

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



SESSION 7
The Creative Triune God

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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.

The Creative Triune God

SESSION OVERVIEW

The Creative Triune God

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

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

- explain Wesley's doctrine of God.
- define Wesley's view of creation and its relevance for ecology.
- understand Wesley's view of the Trinity.

INTRODUCTION

Wesley had a very strong sense of the necessity of stewardship of creation. "We are now God's stewards. We are indebted to him for all we have . . . A steward is not at liberty to use what is lodged in his hands as he pleases, but as his master pleases . . . He is not the owner of any of these things but barely entrusted with them by another . . . Now this is exactly the case of everyone with relation to God. We are not at liberty to use what God has lodged in our hands as we please, but as God pleases, who alone is the possessor of heaven and earth and the Lord of every creature" (Sermon, "The Good Steward," *Works* 2:283-84).

THE CREATIVE TRIUNE GOD



NOTES

General revelation can raise the question of God, but only special revelation answers the question, “What is God like?” John Wesley believed God revealed himself to us most fully and finally in the person of Jesus Christ, to which Scripture gives witness. Yet, if pushed Wesley would also say God gives enough preening grace in the world, not only to impress upon the human heart the reality of God as eternal, infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, and the like, but also to give some even more specific characteristics of this divine being such as goodness, justice, and mercy. Wesley would say the biblical witness makes these characteristics even clearer.

These two types of attributes are usually denoted as natural and moral attributes. Natural attributes are those attributes of God that cannot be removed; without them God would cease to be God. These would be God’s eternal, infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent qualities. According to Wesley, these are essential, unchanging characteristics of God; they express God’s nature.

The moral attributes are those qualities that give us more insight into the goodness of God such as His love, grace, and mercy; the moral attributes express God’s activity toward humankind. The most important characteristic of God is that God is love.

Wesley’s concern about the character of God was not just a speculative concern. He came to believe a person’s understanding of who God is will be crucial to that person’s Christian life. If people misunderstand God, they will misunderstand faith and Christian practice.

The fact that God is love is the overarching principle of Wesley’s theology. He will maintain God’s love at any cost. By way of contrast, one could say that if pressed, a Calvinist would need to maintain God’s sovereignty as the primary characteristic of God. This foundational premise, either of love or power, would go on to shape Wesley and Calvin’s whole theological vision, which moved Wesley and Calvin, then, in different directions.

The love of God is paramount and foundational for Wesley. This love is personal for him as well. God is a personal God. Of course, the very word personal is an anthropomorphism—applying a human analogy to God, because God, in His essence, is beyond our understanding. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say God is relational.

 NOTES

One of the most important evidences of God's relational character is that God created human beings for relationship with Him. God is Creator and Sustainer, in Wesley's thought. This implies all things originate from God (*creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing), but also the world continues to exist and function only because God presently sustains the world. God is intricately involved in life. Without God's sustaining work, nothing would continue to exist.

For the most part, Wesley adopted the scientific knowledge and religious belief structure about creation that was popular in his day. Of interest is Wesley's persistent claim there will be a *new* creation—earth itself will be renewed at the end of time.

Overall, Wesleyans have been interested in the question of ecology. Wesley's deep respect for the earth has influenced some to connect Wesleyan theology and ecological issues. Wesleyans should be careful about a cavalier attitude found in more fundamentalist traditions—the erosion of the earth evidences that the world will end soon. Why preserve it?

Wesley would also maintain the relational character of God when talking about the Godhead, or the Trinity. It had been common in the Western part of Christendom—both in its Protestant and Catholic form—to emphasize the unity of the Godhead, and to subordinate the work of the Spirit to the work of the Father and the Son. But Wesley, more influenced by Eastern sources of the Early Church than by Western Christianity, gave emphasis to the distinctiveness of the three Persons and gave the Spirit a great deal of attention in his thought. He was thoroughly Trinitarian, but his views were different from his Western contemporaries. What mattered most to Wesley was God's characteristics, even His Trinitarian nature, influence how Christians experience and respond to God. If we love and worship the true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—then we will grow in love and virtue.

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Record some misconceptions of God that might influence how a person responds to God?
2. Write a definition of Wesley's view of creation and its relevance for ecology. Do you consider ecology a religious issue? Why or why not?
3. Write a reflection paper on what you consider to be the most important attribute of God.

EXAM



NOTES

1. General revelation can raise the question of God, but only special revelation answers the question.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. John Wesley believed God revealed himself to us most fully and finally in the person of Jesus Christ, to which Scripture gives witness.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. Moral attributes are those qualities that give us more insight into the goodness of God. Which of the following is NOT a moral attribute?
 - A. love
 - B. grace
 - C. mercy
 - D. omnipresence
4. Natural attributes are those attributes of God that cannot be removed; without them God would cease to be God.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. Moral attributes express God's activity toward humankind.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. _____ are essential, unchanging characteristics of God; they express God's nature.
 - A. Moral attributes
 - B. Natural attributes
 - C. Both of these
 - D. Neither of these
7. The most important characteristic of God is that God is love.
 - A. True
 - B. False

**NOTES**

8. If people misunderstand God, they will misunderstand faith and Christian practice.
 - A. True
 - B. False

9. The fact that God is love is the overarching principle of Wesley's theology.
 - A. True
 - B. False

10. The foundation of Wesley's theology is power; unlike the foundation for Calvinism is love.
 - A. True
 - B. False

11. One of the most important evidences of God's relational character is that God created human beings for relationship with Him.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. That God is Creator and Sustainer in Wesley's thought implies _____.
 - A. all things originate from God
 - B. the world continues because God sustains it
 - C. God is involved in life
 - D. all of the above

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. Some misconceptions of God that might influence how a person responds to God.
2. Your definition of Wesley's view of creation and its relevance for ecology. Do you consider ecology a religious issue? Why or why not?
3. Your reflection paper on what you consider to be the most important attribute of God.