

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



**SESSION 4**

Epistemology and Revelation

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## PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTOR

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**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.

# Epistemology and Revelation

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**Epistemology**

**Revelation**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## INTRODUCTION

Wesley agreed with the one philosophical camp:  
 “nothing is in the mind that is not first in the  
 senses.” –*An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and  
 Religion, Works 11:56*

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

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

- explain the differences and similarities of general and special revelation.
- define rationalism and empiricism.
- articulate Wesley’s concept of spiritual senses.

## EPISTEMOLOGY



### NOTES

Let's begin to look at Wesley's doctrines in a systematic form. Often systematic theology begins with a discussion about method—how are we going to go about finding the answers to each doctrine's questions? Or, how do we know what we know about religious truth? The philosophical study of how we know what we know is called epistemology; therefore scholars can talk about a Wesleyan epistemology.

To understand Wesley's epistemology fully we must understand two philosophical traditions and their ideas about how we gain knowledge. Interestingly, both influenced Wesley. Once again he takes a *via media*, or middle course, position.

The first tradition, known as rationalism, goes back to Plato. Plato believed before we experience anything, innate ideas have already been implanted in our minds by the divine. For example, we have an idea of beauty in our minds, and so we recognize beauty when we see it.

In contrast, empiricism, set forth by Aristotle, believes we only know what we have experienced. Our five senses experience the world, then we process such information to make sense of it. During Wesley's day empiricism was quite dominant, supported by the work of John Locke. For the most part Wesley embraced empiricism, but when it came to knowledge of God, Wesley parted ways with it.

A strict empiricist would reject knowledge of God, because God cannot be perceived through the senses. It is here Wesley moves more in the direction of rationalism, by believing all knowledge of God comes from God. How Wesley synthesizes the two traditions is seen in his development of a concept of spiritual senses. God has given us an extra sense so we might perceive the spiritual realm.

Spiritual senses is a type of empiricism in that this sense allows us to directly experience God. It is a type of rationalism in that this sense—but not knowledge—has been implanted in us by the divine, God himself.

## REVELATION



### NOTES

The question of the knowledge of God raises not only the question of our capacity to experience God but also the question of God's revelatory activity. Traditionally, revelation has been broken into two categories:

- General, or natural revelation
- Special revelation

Once again, Wesley modifies the traditional scheme. Natural revelation, since the time of Thomas Aquinas, the most significant scholastic theologian of the Middle Ages, has been seen as the knowledge we receive about God by considering God's effects. In other words, a certain amount of knowledge about God comes by looking at creation and the complexity of the human person.

Aquinas argued that looking at creation immediately raises the question of a creator. God must necessarily be the "unmoved mover" who put everything into motion. While natural revelation raises the question of God and can even affirm the necessity of the existence of a creator, it cannot answer the question of what God is like.

For that, special revelation is needed. God must break into history and reveal himself to humanity. The ultimate special revelation is the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ reveals the nature and character of God. The Bible is also seen as special revelation in that it gives witness to the activity of God and to Jesus as the Christ.

Wesley saw the separation between natural and special revelation to be drawn too sharply. Special revelation alone has been traditionally viewed as an expression of God's gracious activity. Wesley wanted to maintain that natural revelation itself is also an expression of grace. Special revelation, then, fulfills what is started in natural revelation in that all knowledge of God comes through God's initiative.

Who then receives the gracious revelation of God? That question gives us Wesley's groundwork for the doctrine of prevenient grace. Some scholars believe this doctrine is foundational to all of Wesley's theology.

In Wesley's mature thought, he believed prevenient grace gives a certain amount of light to every human being that awakens the spiritual senses, regardless of his or her cultural, historical, or religious context. He believed that this light—what



 **NOTES**

Maddox calls initial universal revelation—enables persons to know there is a God, He is just and merciful, and there will be some type of judgment, based on living up to the light given, before eternal life begins. Prevenient grace will go on to awaken persons who directly hear about Christ and their need for His redemption.

Wesley also affirmed special revelation as crucial to our understanding of God. The witness to Christ, as revealed to us in Scripture, is authoritative and standardized. However, is Scripture a mediator of revelation or do we hear immediately and directly from God? Again, Wesley affirms both. As Randy Maddox states, “The definitive revelation of God may come to us through Scripture but still be immediate because the Spirit who originally addressed the spiritual senses of the writers will also open our spiritual senses to perceive and attest to the truth they expressed” (p. 31).

Ultimately, Wesley developed what has come to be called the Wesleyan quadrilateral. This is at the heart of his theological method. Wesley believed Scripture is primary in our understanding of religious truth, because it is God’s special revelation of himself to us. However, Scripture is only rightly interpreted in dialogue with how tradition has understood the Bible, how we *experience* the truth of the Bible, and how reason helps us process, organize, and communicate biblical truth.

## APPLICATION

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**NOTES**

1. Write a reflection paper explaining the differences and similarities of general and special revelation.
2. Write definitions for the concepts of rationalism and empiricism. Reflect on how the two have affected your life.
3. Write a reflection paper explaining the revelation (knowledge of God) in your own life.



## EXAM



### NOTES

1. The philosophical study of how we know what we know is called epistemology.
  - A. True
  - B. False
2. We have an idea of beauty in our minds, and so we recognize beauty when we see it. This is an example of rationalism.
  - A. True
  - B. False
3. Empiricism, set forth by Aristotle, believes that we only know what we have experienced.
  - A. True
  - B. False
4. A strict empiricist would reject knowledge of God because God cannot be perceived through the senses.
  - A. True
  - B. False
5. Wesley synthesizes rationalism and empiricism by the development of a concept of "spiritual senses." God has given us an extra sense so that we might perceive the spiritual realm.
  - A. True
  - B. False
6. Natural revelation has been seen as the knowledge we receive about God by considering God's effects. In other words, a certain amount of knowledge about God comes by looking at creation and the complexity of the human person.
  - A. True
  - B. False
7. The idea that God must break into history and reveal himself to humanity is called \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Special revelation
  - B. Natural revelation
  - C. Prevenient grace
  - D. Rationalism

**NOTES**

8. Wesley developed what has come to be called the Wesleyan quadrilateral.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
9. Prevenient grace is grace that goes before.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
10. In Wesley's mature thought he believed that prevenient grace gives a certain amount of light to every human being that awakens the spiritual senses, regardless of his or her cultural, historical, or religious context.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
11. Wesley affirmed special revelation as crucial to our understanding of God.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
12. Wesley believed that Scripture is primary in our understanding of religious truth because it is God's special revelation of Himself to us.
  - A. True
  - B. False

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Your reflection paper explaining the differences and similarities of general and special revelation.
2. Your definitions for the concepts of rationalism and empiricism. Show how the two have affected your life.
3. Your reflection paper explaining the revelation (knowledge of God) in your own life.