

## Close Encounters

*"...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up ..." (Ephesians 4:15)*

Never in human history has communication been easier, quicker and more abundantly accessible. We have email, Facebook, cell phones, Skype, texting and Twitter. Yet ironically, never has a generation felt more alone and disconnected. We talk more and communicate less than anyone in history! This has huge implications for our Christian walk. Spiritual growth does not take place in isolation. Although individual spiritual disciplines such as daily prayer and Bible reading are important, real spiritual growth occurs primarily in close relationships with fellow believers. No one understood this better than John Wesley.

*"Holy solitaires" 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. (Preface to the 1738 Hymnbook. Works. XIV, p. 321).*

Wesley, therefore, urged all converts to join a small group where they could build intimate relationships with other believers and experience what he called "close conversations." Knowing well the human tendency to prattle and babble on and on about inconsequential matters, Wesley outlined a method for helping small groups to talk about things that mattered most. He knew that without discipline and intentionality in our conversations, spiritual growth simply would not (and could not!) occur. Thus he urged the members of small groups to speak "freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting." This is the kind of honest accountability that one finds today in Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers. How much more such candor and transparency is needed among Christians! In Wesley's small groups, four questions were asked of every attendee every week:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
  2. What temptations have you met with?
  3. How were you delivered?
  4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
- (Rules of the Band-Societies. Works, VIII, pp. 272f.)*

Wesley discovered that one hour of such "close conversation" often had a more profound spiritual impact on a believer's life than ten years of public preaching!

Friends, as you gather with the saints today, rather than engaging in idle chit-chat about the weather or your favorite television show, why don't you initiate some "close conversations?" This is not for the faint of heart. But it is perhaps the surest path to spiritual growth anyone will ever discover.

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