

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



**SESSION 1**

Wesley's Theological Biography—  
Epworth to Aldersgate

## NOTICE TO CLT PARTICIPANTS AND EDUCATORS

---

This is a contract. By using these materials you accept all the terms and conditions of this Agreement. This Agreement covers all Leader's Guides, Student Guides, and instructional resources included in the Continuing Lay Training (CLT) website.

Upon your acceptance of this Agreement, Continuing Lay Training grants to you a nonexclusive license to use these curricular materials provided that you agree to the following:

### 1. USE OF THE MODULES.

- You may distribute educational materials in electronic form to students or other educational providers.
- You may make and distribute electronic or paper copies to students for the purpose of instruction, as long as each copy contains this Agreement and the same copyright and other proprietary notices pertaining to the Module. If you download the educational materials from the Internet or similar online source, you must include the CLT notice for the Module with any online distribution and on any media you distribute that includes the educational content.
- You may translate, adapt, and/or modify the examples and instructional resources for the purpose of making the instruction culturally relevant to your students. However, you must agree that you will not sell these modified materials without express, written permission from CLT.

### 2. COPYRIGHT.

The material is owned by CLT and is protected by United States Copyright Law and International Treaty provisions. Except as stated above, this Agreement does not grant you any intellectual property rights in the Module.

### 3. RESTRICTIONS.

- You may not sell copies of these educational materials in any form except to recover the minimum reproduction cost of electronic media or photocopy expense.
- You may not modify the wording or original intent of the educational material for commercial use.

## THANK YOU

Continuing Lay Training would like to thank Clergy Development for granting permission to modify and adapt their course of study materials for our educational purposes. Their willingness to partner with us is sincerely appreciated.

## PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTOR

---

**NOTES**

The principal contributor for this module is Dr. Diane Leclerc. Dr. Leclerc is professor of Historical Theology and Homiletics at Northwest Nazarene University where she has taught since 1998. She is an ordained clergy in the Church of the Nazarene and has pastored two congregations, in Maine and in Idaho. She received a Bachelor of Arts in religion from Eastern Nazarene College, a Master of Divinity degree from Nazarene Theological Seminary, and both her Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from Drew University.

She has published articles in the Wesleyan Theological Journal and has contributed to two books, including *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*. Her full-length book, *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Respective*, won the Wesleyan Theological Society Book of the Year Award in 2002. Leclerc is an active member of the Wesleyan Theological Society and the Wesleyan-Holiness Women Clergy Association. She resides in Nampa, Idaho, with her husband and son.

# Wesley's Theological Biography— Epworth to Aldersgate

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**The Historical Context of the Church of England**

**Theological Biography from Epworth  
to Aldersgate**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- describe the religious and political culture of the Church of England.
- articulate the influences of family, education, and ordination on the spiritual formation of John Wesley.
- understand the impact of the writings of Thomas à Kempis, William Law, and Jeremy Taylor on Wesley.
- discuss the hopes and failures of Wesley's missionary work in Georgia.
- identify the role of the Moravians on Wesley.
- describe the significance of Aldersgate on Wesley's spiritual development.

# Wesley's Theological Biography— Epworth to Aldersgate

## INTRODUCTION



John Wesley's biography is extremely important in understanding his theology. It is also important to know Wesley's theology always applies directly to real-life situations. He did not write a "systematic theology" in the same way John Calvin did. He never sat down and wrote out in one place what he believed about all the Christian doctrines. Scholars must look at Wesley's more practical works—such as his sermons, journals, and letters—in order to weave together what Wesley believed about each traditional "systematic" doctrine. Wesley has therefore been called a "practical theologian."

Many different influences were involved with what Wesley finally concluded theologically. He is known as a rather "eclectic" theologian; he takes the best he can find from a variety of sources and condenses it into a creative theological vision. More often than not, Wesley ends up in a middle position between more radical poles. A key way of interpreting Wesley is to see this *via media* (middle way) in much of this thought.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND



### NOTES

Wesley gained an understanding of the *via media* from the dramatic history of the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church. King Henry VIII separated the Church from Roman Catholicism in 1532. The Parliament established a form of government that placed the king as the head of both the Church and the state of England. The first official statement of English theology came in the “Ten Articles of Religion.” These articles showed that while Henry had separated from Catholicism politically, he did not support all the tenets of the Protestant Reformation.

Important for the development of the English faith were two works: The Book of Homilies (1546) and The Book of Common Prayer (1549). It is important to note that theology is completely tied to liturgy or worship.

After Henry died, his son Edward VI took the throne at a young age. During his reign, the Church moved in the direction of the Reformers, but when Edward died, his sister, Queen Mary, took an aggressive stance back toward Catholicism. She is known as “bloody Mary,” because she used any means to suppress any opposition to the Catholic position. Some people and groups were exiled. When Mary died, these exiles—primarily Calvinists—returned to England determined to rid the Church of the “excesses” of English Catholicism. They came to be known as Puritans.

Elizabeth became queen after Mary. She was Edward and Mary’s sister, but by a different mother. Elizabeth sought and fought hard for a united Church; she wished to protect the Church from Rome’s designs to regain control on the one hand and the aggressive Calvinism of the Puritans on the other.

“The Act of Uniformity” (1559) helped bring a middle position. Through it, Elizabeth established a Church government separate from Catholicism and reestablished the Book of Common Prayer and the Book of Homilies as theological guides. Her resolution became known as the “Elizabethan Settlement.” Although succeeding kings and Church leaders would attempt to throw off the balance in one direction or the other, the settlement and its *via media* became the lasting paradigm of English theology and doctrine.

There is no doubt Anglicanism was highly influential on the life and thought of John Wesley, but it would be naive to think the Anglicanism of the 1700s was a purely benevolent force or to underestimate Wesley’s radical departure from the Church of England on many points. Even today we should be sensitive

 **NOTES**

to the fact that in many parts of the world Anglicanism is connected to an aggressive colonialism and various forms of oppression and exploitation. Wesley stood against the Anglicans on some points of social justice, and where he didn't directly oppose the exploitation of the colonies, he certainly should have. Also, Wesley departed significantly from Anglican theology of the day.



## THEOLOGICAL BIOGRAPHY FROM EPWORTH TO ALDERSGATE



### NOTES

John Wesley was born on June 17, 1703, to Samuel and Susanna Wesley. Both Samuel's and Susanna's families had been nonconformists and part of the Puritan dissenters that had separated themselves from the Church of England. However, John's mother and father decided to rejoin the Anglican Church and did so with great zeal.

Samuel was an Anglican priest, responsible for the Church in Epworth, England. Biographers have been correct in seeing John's upbringing in this family as very significant to his own spiritual formation. Samuel was an educated pastor who valued study above all else. He wrote and published. Susanna also highly valued education—for her daughters as well as her sons. She is well known for the Christian education she provided for her children. She was also an early model of a woman in ministry; for all practical purposes she served as a co-pastor to the flock at Epworth.

Perhaps significant for later Methodism, the Wesleys led house meetings in the rectory where persons would share openly about their own spiritual journeys. They met regularly for prayer, reading of Scripture, and edifying conversation. Susanna often led these meetings. John seems to have had a special place in his mother's heart. She believed God had spared him (from a fire) and called him for some very special purpose.

At age eleven, John entered the famous Charterhouse School in London. His older brother, Samuel, attended Westminster School nearby, where Charles, John's famous younger brother, was later also a pupil. Charterhouse provided John with a type of preschool education as well as an opportunity to begin his teenaged reflection on his own spiritual life. Through it all, John's tie to his mother remained substantial and influential.

In 1720, John began at Christ Church (college) at Oxford University and began to prepare for the priesthood. Oxford provided a place for Wesley to mature spiritually as well as excel academically. Christ Church was one of the more prestigious colleges of the time, and along with other professional disciplines, prepared young scholars for work in the Church. Wesley was a tutor and fellow, which meant he was supported financially throughout his years there (although there is some speculation about whether Wesley might not have gone to Georgia because of a lack of funds as a priest in England).




**NOTES**

Training for ministry in the Church of England required the following:

- a bachelor of arts degree,
- examination by the bishop,
- ordination as a deacon, which acted as a two-year probationary period to prove gifts for ministry and to give time to finish the M.A. degree,
- another examination by the bishop, and
- another ordination as priest.

In order to prepare for his ordination as a deacon, Wesley began to read from the Pietist tradition, which focused on holy living. Three authors were extremely significant to Wesley's theological development:

- Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), a German mystic, wrote the famous *The Imitation of Christ*.
- Jeremy Taylor (1613-67) who wrote *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*.
- William Law (1686-1761) who wrote two significant works: *Christian Perfection* and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

From these three authors Wesley gained three primary ideas that related to his doctrine of holiness. Holiness involves:

- a purity of intentions,
- the imitation of Christ as the model for holy living, and
- love for God and neighbor as definitive and normative of Christian perfection.

In Wesley's famous later work, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he writes this:

In one view, it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting, not a part, but all our soul, body, and substance to God. In another view, it is all the mind which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked. It is the circumcision of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution. It is a renewal of the heart in the whole image of God, the full likeness of Him that created it. In yet another, it is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves.


**NOTES**

These reflections began to take shape at Oxford. Entries in his diary at that time indicate a seriousness about his own holiness. Some scholars mark this period as Wesley's conversion, for Wesley, reflecting later, gave great significance to this period of his spiritual development.

Another highly significant development at Oxford was the formation of Wesley's holy club in 1729. The Holy Club was a study group that developed over time into what some believe to be the model of Wesley's band meetings. He would later place all converts to Methodism into small groups for the purpose of spiritual accountability and encouragement. In the context of the Holy Club, Wesley came to highly value what we might call social service ministry. Members would weekly visit men in prison, an orphanage, or the sick. These types of activities were a vital part of Wesley's understanding of spiritual discipline.

By 1733 the Holy Club, now known as the Oxford Methodists, was strong and growing. Wesley, on the other hand, began to have doubts about his own salvation. He wrestled to find some kind of assurance he, in fact, was a child of God. When opportunity to go to Georgia as a missionary arose, Wesley went. As he said, "My chief motive . . . is the hope of saving my own soul" (Frank Baker, ed. *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, Letters, vol. 25: 440).

Three months after his father's death in 1735, a trustee of the organization, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.), invited John Wesley to Georgia in the United States. He, along with his brother Charles and one other member of the Holy Club, sailed in January of 1736. For all practical purposes the time they spent in Georgia was a pastoral, relational, and spiritual failure. Part of John's plan was to convert the Indians. Entries in his journal show that far from being thirsty for the gospel—as John had imagined because of his strong belief in prevenient grace—the Native Americans disgusted John. He also had little tolerance for the colonists.

Albert Outler calls John's practices as pastor "tactless" and his ministry in Georgia a "fiasco" (from Outler, p. 11). Things were further complicated with a messy romance for John. John fell in love with Sophie Hopkey but was perpetually noncommittal. She finally married someone else. John then barred her and her new husband from Holy Communion and was in turn sued for defamation of the new husband's character. Events escalated until John was to appear for a formal grand jury on twelve counts. Finally, John decided to leave for England to escape any further embarrassment.

Out of the unappealing occurrences from his time in Georgia, one positive benefit emerges without question: John's acquaintance with the Moravians. He first encountered them on the trip to Georgia and was impressed with their assurance

 NOTES

of their own salvation. He met with them on occasion while there and upon returning to England actually visited the Moravian settlement in Germany. They strongly supported the Lutheran doctrine of sola fide: salvation by faith alone. Wesley's more than ten-year quest for holiness had missed the power of this vital doctrine. At this point in his life, Wesley needed to know he was a child of God apart from his own efforts or "works-righteousness."

Peter Bohler, a Moravian who counseled Wesley on several occasions, challenged Wesley to "preach faith till you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith" (The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, Journal and Diaries, vol. 18: 228). Wesley did exactly that. In doing so, Wesley offended Anglican sensibilities. He defended himself by stating The Book of Homilies and The Book of Common Prayer both strongly affirmed the doctrine of salvation by faith.

Rather than being discouraged, Wesley saw the controversy with his Anglican brothers in a positive light and stated that God's special blessing was on the sermons that gave the most offense. On May 24, 1738, John went to a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate Street and claimed for himself the assurance of salvation he had sought. He felt his heart "strangely warmed" and wrote later in his diary, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

There is no consensus among scholars as to what happened to Wesley that night. Some call it his true conversion, others his evangelical conversion, others one spiritual step among many, some an entire sanctification experience. Wesley himself does not help us define the moment. He does reference 1738 as significant but could have meant the date of the first society meeting or the beginning of the evangelical revival in England. He does reprint his diary entry five times in other writings, but with no comment. In later years, Wesley references 1725 more than 1738 as key to his spiritual development. Perhaps most puzzling are his diary entries immediately following May 24. He expressed continuing doubts about his spiritual life.

What is sure is that Aldersgate turned Wesley in a new direction. Most scholars agree Wesley experienced a new level of assurance of his salvation, based on grace not on works. This "witness of the Spirit," as Wesley also called it, became a key doctrine in Methodism. From Aldersgate on, Wesley also preached sola fide so strongly in Anglican pulpits that he was barred from preaching further in many such churches. He decided if he could not preach in the pulpits he would "preach in the fields," and he turned his attention toward an itinerant ministry throughout Britain.

## APPLICATION

---

**NOTES**

1. Describe the religious and political culture of the Church of England.
2. What influence did family, education, and ordination have on the spiritual formation of John Wesley?
3. How did the writings of Thomas à Kempis, William Law, and Jeremy Taylor impact Wesley?
4. Explain the hopes and failures of Wesley's missionary work in Georgia.
5. Identify the role of the Moravians on Wesley.
6. What was the significance of Aldersgate on Wesley's spiritual development?

## EXAM



### NOTES

1. John Wesley's biography is extremely important in understanding his theology.
  - A. True
  - B. False
2. Wesley's theology always applies directly to real-life situations.
  - A. True
  - B. False
3. Wesley has been called a "\_\_\_\_\_ theologian."
  - A. practical
  - B. systematic
  - C. none of these
  - D. all of these
4. Important for the development of the English faith were two works: The Book of Homilies (1546) and The Book of Common Prayer (1549).
  - A. True
  - B. False
5. Theology is not tied to liturgy or worship.
  - A. True
  - B. False
6. Susanna Wesley was also an early model of a woman in ministry; for all practical purposes she served as a co-pastor to the flock at Epworth.
  - A. True
  - B. False
7. House meetings are defined as \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. meetings held in the rectory.
  - B. a place where people were allowed to share about their spiritual journey.
  - C. a place where people met regularly for prayer, reading of Scripture, and edifying conversation.
  - D. All of the above.
8. To prepare for the priesthood, Wesley began to read from the Pietist tradition, which focused on holy living.
  - A. True
  - B. False

**NOTES**

9. Which of these authors were extremely significant to Wesley's theological development?
  - A. Thomas a Kempis
  - B. Jeremy Taylor
  - C. William Law
  - D. All of the above
  
10. Which of the following is NOT one of the three primary ideas of Wesley's doctrine of holiness?
  - A. purity of intentions
  - B. The imitation of Christ as the model for holy living
  - C. Love for God and neighbor as definitive and normative of Christian perfection
  - D. Following a set of defined rules
  
11. Aldersgate turned Wesley in a new direction.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
12. John Wesley was very successful in his mission in Georgia to convert the Indians.
  - A. True
  - B. False

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

---

**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. How do life experiences shape how a person thinks?
2. How important is it to know a person's biography in order to understand his or her perspective?
3. How is theology expressed through worship services that you are involved in?
4. What authors have influenced your theology the most?