

THEOLOGY OF JOHN WESLEY



WESLEY'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD



WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

IS IT IMPORTANT?

WHY OR WHY NOT?

THEOS = GOD

LOGOS (-OLOGY) =

WORD, SCIENCE, STUDY

THEOLOGY =

STUDY OF GOD

QUEEN OF THE SCIENCES

SUBSETS OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

- ❖ Doctrine of God
- ❖ Doctrine of the Trinity
- ❖ Doctrine of Christ
- ❖ Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

SUBSETS OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

- ❖ Doctrine of Salvation
- ❖ Doctrine of Humanity
- ❖ Doctrine of Sin
- ❖ Doctrine of Grace

SUBSETS OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

- ❖ Doctrine of Salvation
- ❖ Doctrine of the Church
- ❖ Doctrine of the Sacraments
- ❖ Doctrine of Last Things

REASONS FOR DOING THEOLOGY

- ❖ Worship of God through mind
- ❖ Belief impacts action (i.e. Caste system)
- ❖ Protection from spiritual attack
- ❖ Clear thinking for self and for others

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- ❖ Initially very little theology codified
- ❖ Heresy leads to orthodoxy
- ❖ Pope/Church does theology
- ❖ Luther/Reformation relationship of tradition/
scripture

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- ❖ Enlightenment: empiricism and rationalism
- ❖ Deism
- ❖ Anglican Church & Middle Way

EPISTEMOLOGY

- ❖ The Study of Knowledge
- ❖ Rationalist (Plato) innate ideas prior to experience
- ❖ Empiricists (Aristotle) only experience is foundation for human knowledge

“Nothing is in the mind that is not first in the senses.”

—John Wesley

TWO DIFFERENCES

- ❖ More optimistic than Locke - senses can mislead us
- ❖ Knowledge of God

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

- ❖ Empiricists inference from experience of world or assent to Scripture
- ❖ Wesley agreed, but added God has provided humanity with spiritual senses which sense spiritual reality

DAVID'S CAUTION

- ❖ Any god we can infer or prove apart from Revelation is an idol and not the God of Scripture, of Israel, of Jesus

USES OF SPIRITUAL SENSES

- ❖ Assurance of being accepted by God
- ❖ Access to spiritual realities such as the soul, angels, and the afterlife

SOURCES OF REVELATION

- ❖ natural knowledge (nature) vs. gracious knowledge (Christ/Scripture)
- ❖ both/and God's revelation in Christ is the full completion of revelation in creation
- ❖ balance of total depravity & universal grace, i.e. knowledge of God on a spectrum

DIRECT KNOWLEDGE FROM GOD

- ❖ All inward revelations (spiritual senses) must be tested by scripture
- ❖ Scripture being directly from God (without disbelief of human authors)

SCRIPTURE AS IMMEDIATE

- ❖ Original inspiration through immediate contact with Holy Spirit
- ❖ God can communicate through means and still be immediate

SOURCES OF DOCTRINE

- ❖ Doctrine/Dogma = Church teaching
- ❖ Methodists are people of one book
- ❖ Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Reason, Tradition, Experience
- ❖ Not balanced

SCRIPTURE

- ❖ Scripture is primary not exclusive
- ❖ Authority for:
 - ❖ Tempers (spiritual corruption and means of repair)
 - ❖ Words (language of scripture for regular discourse)
 - ❖ Actions (moral, testing spirit, worship, life)

HANDLING SCRIPTURE

- ❖ Not naive
- ❖ Trained at Oxford in critical study methods
- ❖ Used the original languages to make his own translation
- ❖ Used contemporary sources for his 'Notes' on Scripture

HANDLING SCRIPTURE

- ❖ Committed to literal meaning of scripture vs. allegorical/spiritual)
- ❖ Principle: contradiction then obscure understood in light of clearer
- ❖ Principle: interpreting the part in light of the whole

CANON WITHIN THE CANON

- ❖ In order to limit ‘proof texting,’ Wesley interpreted any part of scripture by a “connected chain of scripture truths”
- ❖ 1) corruption of sin, 2) justification by faith, 3) the new birth, 4) present inward and outward holiness
- ❖ 1 John primary (Paul Justification & John freedom from sin)

HANDLING SCRIPTURE

- ❖ Luther (flexible not condemned) vs. Zwingli (inflexible not condoned)
- ❖ Wesley sides with Luther
- ❖ Scripture may have principles relevant to decisions

REASON

- ❖ After scripture, reason most often referred to
- ❖ In fact, scripture and reason were usually joined

REASONS FOR REASON

- ❖ Rejection of traditional authority for truth claims requiring a rational justification for all knowledge
- ❖ Scorning of all enthusiastic (non-rational) such as mystery or miracle avenues to truth
- ❖ Reason was not a source for knowledge but an organ (processor) of it

REASON

- ❖ Reason is the faculty used to understand and respond to claims of revelation
- ❖ Reason is the “candle of the Lord” to appropriate revelation
- ❖ So, reason organizes and draws inferences from revelation

TRADITION

- ❖ Accused by Protestants to being too RC in use of tradition, accused by RC of not allowing tradition to correct his reading of scripture
- ❖ Immediate tradition: Thirty Nine Articles, the book of homilies, and Book of Common Prayer
- ❖ Brought these into correction in light of Early Church

EARLY CHURCH

- ❖ Ante-Nicene (pre-Constantine)
- ❖ Particularly Greek writers
- ❖ Whatever is new is wrong, only true religion is old religion
- ❖ What all Christians have believed for all time

REASONS FOR EARLY WRITERS

- ❖ Proximity to Biblical times
- ❖ Eminent character
- ❖ Special endowment of Holy Spirit
- ❖ Life after Constantine degenerated rapidly in the Church

PURPOSE OF EARLY WRITERS

- ❖ Clarify aspects of scripture that are ambiguous
- ❖ Provide specific implications of scriptures general principles
- ❖ Later Christian teaching can go beyond scripture, but never against scripture

SCRIPTURE & TRADITION

- ❖ Reciprocal:
 - ❖ teachings aid understanding of and applying scripture
 - ❖ scripture challenges traditional theological judgements, worship practices, etc.

EXPERIENCE

- ❖ What type of experience does Wesley refer to?
- ❖ His own inner spiritual experience? or,
- ❖ His observations of the lives of the people called Methodists?

EXPERIENCE

- ❖ What is the purpose of Wesley referring to experience?
- ❖ To formulate doctrinal claims? or,
- ❖ To confirm doctrines derived from scripture?

EXPERIENCE

- ❖ Experience confirms scripture
- ❖ Experience tests proposed interpretations of scripture
- ❖ At times experience speaks where scripture is silent - being proven by his own and the experience in the life of his people

WESLEY'S METHOD

- ❖ Existing tradition (theology) **to** experience (calling traditional theology into question) **to** scripture (to decide to retain, revise, reject) **to** guided by reason, experience and tradition
- ❖ Hermeneutical spiral

TYPE OF THEOLOGY

- ❖ Sermons and writings, i.e. to a particular context and purpose
- ❖ Action oriented
- ❖ Seeking unity vs. division

THEOLOGY IMPORTANT

- ❖ Sermons to people just like us!
- ❖ Insistence that 'preachers' develop a taste for theology!

READING REFLECTION