

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



**SESSION 6**

The Quadrilateral: Experience and Reason

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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 Respective*, 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.

# The Quadrilateral: Experience and Reason

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**Experience**

**Reason**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

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

- recognize the use of reason as a tool, not a source.
- discuss Wesley's view of experience as communal, not individualistic.

## INTRODUCTION

Charles Wesley wrote a hymn that shows the relationship between knowledge and spirituality.

Unite the pair so long disjoined,  
 Knowledge and vital piety;  
 Learning and holiness combined,  
 And truth and love, let all see  
 In those whom up to thee we give,  
 Thine, wholly thine, to die and live.

“A Prayer”

## EXPERIENCE



### NOTES

Before Wesley, we see both the Early Church and Anglicanism using what we might call a trilateral of Scripture, tradition, and reason. It is Wesley's unique contribution of experience that expands the methodology to a quadrilateral.

How did Wesley use experience? First, Wesley believed strongly in heart religion. Christians can experience the assurance of God's saving love in their lives. The doctrine of assurance—also known as the witness of the Spirit—is taken by Wesley from Romans 8:16, where Paul states, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

Wesley was also influenced by his own experience at Aldersgate when formulating and discussing the doctrine of assurance. Christian faith, for Wesley, was experiential. He believed a person might affirm all the creeds and believe all the right doctrines but still be dead spiritually. The grace of God must be given to each individual and tailored to fit, resulting in assurance and a changed heart and life.

Did Wesley ever use experience as a source for doctrinal formulations themselves? Yes and no. If by that question we mean he reached conclusions based on experiences, independent from Scripture, then no. Wesley never used experience in this manner. Some have argued he developed his doctrine of original sin from experience alone. However, what he was in fact doing was putting forth original sin as self-evident, obvious to all. Our experiences prove humankind is corrupt. But Wesley never set aside Scripture, as if original sin was an extra-biblical concept.

The yes was Wesley's willingness to adapt his interpretation of Scripture when confronted by the experiences of his Methodist people. This is most obvious when considering two specific issues.

First, Wesley developed his understanding of sanctification over time. The question of whether sanctification is instantaneous or a progressive process arose as Methodism developed through the decades. Wesley believed the Bible was silent on the specific issue; it has much to say about sanctification and the life of holiness, but not about how or when it is achieved.

Wesley began to hear many testimonies to an instantaneous experience of grace after an initial conversion experience. These testimonies led Wesley to affirm this deeper experience of sanctification can, in fact, be instantaneous, and thus

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expected now on the Christian journey. This modified Wesley's earlier view. His mature position, according to Nazarene interpretation, is that sanctification is both progressive growth and an instantaneous experience.

This example points to a very important aspect of Wesley's use of experience. He saw legitimate experiences as communal in nature and consistent over time. In other words, Scripture should not be re-interpreted on the basis of individualistic feelings, but rather on the basis of a whole community of faith testifying to a reality that has had lasting impact.

Second, Wesley applied this concept of experience being communal to women's leadership in the church. Early in his career Wesley held to a traditional view of women, not allowing them up front involvement in church meetings or events. However, the reality that many Methodist women were sensing God's call to preach finally led Wesley to affirm these extraordinary instances of God's direction as biblically based. He thus officially sanctioned women preachers and leaders in his Methodist societies.

## REASON



### NOTES

Like experience, Wesley never used reason as an independent source of truth. As Rebekah Miles states, “reason is a tool, not a source” (Gunter, p. 77). We cannot reason our way to God without special revelation. This is not to say faith is unreasonable. Wesley was skeptical of a faith that had too much enthusiasm and not enough rationale. A true Christian is reasonable. Reason is essential.

Once again, Wesley finds a *via media*, or middle ground between those who discount reason and those who think too highly of it. What does Wesley believe reason does? Like the British empiricists at the time, Wesley believed experiences, gained through sense perception, are the primary source for human knowledge. Reason helps us process those experiences—to make sense of them, to organize them, and finally to communicate them to others. Reason also helps us understand, analyze, structure, and communicate issues of faith and biblical truth, but ultimately reason cannot produce a faith-filled life that expresses itself in the virtues—specifically in faith, hope, and love.

Continuing with the hymn by Charles Wesley from the beginning of this session:

Father, accept us through thy Son,  
And ever by thy Spirit guide!  
Thy wisdom in our lives be shown,  
Thy name confessed and glorified  
Thy power and love diffused abroad,  
Till all the earth is filled with God.

“A Prayer”

## APPLICATION

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1. Write your reaction to the statement: “reason is a tool, not a source” (Gunter).
2. Write a reflection paper on Wesley’s view of experience as communal, not individualistic. How has your experience impacted the way you interpret Scripture?



## EXAM



### NOTES

1. Wesley believed strongly in heart religion.
  - A. True
  - B. False
2. Christian faith, for Wesley, is experiential.
  - A. True
  - B. False
3. The doctrine of \_\_\_\_\_—also known as the witness of the Spirit—is taken by Wesley from Romans 8:16, where Paul states, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”
  - A. salvation
  - B. sanctification
  - C. assurance
  - D. grace
4. Wesley believed a person might affirm all the creeds, and believe all the right doctrines, but still be dead spiritually.
  - A. True
  - B. False
5. Wesley used experience alone to reach doctrinal conclusions.
  - A. True
  - B. False
6. Wesley believed the Bible was silent on the how and when of Sanctification.
  - A. True
  - B. False
7. Wesley officially sanctioned women preachers and leaders in his Methodist societies.
  - A. True
  - B. False
8. Wesley’s mature position, according to Nazarene interpretation, is that sanctification is both progressive growth and an instantaneous experience.
  - A. True
  - B. False

**NOTES**

9. Wesley never used reason as an \_\_\_\_\_ source of truth.
- A. independent
  - B. only
  - C. none of these
  - D. all of these
10. Wesley believed experiences, gained through sense perception, are the primary source for human knowledge.
- A. True
  - B. False
11. Reason helps us process experiences—to make sense of them, to organize them, and finally to communicate them to others.
- A. True
  - B. False
12. Reason helps us to understand, analyze, structure, and communicate issues of faith and biblical truth.
- 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 reaction to the statement: “reason is a tool, not a source” (Gunter).
2. Your reflection paper on Wesley’s view of experience as communal, not individualistic. How has your experience impacted the way you interpret Scripture?