

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



SESSION 8

The Person of Christ and the
Person of the Spirit

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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 Person of Christ and the Person of the Spirit

SESSION OVERVIEW

Christ's Person

The Spirit's Person

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

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

- explain Wesley's view of Christology.
- define practical monophysitism.
- recognize the Spirit as a personal entity.

INTRODUCTION

Wesley advises his ministers to:

“Declare in every sermon (and the more explicitly the better) that the first and great command to a Christian is ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ’: that Christ is all in all, our ‘wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption’; that all life, love, strength are from him alone, and all freely given to us through faith” (*On Preaching Christ*, Outler, pp. 234-35).

“I believe the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy himself, but the immediate cause of all holiness in us” (*Letter to a Roman Catholic*).

CHRIST'S PERSON



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Wesley, being a devout Anglican, followed the study of Christ, or Christology, that came from the early ecumenical councils. The first four of those councils, coming together from various Christian churches and groups, developed the orthodox belief in the nature of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is fully God, sharing the same essence or substance as the Father, and He who revealed the nature of God fully and finally. Jesus is unified with God in that He shares the same essence, the same attributes, and the same purposes. (*Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, p. 730, Phil. 2:6; p. 815, Heb. 2:10.)

As the Chalcedon creed affirms, Wesley states Jesus is “real God, as real man,” “perfect, as God and as man,” and thus worthy of our true worship. Yet Wesley also recognizes the Christology of the Early Church was philosophically bound because much of the creedal language does not come from Scripture but from the philosophical system prevalent in the late Roman Empire.

Wesley sought his Christology, as well as all of his theology, in the Bible first. He preferred scriptural language. For this reason, Wesley was not interested in some of the speculation around the issue of Christology that arose in his own day. In fact, the nature of Christ was not his primary interest. His emphasis lay in the work of Christ, also known as the doctrine of soteriology. His soteriology is broader than the emphasis of Western Christianity, which focused on the death of Jesus as the most significant aspect of salvation. Following in the footsteps of Irenaeus of Lyon (who wrote in the second century), Wesley affirms the saving significance of Jesus' life. The Incarnation is very significant in Wesley's thought.

Yet, according to Randy Maddox, some have argued Wesley displays contradictions about Jesus' humanity. Common to Western Christianity is the tendency to keep Christ's two natures distinct. Eastern theology, on the other hand, has, as Maddox states, emphasized the interpenetration, or coming together of the natures.

This has brought the charge of monophysitism—an Early Church Christological heresy that so emphasized Christ's divine nature that His humanity was diminished. Thus the question Maddox addresses is that of Wesley's monophysitistic tendencies.

Maddox sees a discomfort with Jesus' humanity in the writings of Wesley, particularly in his *Notes on the New Testament*. He tended to downplay any emotion or vulnerability Jesus displayed. Maddox explains this by focusing on

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Wesley's understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy's goal for humanity—to become like God (also known as deification or divinization). It's similar to what we might call the goal of the process of sanctification.

Christ's incarnation and life, as well as His death, influences our understanding of holiness. Maddox also points out the Atonement is based firmly on God's initiative toward humankind. The divine Christ is the fullest expression of that initiative.

As with all of Wesley's theology, his Christology has practical relevance. He is more interested in Christ's work than His nature. Yet, even when talking about His nature, the practical implications always accompany his considerations.

THE SPIRIT'S PERSON



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The Spirit is the presence of God in the Christian life. It was key for Wesley that not only did Christ make provision for our redemption but also that such redemption is applied by the work of the Spirit. Wesley paid closer attention to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit than his Western counterparts.

Even to this day, persons standing in the Wesleyan-holiness tradition have a broader and deeper doctrine of the Spirit than those from the Reformed tradition. The Spirit is a person of the Godhead, with personal characteristics, and His own beingness, not just a subordinated, functional part of God or a present expression of Christ on earth.

The Spirit is unique in His role in the Trinity and our lives. As Maddox says, “Wesley was clear that the Holy Spirit should be seen as fully personal, not merely a force or energy in our lives . . . Grace for him was not simply a Divine-originated product bestowed upon humanity. It was the activity of God’s very Self in human life . . . ‘present to us in the indwelling Person of the Holy Spirit’” (Maddox, p. 120).

As way of summary, Wesley wrote:

I believe the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy himself, but the immediate cause of all holiness in us: enlightening our understanding, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of the adoption of sons, leading us in our actions, purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies to a full and eternal enjoyment of God. (*Letter to a Roman Catholic*)

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Write a reflection paper explaining Wesley's view of Christology.
2. Write a paragraph that answers the questions: When we say our goal is to become Christlike, are we saying like His divinity or His perfect humanity? Why is it important to maintain a strong emphasis on Jesus' human nature?
3. Journal your thoughts on the Holy Spirit as a personal entity. Include comments regarding the last sermon or teaching you heard about the Holy Spirit.

EXAM



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1. Jesus is unified with God in that He shares the same essence, the same attributes, and the same purposes.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. Wesley states Jesus is “real God, as real man,” “perfect, as God and as man,” and thus worthy of our true worship.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. Wesley sought his Christology, as well as all of his theology, in the Bible first.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. Wesley’s primary interest was in the nature of Christ rather than work of Christ.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. The doctrine of _____ is the work of Christ.
 - A. salvation
 - B. sanctification
 - C. soteriology
 - D. ambivalence
6. According to Wesley, the Spirit is the presence of God in the Christian life.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. Persons standing in the Wesleyan-holiness tradition have a broader and deeper doctrine of the Spirit than those from the Reformed tradition.
 - A. True
 - B. False
8. The Spirit is a person of the Godhead, with personal characteristics and His own beingness, not just a subordinated, functional part of God or a present expression of Christ on earth.
 - A. True
 - B. False

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9. _____ said, "Wesley was clear that the Holy Spirit should be seen as fully personal, not merely a force or energy in our lives . . . Grace for him was not simply a Divine-originated product bestowed upon humanity. It was the activity of God's very Self in human life . . . 'present to us in the indwelling Person of the Holy Spirit.'"
- A. Calvin
 - B. Maddox
 - C. The Chalcedon creed
 - D. Western Christianity
10. Wesley believed _____ was the immediate cause of all holiness in us.
- A. the way we behave
 - B. our personal theology
 - C. the infinite and eternal Spirit of God
 - D. all of the above

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. Your reflection paper explaining Wesley's view of Christology.
2. The paragraph that answers the questions: When we say our goal is to become Christlike, are we saying like His divinity or His perfect humanity? Why is it important to maintain a strong emphasis on Jesus' human nature?