

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



SESSION 13
Last Things

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**NOTES**

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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.

Last Things

SESSION OVERVIEW

Last Things

Death, Immortality, Resurrection, Intermediate States, and Judgment

New Creation

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

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

- identify the most Wesleyan of end-time theories.
- define the Wesleyan understanding of: death, resurrection, judgment, intermediate states, new creation.

Last Things

INTRODUCTION



Wesley always connected the coming Kingdom with present salvation: “He is already renewing the face of the earth. And we have strong reason to hope that the work he hath begun he will carry on unto the day of his Lord Jesus; that he will never intermit this blessed work of his Spirit until he has fulfilled his promises; until he hath put a period to sin and misery, and infirmity, and death; and re-established universal holiness and happiness, and caused all the inhabitants of earth to sing together ‘Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!’” (Sermon, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” *Works*, 2:499).

LAST THINGS



NOTES

The general consensus of Wesley scholars is that speculation about the end of the world falls outside the realm of what is Wesleyan. This is not to say Wesley did not consider such inquiries at all. It is to say eschatology, or the study of the end times, is by nature speculative theology. Since Wesley's primary doctrine, out of which all other doctrines flow, is soteriology, the doctrine of end times is theologically relevant to Wesleyans only as it relates to the doctrine of salvation.

The Church of the Nazarene does not demand its members ascribe to a certain end times theory. It gives members full liberty on this issue. That there is a final salvation is what is important, not how the final culmination of all things comes about. Wesley himself was skeptical about much of the sensationalistic enthusiasm that tended to go hand in hand with the eschatology of his day. Michael Lodahl—in his *Wesleyan Theological Journal* article published in 1994—elaborates more fully on Wesley's reservations about things connected to the end times.

According to Lodahl, it is not inappropriate to connect Wesley's eschatological considerations to his doctrine of sanctification. Lodahl calls this a realizable eschatology. By that he means Wesley insisted that perfect love for God and neighbor is attainable in this life through the process and the crisis of entire sanctification.

Unlike other traditions, that can only hope for a day when sin will be overcome and wait for an escape from this world, the Wesleyan theology of sanctification holds to the potential of divine grace to affect us in this life and, in a sense, to sanctify the value of the here and now. Lodahl states:

One might even surmise that the same impatience Wesley showed toward those who testified to being in a "state" of perfection, because they tended to rest in a past experience, he might extend toward those who tend to look ahead to some future moment of eschatological perfection. The crucial nature of the "now" before God . . . [can be] obscured by moments either remembered or anticipated (Lodahl, "Wesleyan Reservations about Eschatological 'Enthusiasm'", Vol. 29, Spring-Fall, 1994).

Another important insight from Lodahl arises at the point of the need for continuity between Wesley's understanding of present salvation and future salvation. Lodahl agrees Wesleyan theology is thoroughly synergistic—the combined effort is greater than the individual aspects.

 **NOTES**

Lodahl insightfully asks, “Can we not, indeed, ought we not interpret the idea of synergism in categories that are larger, more encompassing and more cosmic than simply an understanding of the individual’s relationship to God?”

In other words, it would make little logical sense Wesley would insist on the dynamic between divine grace and human cooperation in his soteriology where human free will is key, then subscribe to a unilateral (one side only) notion of eschatology where humanity sits by and waits for a preordained and predetermined end where God’s absolute sovereignty is completely divorced from human activity. For this reason, scholars who have attempted to categorize Wesley’s eschatology in traditional terms have placed him in the postmillennialist camp, for postmillennialism sees human cooperation in history as crucial to bringing about God’s kingdom on earth.

Scholars are divided about which of the three available millennial theories Wesley finally ascribed to. His Anglican training would have placed him squarely upon an amillennialist position. Amillennialism believes there is no actual thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, but that we stand in a figurative millennium because we stand between the first and second Advents of Christ.

There was a period of time when Wesley studied the work of Johann Bengel, which some interpreters categorize as a postmillennialist because he believed an actual reign will commence when the Church itself brings about a period of peace and righteousness on earth. At best, Wesley’s endorsement of Bengel is cautious.

Some Wesley scholars hold Wesley’s final conclusions represent a premillennial position: the belief that is accompanied by the idea the world will worsen until the return of Christ. However, this, according to scholars like Randy Maddox, is a misreading of Wesley. Present-day dispensationalism, or divine ordering of events in the world, would have been completely foreign to Wesley in his context. Also, since dispensationalism tends to focus on a prevailing pessimism about the condition of the world, in its essence it is contra-Wesleyan.

DEATH, IMMORTALITY, RESURRECTION, INTERMEDIATE STATES, AND JUDGMENT



NOTES

The 18th-century religious ethos emphasized that not only is a Christian to live right, he or she is to die right, thus the title of the book by Taylor—one that greatly influenced Wesley—*The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*.

Death

The distinguishing characteristic of Christian dying is that one dies with no fear, but with a blessed anticipation of seeing Christ. Wesley's own death was a celebrated event in Methodism.

Immortality/Resurrection

Wesley's speculations about the transition from this life to the next were not extensive and certainly not dogmatic. He rejected the Platonic idea that only the soul survives death; Wesley clearly stands with the orthodox position regarding immortality: "I believe in the resurrection of the body."

Intermediate States

On what happens next, Wesley is less clear. At certain periods in Wesley's developing thought he affirms what are known as intermediate states. By affirming this concept, he rejects the concept of soul sleep. Wesley surmises that for those whose final destiny is heaven, they await the culmination of the world and the beginning of eternity in a place called paradise. For those destined to hell, they wait in Hades. He resolutely rejected the concept of purgatory, where people could change their future destiny by enduring present punishment or discipline.

Judgment

By affirming the intermediate states, a theological paradox is immediately raised: if the Judgment will not occur until the end of time, how is the individual assigned to either paradise or Hades? Wesley never satisfactorily answered this dilemma. Keeping with Wesley's synergistic theology, he stressed that any ultimate judgment that led to hell would only be the result of the person's deliberate choice to resist grace.

NEW CREATION



NOTES

One distinctive of Wesley's end times theology is the concept of the new creation. Toward his later years he shifted his hope from heaven to a future of new creation. This new creation will be an actual physical place. This is where the human destiny of eternity will play itself out. He also suggests animals will participate in this new creation at a higher level. As stated in Romans, all of creation has been yearning for redemption. Thus all of creation, according to Wesley's developing thought, will thus be redeemed in actuality. It is Eden revisited, but far beyond what Eden ever actually was.

Wesley also hinted Christian growth will continue in this place. We will have already been made perfect at glorification—where sin will no longer be an issue—but a new type of growth will be made possible. As Maddox states, "Progression in our abilities and maturity is so central to what it means to be human that we will surely continue to progress in the life to come," (p. 253). Thus synergism, although in a new form, will continue into eternity.

APPLICATION



NOTES

1. Write a reflection about what you feel is the most Wesleyan of end-time theories and record your beliefs about end-time theories.
2. Define the Wesleyan understanding of the following topics. Choose one of the topics and write an essay:
 - death
 - resurrection
 - judgment
 - intermediate states
 - new creation
3. Spend some time reflecting on the following: Wesley's view of the future, a "new earth" is laced with scriptural references of hope: "Suppose now the fullness of time to be come, and the prophecies to be accomplished—what a prospect is this! . . . Here is no din of arms, no 'confused noise,' no 'garments rolled in blood' . . . no country or city divided against itself, and tearing out its own bowels . . . Here is no oppression to make even 'the wise man mad,' no extortion to 'grind the face of the poor;' no robbery or wrong; no rapine or injustice; for all are 'content with such things as they possess.' Thus 'righteousness and peace have kissed each other;' they have 'taken root and filled the land;' righteousness flourishing out of the earth, and 'peace looking down from heaven.'" (Sermon, "Scriptural Christianity," *Works*, 1:170-71).

EXAM



NOTES

1. The general consensus of Wesley scholars is that speculation about the end of the world falls outside the realm of what is Wesleyan.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. The Church of the Nazarene does not demand its members ascribe to a certain end times theory.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. According to Lodahl, Wesley insisted perfect love for God and neighbor is attainable in this life through the process and the crisis of entire sanctification.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. Amillennialism believes there is no actual thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, but that we stand in a figurative millennium because we stand between the first and second Advents of Christ.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. A premillennial position is the belief that is accompanied by the idea the world will worsen until the return of Christ.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. Present-day dispensationalism, or divine ordering of events in the world, would have been completely foreign to Wesley in his context.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. Since dispensationalism tends to focus on a prevailing pessimism about the condition of the world, in its essence it is pro-Wesleyan.
 - A. True
 - B. False

**NOTES**

8. The distinguishing characteristic of a Christian dying is that one dies with _____, but with a blessed anticipation of seeing Christ.
 - A. great fear
 - B. no fear
 - C. great regret
 - D. none of these

9. Wesley accepted the Platonic idea that only the soul survives death.
 - A. True
 - B. False

10. Wesley was very clear about what he believed about intermediate states.
 - A. True
 - B. False

11. In Wesley's synergistic theology he stressed that any ultimate judgment that led to hell would only be the result of the person's deliberate choice to resist grace.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. One distinctive of Wesley's end times theology is the concept of the new creation. This new creation will be an actual physical place.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. Discuss your reflection paper about what you feel is the most Wesleyan of end-time theories.
2. Share your definitions and essay following topics:
 - death
 - resurrection
 - judgment
 - intermediate states
 - new creation
3. Discuss the following: Wesley's view of the future, a "new earth" is laced with scriptural references of hope: "Suppose now the fullness of time to be come, and the prophecies to be accomplished—what a prospect is this! . . . Here is no din of arms, no 'confused noise,' no 'garments rolled in blood' . . . no country or city divided against itself, and tearing out its own bowels . . . Here is no oppression to make even 'the wise man mad,' no extortion to 'grind the face of the poor;' no robbery or wrong; no rapine or injustice; for all are 'content with such things as they possess.' Thus 'righteousness and peace have kissed each other;' they have 'taken root and filled the land;' righteousness flourishing out of the earth, and 'peace looking down from heaven.'" (Sermon, "Scriptural Christianity," *Works*, 1:170-71).