

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



SESSION 3
Wesley's Theological Sources

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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.

Wesley's Theological Sources

SESSION OVERVIEW

The Early Church

Mysticism and the Reformation

Wesley's Contemporaries: Puritanism and Anglicanism

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

INTRODUCTION

Wesley was influenced by many different traditions, including mystics:

I grew acquainted with the mystic writers, whose noble descriptions of union with God and internal religion make everything else appear mean, flat, and insipid . . . These gave me an entire new view of religion—nothing like any I had before. Journal, Tuesday 24 January, 1738 (from Outler, pp. 46-47).

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

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

- articulate the reasons for Wesley's preference for Pre-Nicene and Eastern theology.
- understand the impact of the Patristic sources on the thought and life of Wesley.
- discuss Wesley's practical mysticism—rejection of quietism but appropriation of the value of experiencing God.
- talk about the influence of Luther and the Moravian's *sola fide* on Wesley.
- understand the influence of Puritanism on Wesley.
- understand the influence of Arminius on Methodism.
- explain Anglicanism's theological influence on Wesley.

THE EARLY CHURCH



NOTES

In *John Wesley's Conceptions and Uses of Christian Antiquity*, Ted Campbell offers a comprehensive study of John Wesley's relationship to the writings of the fathers of the early Christian church, or Patristic period. Much of Campbell's book gives a chronological analysis of Wesley's use of Early Church sources.

Wesley gained his appreciation for the writers of the Early Church first from his father, Samuel, who wrote to clergymen with advice about which sources to read. While Wesley was at Oxford, he was diligent about studying as much of the Early Church fathers as he could. At this point he took them very literally and attempted to follow after them as much as he could in his own life.

He continued this pattern while in Georgia and even incorporated various ways to order the service from the Early Church into his work as a priest there. He also experimented with small group bands he believed were modeled by the Early Church teaching structure.

However, in January of 1738, Wesley stated he had been wrong on several points in his interpretation of Early Church sources. He believed he had not adequately subjected them to Scripture's authority. He had extended the truly important sources too far into the fourth century. He had misunderstood councils and synods to be more universally applicable than in fact they should be.

From this point on, Wesley believed the closer to the New Testament period, the more reliable the source. He began to prefer Pre-Nicene sources, which are those who wrote before the first ecumenical council in 325. He also preferred Eastern sources. These are the Patristic sources written in Greek, rather than Latin. However, the difference is not only a matter of language.

Very early on, Eastern and Western theology began to take on unique emphases. Eastern theology tended to be liturgically and practically focused. It had a higher estimation of the human condition and human potential for change than did Western sources. Thus its understanding of salvation and sanctification focused on real character transformation through the grace of God and was thoroughly optimistic about spiritual growth in this life. It also focused on the dynamic cooperation between God's grace and our appropriation of grace, also known as synergism. Some of the Eastern sources that most influenced Wesley were Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Macarius, John Chrysostom, and Ephraem Syrus. Each of these, as well as many others, focused on the experience of God and the life of holiness.

MYSTICISM AND THE REFORMATION



NOTES

Wesley's interest in the practical aspects of a relationship with God took him from the Early Church to the Catholic mysticism of the Middle Ages and then to the emphasis on grace in the Protestant Reformation. He deeply appreciated the mystical tradition of such persons as Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross, and Francis Fenelon. Their experiences of God impressed him greatly. However, he ultimately concluded they went too far. His disagreement focused on two major points.

First, Wesley rejected the goal of the Christian experience being unification with God. The mystics believed a Christian can progress through certain stages to the ultimate experience of unification. Some mystics believed the goal of unification was the complete loss of self into the essence of God. Wesley was concerned divine and human essences remain separate, theologically. We become like God, in Wesley's scheme. Mysticism bordered on the notion of becoming a part of God himself.

Second, Wesley wanted to refute the quietism of some mystics. Wesley never wanted to affirm a Christianity that neglected the work of God in the name of grace or even of prayer. Mysticism could lead to such an emphasis on one's own mystical pursuit that practical expressions of love for neighbor are neglected. Because of Wesley's appreciation for the mystical tradition's emphasis on devotion, coupled with his rejection of their quietistic tendencies, Wesley has been called a practical mystic.

In general, Wesley affirmed the Protestant Reformation, as expressed by Martin Luther. Luther's doctrine of *sola fide*, as conveyed to him particularly by the Moravians, greatly influenced Wesley and his Aldersgate experience. Yet, the Moravian tendency toward quietism and Luther's own problems with the concepts found in the Book of James gave Wesley pause.

The Reformation, as expressed by Calvinism, was a battlefield for Wesley's vision of Methodism. Wesley was clearly an Arminian, following the thought of James Arminius, an early 17th-century figure who refuted Calvinism's doctrine of salvation. It is in fact surprising Wesley did not quote Arminius more in his own defense against Calvinism. Arminius's theology focuses on:

- freewill
- rejection of predestination
- affirmation Christ died for all

 **NOTES**

During the 17th century, followers of Arminius (Remonstrants) were severely persecuted. The Synod of Dort, for all practical purposes, deemed Arminianism heretical and rigidified Calvin's thought certainly far beyond what Calvin himself ever envisioned. Anglicanism in Wesley's day was more tolerant. While some Anglican articles of faith were clearly Calvinistic in tone, the threat of Puritanism pushed mainstream Anglicanism more toward a middle position.

WESLEY'S CONTEMPORARIES: PURITANISM AND ANGLICANISM



NOTES

Robert Monk has argued strongly that Wesley was influenced by his Puritan heritage. Both his mother and father were originally from Puritan homes. Monk makes his case by pointing out Wesley's knowledge of Puritan literature is surprisingly extensive. He quotes Puritan writers and affirms many Puritan doctrines such as the doctrines of original sin, justification by faith, assurance, and final justification. He used Puritan methods of evangelism and emphasized self-examination.

Yet, on the more political side, Wesley rejected the Puritan's separationist tendencies. He was suspicious of those seeking a separate identity from the Anglican Church.

Wesley was an Anglican from birth to death. His loyalty was deep and unshaken by his practical need to ordain Methodist ministers in America. However, beyond an outspoken loyalty, there is no question much of Wesley's theological vision was influenced greatly by Anglican thought. Directly from the Anglican theology of the 18th century, Wesley embraced certain theological understandings. Anglicanism focuses on the following:

- the goodness of God
- rejection of a satisfaction theory of the atonement
- conditional election
- imparted righteousness
- Christ as central to all theological conclusions
- the Bible as the sole rule of faith
- an inclination toward the *via media* (middle course)
- use of Early Church sources
- holiness of heart and life

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Write a reflection paper on the reasons for Wesley's preference of Pre-Nicene and Eastern theology.
2. Write your opinion of the term "practical mystic" and discuss whether or not this term applies to you.
3. Write a paragraph explaining the influence of Arminius on Wesley's theological beliefs.

EXAM



NOTES

1. While at Oxford, John Wesley read and interpreted the Early Church fathers' writings literally and tried to follow the writings to the letter.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. Wesley changed his mind about the Early Church writings after he compared them to Scripture's authority.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. Pre-Nicene sources are those who wrote before the first ecumenical council in 325.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. John Wesley preferred Eastern Patristic sources.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. Eastern theology tended to be liturgically and practically focused.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. Western theology's understanding of salvation and sanctification focused on real character transformation through the grace of God and was thoroughly optimistic about spiritual growth in this life.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. Wesley's interest in the _____ aspects of a relationship with God took him from the Early Church to the Catholic mysticism of the Middle Ages and then to the emphasis on grace in the Protestant Reformation.
 - A. logical
 - B. practical
 - C. rational
 - D. mystical

 **NOTES**

8. We become like God, in Wesley's scheme.
 - A. True
 - B. False

9. Wesley never wanted to affirm a Christianity that neglected the work of God in the name of grace or even of prayer.
 - A. True
 - B. False

10. Arminius' theology does NOT focus on _____.
 - A. freewill
 - B. rejection of predestination
 - C. affirmation Christ died for all
 - D. once saved always saved

11. Wesley was an Anglican from birth to death.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. Wesley's loyalty was deep and unshaken by his practical need to ordain Methodist ministers in America.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Discuss the reflection paper on the reasons for Wesley's preference of Pre-Nicene and Eastern theology.
2. Share your opinion of the term "practical mystic" and discuss whether or not this term applies to you.
3. Present your ideas on the influence of Arminius on Wesley's theological beliefs.