

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



SESSION 2

Wesley's Theological Biography—
Aldersgate to Wesley's Death

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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 Perspective*, 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.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Biographical Concerns

The Middle Wesley

The Late Wesley

Application

Exam

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INTRODUCTION

In a letter to a friend, Wesley shows the heart of his movement in his own heart:

O grant that nothing in my soul
May dwell, but Thy pure love alone!
O may Thy love possess me whole
My joy, my treasure, and my crown.
Strange flames far from my heart remove!
My every act, word, thought, be love.

Wesley, 1765 (From Outler, p. 80.)

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

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

- describe the rise and development of Methodism.
- comprehend Wesley's controversy with the London society over the meaning of holiness.
- analyze Wesley's controversy with Calvinism and George Whitefield.
- understand Wesley's reasons for allowing American ordinations.
- describe John Wesley's controversy with Charles Wesley over succession.

BIOGRAPHICAL CONCERNS



NOTES

In his work, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, Richard Heitzenrater explains some of the difficulties of understanding John Wesley's biography. First, Wesley was a legend in his own time, so early in his life information about him takes on the form of hagiography. Hagiography is a biography of a holy person written to praise the person and show him or her as a true saint of God. Many times historical accuracy is not a priority in this type of literature.

Second, Wesley was a controversial figure during his own life. Therefore, what is recorded often reflects the opinion of the writer, whether positive or negative. In many of the biographies of Wesley, the negative material is overlooked.

Third, Wesley's own writings can reveal a distinctly "public" and a distinctly "private" Wesley. The historian must negotiate this area carefully.

Finally, according to Heitzenrater the historian must deal with aspects of Wesley's life and thought that often contradict each other. Wesley has been identified by many scholars with words that have a conflict in meaning—for example "radical conservative," "romantic realist," "quiet revolutionary," "reasonable enthusiast," "practical mystic," and "folk theologian."

Wesley's place as theologian also raises historical concerns. Many scholars point out Wesley's theology developed over time. Randy Maddox, in *Responsible Grace*, speaks of an early, middle, and late Wesley, with each phase of his life representing differing interests and concerns. Maddox states, however, the late Wesley integrated his early and middle years into mature theological positions. This developmental view of Wesley helps deal with apparent inconsistencies in his thought.

For our purposes, the middle Wesley will be designated by the years 1739-1760; the late Wesley from 1760 until his death in 1791.

THE MIDDLE WESLEY



NOTES

The middle phase of Wesley's life was consumed by the rise and organization of the Methodist Revival in England and his need to clarify Methodist theology. Wesley's first theological move was to reject the extremes of Moravianism. Although Wesley deeply appreciated their influence on his life and their doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone), Wesley began to be uncomfortable with their quietism.

Wesley recognized an extreme emphasis on the doctrine of grace could lead to a belief that since grace is all, works are not necessary and could be harmful to the Christian's dependence on God only for salvation. Thus Moravians remained quiet before God. From 1725 on Wesley never wavered in his belief that a Christian expressed his or her Christianity through good works, particularly works of love and mercy to the most needy. Wesley, like the Book of James, demanded that faith is shown and legitimized by such work.

The 1740s and 1750s saw the rise of the people called Methodists. With the organization of societies, bands, and class meetings Wesley provided his converts with a disciplined program of spiritual formation by fellowship with other Christians and focused pastoral care. Societies were larger groups, which would be similar to the size of an average congregation. Band and class meetings were small accountability groups and were very intense.

Most scholars see this as crucial in the growth of Methodism, because other periodic revivals had initial success but no long-term harvest. Wesley also initiated a large network of lay preachers. These preachers would travel to different societies to preach and make sure Wesley's plan and theological vision were being carried out.

Annual conferences, first initiated in 1744, were also crucial to making Methodism distinctive. The Methodist relationship with the Anglican Church was questioned at this time, both by Methodists and Anglicans. Wesley saw his movement as a renewal or evangelistic order within the Church of England. Through these years, Wesley completely denied any hint of separatism.

Influenced by Wesley's vision, Methodists in the bands and societies began to testify to the experience of entire sanctification. "Holiness of heart and life" was one of Wesley's cherished phrases. As people professed to being sanctified, Wesley saw the benefit of preaching it was possible to be sanctified. John Wesley's brother Charles disagreed with this new preaching. Charles believed an experience of entire sanctification was rare, and if it did occur it would be very near a person's death. John Wesley would be forced to clarify his own position in the coming decades.

THE LATE WESLEY



NOTES

The years following 1760 until his death in 1791 will be referred to as the late Wesley. During these decades, Wesley faced major theological issues that would help define Methodism. Personal problems as well as theology concerns became more difficult to handle.

What has come to be known as the perfectionist controversy began in the early 1760s. During the middle period, Wesley began to stress the attainability of Christian perfection and advise his followers to seek it now. Two of his followers, Thomas Maxfield and George Bell, took the doctrine to extremes. They were the leaders of the society in London. They emphasized that such perfection was absolute and claimed a perfected Christian could not sin and would exist in an angelic-like state. They downplayed the gradual process Wesley had always emphasized as equally important. The controversy led to much debate and aggression over the doctrine of sanctification. Wesley called a conference to settle the issue, and he clarified his own positions in such publications as “On Perfection” (1761), “Sin in Believers” (1763), and perhaps most comprehensively in “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection” (first issued in 1766 and again in 1777).

Although Wesley had dealt with Methodists who deemed themselves Calvinists from the very beginning of the movement, the 1770s brought the issue to a head. The death of George Whitefield in 1770 brought the debate to the front of issues to be discussed. Whitefield had been a member of the Holy Club and became a very successful evangelist in both North America and England. Although closely associated with Wesley for many years, Whitefield and Wesley disagreed over the doctrine of predestination. Wesley was accused of not adequately representing Whitefield’s views in Whitefield’s funeral sermon Wesley delivered. In response to the controversy, Wesley published several works: “On Predestination” (1773), “Thoughts Upon Necessity” (1774), and “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” (1785). Wesley never wavered from his strongly anti-election position. Ultimately, Methodism stood in the Arminian camp, meaning all persons are elected by God for salvation, conditioned upon their acceptance of God’s grace.

According to the Calvinist position, only certain individuals are elected to salvation, and salvation is conditioned upon nothing; grace is irresistible. Wesley’s main argument against the doctrine of predestination was it distorts our image of God and places God’s sovereignty over God’s love.

 **NOTES**

Also during the late period of Wesley's life the issue of Methodism's separation from the Church of England reached a climax. The issue had been faced in the earlier decades of Wesley's life. Wesley had been completely against separation. He wanted to see Methodism as a renewal movement within the church. Charles, Wesley's brother, was even stronger in his sentiments that separation should not occur under any circumstances.

However, an unexpected situation in America forced John's hand. As we know, in the 1770s, the rise of political issues in the American colonies resulted in the Revolutionary War in 1776. In the midst of the conflict, the Anglican Church retreated back to England. This left the pastoral and practical problem of the administration of the sacraments to Methodists in America. While Methodists had always met for preaching services and society meetings, Wesley demanded Methodists in England and America receive the sacrament of Holy Communion in Anglican Churches.

Wesley was deeply concerned with the absence of Anglican priests, American Methodists would have no opportunity to receive the sacrament. Holy Communion was so important to Wesley he decided to approve a Methodist ordination of Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, and he commissioned them as general superintendents of the Methodist Church in 1784 at a conference in Baltimore. In essence, this initiated a series of events that gave American Methodists independence. English Methodists became a separate church from Anglicans after Wesley died.

Wesley's decision brought great disharmony with his brother Charles. Things between them were never the same again. Other personal difficulties were also present. John Wesley had married against Charles' advice. The marriage was a complete failure; Molly Wesley finally left John for good in 1771. When she died in 1781, Wesley did not hear about it until much later.

Despite all of these controversies and difficulties, Wesley remained a strong leader until his death. He continued to publish, preach, and correspond with his Methodist people. He remained productive until the end. He was immediately recognized as an incredibly influential man. Certainly such a claim cannot be refuted, no matter how difficult it is for the historian and biographer to sift through all the evidence. Many traditions, including the Church of the Nazarene, recognize him as their spiritual and theological father.

APPLICATION



NOTES

1. Write a reflection paper describing the rise and development of Methodism.
2. Write a paragraph describing Wesley's controversy with the London society over the meaning of holiness.
3. Describe Wesley's controversy with Calvinism and George Whitefield.
4. Describe Wesley's main reason for allowing American ordinations.

EXAM



NOTES

1. Wesley's first theological move was to reject the extremes of Moravianism.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. Scholars see the organization of accountability groups as crucial in the growth of Methodism.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. A large group of lay _____ were used to travel to societies to preach and make sure Wesley's plan and theological vision were being carried out.
 - A. preachers
 - B. people
 - C. members
 - D. theologians
4. Annual conferences, first initiated in 1744, were crucial to making Methodism distinctive.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. Wesley's goal was to separate from the Church of England.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. Holiness of heart and life was one of Wesley's cherished phrases.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. Wesley clarified his position on the doctrine of sanctification in _____?
 - A. "On perfection"
 - B. "Sin in Believers"
 - C. "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection"
 - D. All of the above
 - E. None of the above

 **NOTES**

8. Wesley believed perfection was absolute and claimed a perfected Christian could not sin and would exist in an angelic-like state.
 - A. True
 - B. False

9. Wesley and the Methodists agreed _____ .
 - A. Only certain individuals are elected to salvation, and salvation is conditioned upon nothing; grace is “irresistible.”
 - B. All persons are elected by God for salvation, conditioned upon their acceptance of God’s grace.
 - C. All of the above
 - D. None of the above

10. Which of the following is NOT one of the reasons Wesley changed his position on separation?
 - A. The American Revolutionary war
 - B. The demand that all of the Methodists in America and England receive communion
 - C. The absence of Anglican priests
 - D. He lost faith in the Church of England

11. Whitefield and Wesley agreed on the doctrine of predestination.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. Wesley’s main argument against the doctrine of predestination was it distorts our image of God and places God’s sovereignty over God’s love.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. The reflection paper describing the rise and development of Methodism.
2. Wesley's controversy with the London society over the meaning of holiness.
3. Wesley's controversy with Calvinism and George Whitefield.
4. Wesley's main reason for allowing American ordinations.