

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



SESSION 14

Life in the Christian Community

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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.

Life in the Christian Community

SESSION OVERVIEW

Wesley on the Church

Wesley on Pastoral Identity

Wesley on Spiritual Formation

Wesley on Christian Education

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

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

- develop a Wesleyan ecclesiology (study of the Church).
- appreciate Wesley's quest for spiritual formation, as in the Methodist societies.
- recognize Wesley's commitment to Christian education in the training of lay pastors and preachers.

Life in the Christian Community

INTRODUCTION



Before 1784 Wesley strongly affirmed the following:

“God could have made [the Methodists] a separate people . . . [but] this would have been a direct contradiction to his whole design in raising them up; namely, to spread scriptural religion throughout the land, among people of every denomination, leaving everyone to hold his own opinions and to follow his own mode of worship. This could only be done effectually by leaving these things as they were, and endeavoring to leaven the whole nation with that ‘faith that worketh by love,’” (Sermon, “On God’s Vineyard,” from *Works*, 3:511).

WESLEY ON THE CHURCH



NOTES

While Wesley certainly had a conception of the Church that can be found in his sermons and treatises, his ecclesiology, or study of the Church, shows most clearly in the need to work out the relationship between the Church of England and the Methodist societies. As with many of Wesley's theological tenants, his concerns were practical rather than theoretical.

John Wesley was an Anglican at birth and by his own admission would be an Anglican until the day he died. Yet in 1784 the American Methodists broke with the Church of England with John's approval. It was only after his death that the British Methodists would follow the Americans. What would bring John to such a radical decision, one that caused him and his brother, Charles, to be at odds for the rest of their lives? From the very beginning of the Methodist movement, John saw their identity as a renewal movement within Anglicanism.

Wesley developed societies that acted in many ways like congregations. The societies met together for preaching meetings. They broke into smaller groups for accountability and spiritual formation. The societies fellowshipped together, served the world together, and served each other in very specific ways. Yet, Wesley did not see these societies as churches. Unity with the Church of England was extremely important to him, despite their veiled rejection of him and their decision to outright bar him from Anglican pulpits. Wesley wanted his Methodist people to see themselves as Anglicans. Whatever they might do during the week in Methodist meetings, he demanded all Methodists attend Anglican worship services on Sundays in order to receive the Eucharist (or Communion).

When the Revolutionary War broke out in the American Colonies, Anglican clergy returned to England. By this time, Methodist meeting houses crisscrossed the 13 Colonies and beyond. Wesley was deeply concerned that these Methodists would be deprived of the sacraments in light of the absence of clergy, so he allowed the ordinations of preachers as Methodists. Methodism became its own denomination. Wesley was willing to sacrifice church unity in order to serve the practical need of his people to have access to the sacraments.

WESLEY ON PASTORAL IDENTITY



NOTES

Even before the American split, Wesley was deliberate and diligent about training his lay preachers and society leaders. He wanted them to be as educated as possible, intentional about their preparation but also recognizing the need for gifts and graces that only come from God. It is the church that confirms the inward call by examining outward fruits of ministerial labor. Let's consider a partial list of qualities outlined in Wesley's "Address to Clergy" (1756):

1. Good understanding, sound judgment, and a capacity for reasoning
2. Discernment
3. Good memory
4. A deep understanding about the nature of the pastoral call
5. A deep knowledge of the Scriptures
6. Knowledge of the original biblical languages
7. Knowledge of the sciences, philosophy, and logic
8. Knowledge of the patristic writers
9. Knowledge of personalities and character in people
10. Common sense
11. Courtesy and scholarship
12. Singlemindedness
13. Love for God and neighbor
14. Desire for personal holiness
15. Desire to cooperate with God's grace

WESLEY ON SPIRITUAL FORMATION



NOTES

The internal functions of the Church can be placed under two main categories: spiritual formation and Christian education. These are intertwined in significant ways, but for our purposes here we will define spiritual formation as progress in holiness and Christian education as the knowledge—doctrinal, theological, practical—that aids that progress. Such formation is at the very heart of Wesleyanism.

Works of individual piety (means of grace), such as prayer and devotion, Scripture study, devotional reading, and practicing the presence of God will lead to works of mercy (also means of grace), such as caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, and ministering to the needs of others in general. This is the breathing in and the breathing out of the spiritual life, so to speak.

In a Wesleyan context, we also add the interdependence we have on our fellow Christians as integral to our own growth in holiness and love. To be formed spiritually is a communal as well as an individual process. To be formed spiritually is the process of sanctification that continues until we die. This was Wesley's goal: for his Methodist people to go on to perfect love, and then to go on from there living out the sanctifying love they had experienced. For Wesley, this is impossible without the Church.

WESLEY ON CHRISTIAN EDUCATION



NOTES

Also integral to Wesley's understanding of the Church is the Church's responsibility to teach its people very deliberately. Wesley's mother was dedicated to education. Wesley valued his own education very highly. Also, he demanded the education of his ministers. Wesley expected that education would take place within the societies and bands. Education was at the forefront of Methodism.

In no sense is Wesleyanism against thinking, reasoning, understanding, and education to promote these. As Charles once wrote, "Unite the pair so long disjointed: knowledge and vital piety" (*A Prayer*). Knowledge and devotion are both crucial to the Christian life. Wesley wanted his people to know a wide range of topics, from the Methodist interpretation of the "Articles of Religion" to how to correctly interpret Scripture to the great devotional classics of the previous centuries to latest understandings of holiness discussed at the latest Methodist conference. Much of what Wesley published was for the educational benefit of his people.

At the heart of Wesley's doctrine of the Church is mutual nurture. He mourns the absence of this in many parishes and admonishes Methodism to be different: "Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone, is Christian fellowship. But, alas! Where is it to be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please. Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of the parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connection is there between them? What bearing of one another's burdens?" (*A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists, Works 8:251-52*).

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Write a reflection paper on the societies that Wesley developed.
2. Write a paragraph that describes what Wesley determined to be qualities of a lay pastor and/or society leader. Which of these qualities would you consider appropriate for a lay pastor today?
3. What are the particular functions of the Church that address the needs of Christians—what we might call the internal functions of the Church? How and in what ways is your church meeting these needs?

EXAM



NOTES

1. From the very beginning of the Methodist movement, John Wesley saw their identity as a renewal movement within Anglicanism.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. Wesley saw societies as churches.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. Wesley was willing to sacrifice church unity in order to serve the practical need of his people to have access to the sacraments.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. Wesley was deliberate and diligent about training his lay preachers and society leaders.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. Wesley wanted his lay preachers and society leaders to be as educated as possible, intentional about their preparation but also recognizing the need for gifts and graces that only come from God.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. The internal functions of the Church can be placed under two main categories: worship and Christian education.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. Spiritual formation is at the very heart of Wesleyanism.
 - A. True
 - B. False
8. To be formed spiritually is the process of sanctification that continues until we die.
 - A. True
 - B. False

**NOTES**

9. This was Wesley's goal: for his Methodist people to go on to perfect love, and then to go on from there living out the sanctifying love they had experienced. For Wesley, this is impossible without the Church.
 - A. True
 - B. False

10. Wesley's understanding of the Church is the Church's responsibility to teach its people very deliberately.
 - A. True
 - B. False

11. Knowledge and devotion are both crucial to the Christian life.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. The heart of Wesley's doctrine of the Church is mutual nurture.
 - 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 on the societies that Wesley developed.
2. Share the paragraph that describes what Wesley determined to be qualities of a lay pastor and/or society leader.
3. Talk about the functions of the Church that address the needs of Christians—what we might call the internal functions of the Church and how and in what ways you feel your church is meeting these needs?