

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Exploring John Wesley's Theology



SESSION 9
Humanity and Sin

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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.

Humanity and Sin

SESSION OVERVIEW

Humanity

Sin

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

INTRODUCTION

Wesley:

“[A human being] is not mere matter, a clod of earth, a lump of clay, without sense or understanding, but a spirit like his Creator, a being endued not only with sense and understanding but also with a will exerting itself in various affections. To crown all the rest, he was endued with liberty, a power of directing his own affections and actions, a capacity of determining himself, of choosing good or evil” (Sermon, “On the Fall of Man,” *Works* 2:400-401).

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

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

- understand the doctrines of the image of God.
- discuss Wesley's view of the fall.

HUMANITY



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Foundational to Wesley's understanding of humankind—also known as the doctrine of theological anthropology—is that human beings are relational. They were created for relationship. They were created for love, created to love. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop highlighted the very definition of the image of God—*imago Dei*—is this capacity to love.

Other traditions have defined the image in various ways. An interpretation of the image in the Early Church period—which was later deemed heretical—proposed the image was an actual physical resemblance to God. There seem to be many nonhuman images in Scripture that were treated as human, but ultimately the accepted view was these should be interpreted as symbolic or representing something else.

Many Western interpreters of the image have stated it resides in our human capacity to reason. This is the view of many classical theologians, including the great Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1275). Another interpretation is that humanity resembles God in its relationship to lesser creation. Just as God stands in a rank of position over humanity, so, too, does humanity stand in a position over the earth. Still another interpretation of the image is that of human freedom. God created us free and self-determining.

Wesley was aware of these various interpretations, but, according to Wynkoop and others, he held strongly to the image as love. H. Ray Dunning has expanded on the definitive relationships of humanity as it was meant to be: we were created to love God, love others, and have an appropriate love for self and for the world.

There are moments in Wesley's writing when he distinguishes between the natural and moral image in humanity. These parallel the natural and moral attributes of God. "That is, the natural Image of God in humanity referred to those characteristics or faculties definitive of being human, while the moral Image of God referred to the 'character' of holiness and love that God intended for humanity" (Maddox, p. 68). This is similar to Eastern theology's distinction between the image and likeness of God.

Key to understanding Wesley's view of humanity and salvation is that after the Fall, the image remains. It is distorted but not destroyed. Therefore, salvation for Wesley—broadly defined to include sanctification—is the process of the

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restoration and renewal of the image of God in us. This idea the image remains after the Fall has led some Wesley interpreters to speak of a doctrine of total deprivation instead of total depravity.

Through the Fall, we are deprived of our primary relationship with God, and our other relationships are therefore distorted, but the capacity for love and the hope of renewal remains. Prevenient grace is immediately offered to make up for what happened at the Fall. The very strong Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, on the other hand, is not as optimistic. Through the Fall, we are totally depraved, without God in the world, and corrupted beyond repair in this life. These two very different understandings of the Fall and the *imago Dei* produced very different doctrines of salvation in Wesley and Calvin.

Wesley speaks of certain human states: the natural, legal, and evangelical. The natural state is only a hypothetical state since the Fall. It was the state in which God created Adam and Eve. Only Jesus, as the Christ, was born into a natural state, free from original sin. By the legal state Wesley means our position before God prior to an experience of new birth. We live under the law, and if we allow the law to do its work, it will drive us to the place of recognizing our need for salvation. Prevenient grace assists us in being awakened to this need. The evangelical state, then, is subsequent to new birth in Christ; we are not under the law, but now under grace. This new birth begins the process of the renewal of the image of God in us.

SIN

NOTES

What happened when Adam and Eve sinned? And how does original sin affect us? Let's begin our investigation with a discussion of the essence of original sin.

While most interpreters of Wesley have followed a traditional—Augustinian—interpretation of original sin as pride, a new interpretation of Wesley has been offered by Dr. Leclerc, published in *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Perspective*, Scarecrow Press, 2001. While Wesley used the word pride often, it is never used as the main example of original sin, according to this analysis.

Wesley's most direct sermon on the topic—"Original Sin" (1854)—shows this lack of dominance of the word pride. Here, idolatry is unmistakably classified as the primary definition of original sin, with "pride," "self-will," and "love of the world" listed under it. Wesley states, "all pride is idolatry"; as is "love of the world." In other words, there are two forms of original sin: inordinate love of self—pride—and inordinate love of others, here listed as "love of the world"; Wesley further explains this phrase: "What is more natural to us than to seek happiness in the creature, instead of the Creator?" (See sermon, "Original Sin," *Works* 6:57-62).

Wesley also wrote a sermon entitled "Spiritual Idolatry," which he penned nearer the end of his life. It will be helpful to quote one passage at length:

Undoubtedly it is the will of God that we should all love one another. It is his will that we should love our relations and our Christian brethren with a peculiar love; and those in particular, whom he has made particularly profitable to our souls. These we are commanded to "love fervently;" yet still "with a pure heart." But is not this "impossible with man?" to retain the strength and tenderness of affection, and yet, without any stain to the soul, with unspotted purity? I do not mean only unspotted by lust. I know this is possible. I know a person may have an unutterable affection for another without any desire of this kind. But is it without idolatry? Is it not loving the creature more than the Creator? Is it not putting a man or woman in the place of God? Giving them your heart? Let this be carefully considered, even by those whom God has joined together; by husbands and wives, parents and children. It cannot be denied, that these ought to love one another tenderly: they are commanded so to do. But they are neither commanded nor permitted to love one another idolatrously. Yet how common is this! How frequently is a husband, a wife, a child, put in the place of God? How many that are accounted good Christians fix their affections on each other, so as


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to leave no place for God! They seek their happiness in the creature, not in the Creator. One may truly say to the other, I view thee, lord and end of my desires. That is, "I desire nothing more but thee! Thou art the thing that I long for! All my desire is unto thee, and unto the remembrance of thy name." Now, if this is not flat idolatry, I cannot tell what it is. (*Works 6:441*)

Wesley strongly believed what Adam and Eve did in the garden had lasting effects on the rest of humanity. Yet, interestingly, he was not concerned about how these effects were transmitted as much as the fact that they were. What concerned Wesley was the question of the guilt associated with original sin.

Western theology says the state of original sin, the corruption of humanity into which we are born, makes us guilty before God, even though we did nothing individually and volitionally to deserve it. The guilt as well as the corruption is inherited. Wesley maintained, however, that original sin does not bring guilt but only a predisposition toward sin. We are guilty for the sins we voluntarily commit. Wesley is clear to distinguish between inbeing sin and actual sins. Thus the classical definition of sin often quoted by Wesleyans: "Sin is a willful transgression of a known law of God."

Some have said Wesley takes a *via media* between Augustine and Pelagius on the topic of sin. Thus Wesley has been called a semi-Pelagian. Augustine and Pelagius were contemporaries in the late third, early fourth centuries. Pelagius held that not only did human beings not inherit guilt from Adam, but also did not inherit any corruption. Therefore each person has the same choice that Adam and Eve had in the garden. He affirmed we are born with natural freedom. Augustine, on the other hand, pushed hard for a very strong doctrine of original sin, total depravity, and inherited guilt. The conclusion of the debate was that Pelagius was deemed heretical by orthodox Christianity.

Wesley rejected Pelagius—although he showed some sympathy for him. Yet he did not parallel Augustine's doctrine either. The *via media* comes through Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace. The grace God gives to every human being born into the world gives that person graced freedom. Although a bent toward sin is in fact inherited, grace is given so sinning—actual sin—is maintained as a choice for which we can rightly be held accountable. Wesley's rejection of inherited guilt maintains God as truly just. It also keeps Wesley from being pressed into a position of affirming predestination. Augustine's doctrine of sin was so strong that only a predetermined, irresistible act of God could save us. Wesley avoided this logical conclusion through his affirmation of universal prevenient grace.

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Write a reflection paper on Wesley's view of the Fall.
2. Write a paper explaining Wesley's doctrine of sin as idolatry and as relational.

EXAM



NOTES

1. Foundational to Wesley's understanding of humankind--also known as the doctrine of theological anthropology--is that human beings are relational.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. Wesley held strongly to the image of God as love.
 - A. True
 - B. False
3. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop has highlighted the very definition of the image of God-----is this capacity to love.
 - A. Sola Scriptura
 - B. man
 - C. relationship
 - D. imago Dei
4. According to H. Ray Dunning, we were created to love God, love others, and have an appropriate love for self and for the world.
 - A. True
 - B. False
5. According to Wesley, the natural Image of God in humanity referred to those characteristics or faculties definitive of being human.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. According to Wesley, the moral Image of God referred to the character of holiness and love God intended for humanity.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. Key to understanding Wesley's view of humanity and salvation is the fact that after the Fall, the image remains but is -----.
 - A. distorted
 - B. obliterated
 - C. none of the above
 - D. all of the above

**NOTES**

8. This idea that the image remains after the Fall has led some Wesley interpreters to speak of a doctrine of total deprivation instead of total depravity.
 - A. True
 - B. False

9. Wesley's theology defines the term natural state as _____.
 - A. the state in which God created Adam and Eve (free from original sin)
 - B. our position before God prior to the new birth
 - C. our position before God after the new birth
 - D. all of the above

10. Wesley used the word pride often, but according to Dr. Leclerc, it is never used as the main example of original sin.
 - A. True
 - B. False

11. Wesley's primary definition of original sin is idolatry. He states, "all pride is idolatry."
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. Wesley believed the bent toward sin is inherited, grace is given so sinning—actual sin—is maintained as a choice for which we can rightly be held accountable.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. Your reflection paper on Wesley's view of the Fall.
2. Your paper explaining Wesley's doctrine of sin as idolatry and as relational.