask the majority of people in our small groups “if they are people of prayer” like the video clip that we just watched that their first answer won’t be, “I go to church.” I also do not think that if we asked them if they are “saved” or know Jesus as Lord and Savior that they will say, “I have been baptized.” Deeper faith, stronger relationships, this makes us and the church stronger.

In the gospel of Matthew in 20:26, Jesus tells us as a people and as a church how to be great. In Matthew 20:26 this what Jesus says:

**(Slide 13 – Matthew 20:26)**

## **Matthew 20:26**

**<sup>26</sup> It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,**

If we are serving and loving people, this is good, but knowing Jesus changes us.

Knowing Jesus makes us a new creation, and that faith will grow us and grow the

church. Am I a “praying man?” as the video asks? Yes, I am. Am I “saved?” as the video asks. Yes, I am.

So, should we continue to serve and love each other? Yes, of course we should, but having strong and growing faith in Christ will grow us, and it will grow the church in many ways.

As I invite our praise team forward, the last scripture that I want to share with you this morning is from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia, or the Galatians. In Galatians 6:9 the Apostle Paul write:

**(Slide 14 – Galatians 6:9)**

## **Galatians 6:9**

**<sup>9</sup> So let us not grow weary  
in doing what is right, for we  
will reap at harvest time, if  
we do not give up.**

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A lived faith, coupled with a deep spiritual faith is how we grow, is how the church grows, and is how the church moves forward together. May it be so. Amen.