

## **A Blueprint for Christian Discipleship: Wesley's General Rules as a Guide for Christian Living**

Kevin M. Watson, Nashville, TN,  
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Watson begins his book by taking stock of the current situation facing the church in the contemporary United States. Moving through a quick survey of recent monographs that consider how the emerging generation has come to see the church as alien and irrelevant, if not entirely hostile, to their ways of life, Watson suggests that churches have two options. The first is “hold on and try not to lose too many members too quickly” (9). The second, more preferable, is to “live...by stubbornly deciding to depend on God’s grace” (9). In service of helping the church take this second option, Watson offers his book, which he claims has two goals: 1. to help develop “a more robust understanding of discipleship” that does not allow Christians to remain comfortable or complacent in the face of the need to be in mission. 2. to recover the understanding and practice of discipleship developed by John Wesley in the earliest days of the Methodist revival (10-11). Pulling both of these goals together, Watson puts forth the General Rules authored by Wesley as a blueprint for discipleship.

In chapter two Watson explicates the theology and tradition from which he develops his points. In it, he provides a sketch of the spiritual pilgrimage of John

Wesley and how Wesley came to understand the centrality of grace in the Christian life. For Watson, this emphasis on grace is critical because it establishes the appropriate framework for how to proceed by focusing on God's initiative not only to save humans from their sin, but to empower them for a life of discipleship. According to Watson, "The goal of grace, then, is not just to save us from ourselves; it is to enable us to enter into a deeper and deeper relationship with God so that we are able to love God and our neighbor increasingly" (33). This view of grace avoids any hint of Pelagianism in its emphasis on God's initiative even as it demands that humans are responsible for living out a life of faith.

In chapter three Watson argues that living according to grace requires discipline. Again drawing from the experience of John Wesley as he oversaw the growing Methodist revival, Watson introduces the idea of Christians practicing their faith in community as the most effective way of sustaining this discipline. He specifically points to the Wesleyan innovations of the society, class meetings, and band meetings, discussing how they helped to encourage and hold accountable their members for growth in grace.

Chapters four, five, and six carry the bulk of Watson's argument by exploring each of the three rules that make up the General Rules (Watson records the full text of the General Rules, as authored by Wesley, in Appendix A). Overarching these explications is Watson's observation that the General Rules "are ideally suited to moving people from nominal faith to holiness. The General Rules provide a helpful blueprint for a stagnant and spiritually dying church to wake up and realize that there

is so much more to being a Christian” (52). The General Rules, in short, are: 1. Do no harm. 2. Do all the good you can. 3. Attend upon the ordinances of God. In each chapter, Watson explores the Scriptural basis for the rules, offers personal experiences that illuminate how the rules might be engaged in real life, and then provides a useful analysis of why many Christians are not living according to the rule and how they might begin doing so.

Chapter seven provides something of a broad exegesis of the General Rules, seeking to overcome the possible tensions or discomforts that readers may have with the rules. To do this, Watson takes the favorite Methodist stance of explaining how Wesley’s work is effective precisely because it holds together practices of the Christian faith that are often seen as mutually exclusive. Specifically, he argues that the General Rules provide balance between faith and works, personal piety and social action, and love of God and love of neighbor.

Chapter eight reprises what Watson sees as a critical point for the actual practice of the General Rules – the need for Christians to live their faith together. He argues, as he hinted in chapter three, that Christian discipleship is a nearly impossible task apart from a supportive Christian community.

Chapter nine concludes the book by recapping the previous chapters and restating the choice that churches have to make. Watson calls the church to repentance for its complicity in allowing the standards of Christian discipline to erode and to a renewed commitment for living according to a disciplined life of faith together.

If there is a primary critique of this book, it is that Watson, who is an elder in The United Methodist Church, often slips into the mode of trying to provide a salve for his own troubled denomination rather than addressing the church in the United States more broadly. While his introduction focuses on the need for the church as a whole to face up to the fact that it is no longer well-received in the culture of the United States, Watson quickly leaves this issue behind in favor of emphasizing how the Wesleyan blueprint for discipleship will revive churches – and he often specifically notes The United Methodist Church at these points – from the inside. Of course, it is not an entirely unwarranted leap to believe that local congregations composed of highly motivated and disciplined followers of Jesus Christ could be precisely the witness that draws the culture to reconsider its views of the church. However, Watson does not connect the dots for this. Watson also seems to miss the fact that the literature he cites about the church being irrelevant in contemporary culture is written by evangelicals attempting to spur their own branch of the church into action, not by fellow mainline pastors who believe their denominations are in need of revival.

Notwithstanding this methodological lapse, Watson's book is a useful one for the purpose of helping Christians in local churches reconsider what being followers of Jesus Christ entails. Indeed, the greatest strength of the book is that it could help those who become serious about its contents to move beyond just an initial study of the book itself. This is a book that could be introduced for a short-term study within a local congregation with the potential for launching a longer-running practice of accountability groups after the initial meetings. The study questions at the end of each

chapter and the appendix that walks through a brief outline of how such accountability groups might operate furthers the book's utility in this regard. Beyond the capacity to help launch such groups, this book would also be highly useful in leading new member's classes, confirmation classes, or other groups geared toward teaching those young-in-the faith the foundations of their new faith.

Churches connected to the Methodist family might find this book especially helpful if they have previously worked with *Covenant Discipleship* by David Lowes Watson (no relation to Kevin Watson) and/or Rueben Job's more recent *Three Simple Rules*. Both of these texts offer ways of helping contemporary Methodists make use of the Wesleyan tradition. David Lowes Watson's book emphasizes a reclaiming of the Methodist class meeting. Job's book specifically focuses on the General Rules. Kevin Watson's book splits the difference between these two books, offering a more theologically and historically astute approach to the General Rules than Job, and offering a more accessible and practicable model than Watson's for how Christians can live in grace together.

In all, Watson's book is a meaningful addition to the library of a pastor, church educator, membership director, youth leader, or anyone concerned with forming intentional disciples of Jesus Christ in the contemporary church. Its strong emphasis on the Wesleyan tradition might lend itself to some churches more than others, but its stronger emphasis on leading Christians to live a grace-filled and graceful life in service to God the Father under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit make it recommendable to all.