

CHAPTER 8

Reflections

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This contribution, which is substantially the text of an address given at the final session of the Institute, is inevitably personal and selective. It cannot represent the experience of all participants. Some one hundred thirty papers were read and discussed in ten working groups, and there were thirty interdisciplinary discussions. No attempt is made here to sum up those discussions.¹ What is offered is reflections on the Institute as an event, a compound of formal lectures, formal and informal responses, group work, casual conversations, worship, and ancillary events. It is a commentary on more than the text of the papers printed in this volume. It is offered from the perspective of one who is a presbyter and church official in the British tradition, white, male, in the second half of life, classically trained, and far from the fields where the battles for justice and the soul of communities are won and lost. Others will have seen the discussions differently.

It was a good Institute and felt good. People related well, had real work to do, with papers of quality to respond to, and shared in some stimulating discussions. By comparison with previous Institutes, there was an improvement in the cross-cultural mix. Some parts of the world were underrepresented still, partly because of the uneven distribution of scholarship and theological institutions around the world, and partly because of lack of funds to gather more

participants together. The voices of the Third World were listened to, although there remains a question mark over the extent to which they were heard and understood.

There was a significant number of first-time participants. Tribute was paid to the founder-figures Dow Kirkpatrick, Rex Kissack, and Raymond George, who were all present at the final dinner; it was encouraging to see the community of the Institute being renewed with new members. The scope of its work was broadened, with the number of specialist groups increased from six on previous occasions to ten. Charles Wesley as well as John Wesley attracted interest, a welcome development, although it needs to be remembered that although they were brothers, they were not theological twins, as is evidenced by John's editing of Charles's work. There is scope for further work here.

The Institute dealt with the doctrine of the Trinity—the Trinity not as God is, but as God is revealed. There is no keyhole by which to spy into the domestic life of God, only the authenticated portrait God has released. That portrait we take on trust, given by revelation, as the only outline we are capable of comprehending of how things are. So the focus was on the given: God's operation towards the world; God's energies, not God's essence.

Two aspects of the debates were surprising. First, their starting point, as in Wesley's writings, was the received doctrine. There was little or no real discussion of the origins of the doctrine or testing of it against the biblical texts as currently understood. The biblical studies working group did not address this. But historically, the development of the doctrine depended in part at least on viewing as a unified whole texts in the Gospels and Epistles that would now be regarded as evidence of diversity in the New Testament period. Does the synthesis of biblical evidence that once undergirded the doctrine still hold? If not, what does that say about the foundations and authority of the doctrine, and of the fact that members of the Institute were willing to affirm it nevertheless? The present writer is reasonably optimistic that an exercise of this kind would support and not undermine the traditional doctrine, but what is interesting is the apparent lack of interest in the question. Not so very long ago it was a live issue.

Second, the approach to the doctrine relied heavily on the Cappadocians. Augustine does not seem to have been noticed. This observation is not a plea for a radically different approach—this

writer has never found Augustine's psychological treatment particularly helpful—but the running has been made in recent years by Orthodox theologians, and the Institute looked, as those theologians naturally do, to the Eastern Fathers.

There is a broader aspect to this. It needs to be asked whether those gathered in the Institute were the victims of fashion. The doctrine of the Trinity has come to the fore in the last ten years or so; therefore the Institute has discussed it. The doctrine was found helpful because it affects our understanding of community and power. As currently understood, it calls into question notions of hierarchy, autocracy, patriarchy, coercive power, and individualism. This is music to the ears of socially concerned twentieth-century Methodists. But the question has to be asked (even if answers are to hand): If community, love, equality, vulnerability, and humility in the governance of the world are the only proper consequences of the doctrine, why has it taken the church so long to wake up to the fact? How far do we read into the doctrine of the Trinity (or any other doctrine, or the interpretation of Wesley, or the Bible for that matter) what we want to find there? It is worth noting, for example, that although the Institute followed the Eastern Fathers in their understanding of the Trinity, there was no serious discussion of the *filioque* clause (although a couple of working groups touched on it). The Eastern argument against that clause is that it undermines the priority of the Father. That notion we find more difficult to handle.

The point of raising this question is not to disagree with the work that was done over the ten days, but to underline the need always to work with caution and rigor. Not only do we all address these questions from different contexts, we can easily become prisoners of our contexts. The working group on systematics, in its report to the plenary, rightly warned of the danger of hanging all our pet concerns on the doctrine of the Trinity to give them validity and authority.

But to sound a more positive note, and notwithstanding the last paragraph, the doctrine of the Trinity proved to be an integrating insight. Far from being something to add on when the rest of theology has been dealt with—the being and attributes of God, the person of Christ, the atonement, the Spirit, and, by the way, also the Trinity (which is the way it is usually dealt with in local churches, something to be taken out of the cupboard and dusted off on Trinity Sunday)—the doctrine has proved to be something that draws other doctrines

together to make sense of the whole. It brings together Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. None can be understood without the others. It brings together creation, redemption, and sanctification. It holds together the individual and the corporate. It joins inseparably faith and works, evangelism and social action, God's work with the church and God's work with the world. It states that God is a communion of three persons bonded together in love and, by that same love outgoing in creation and new creation, drawing human beings and all things into the life of God. It has mystical, ecstatic, social, practical, and political consequences. The Trinity is to be believed, experienced, and lived. All this was brought out in the Institute's work.

Methodists can embrace it all. It resonates in the writings of John Wesley and in the hymns of Charles. It demonstrates that to be in the Methodist tradition is to be in the great tradition of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. There have been times when the peculiarities of Methodism have been expressed in such a way as to give the appearance that Methodists were what John Wesley always prayed they should never be—a sect, an odd people holding bizarre beliefs. In fact, the Methodist tradition, theologically and spiritually, is the tradition of Athanasius, Basil, the Gregorys, and (as many learned for the first time at the Institute) the one whom John Wesley knew as "Macarius the Egyptian." It is an ecumenical theology in all senses of the word.

Not all the working groups made the full range of connections. Some did not appear to have discussed the Trinity at all. Community and power were easier concepts to handle, separately and together. But not all discussed the interrelation between Trinity, community, and power. To that extent, Trinity was not the integrating concept for the Institute's work that its organizers had hoped. Yet the themes of community and power flowed from the theme of Trinity.

The comment about an ecumenical theology leads to a question about the significance of John Wesley. The subtitle of the Institute was "Mapping Theological Trajectories in the Wesleyan Tradition." One group asked, "What does it mean to be Wesleyan?" and pointed to the tension between the Wesley of history and the Wesley of popular tradition. Why does Wesley matter? Various answers might be attempted. Since the Institute members do not all belong to one global connection (not all, indeed to churches using "Methodist" in their title), is Wesley virtually all they have in common to distinguish them

from other Christians? For some the discovery of Wesley as a theologian has given their churches an identity and character in dialogue with other Christian communions they had not found before. Is Wesley the key to identity? Is he a theological resource—a pattern for a way of doing theology, a source of new ideas and a new theological language? He was used in that way in the Institute. There was emphasis on the importance of practical theology and use of the Wesleyan phrase “transcripts of the Trinity.”

But is Wesley normative? Remarks were made from time to time that suggested that for some Wesley ought to determine what to believe and how things should be done, so that if we do not conform we are not truly Methodist. If that is so, it leads in the direction of a Wesleyan confessionalism that should cause concern. For the dynamic of the doctrine of the Trinity is that the community God creates is inclusive. In the purpose of God, this community is to be conterminous with the whole creation. Certainly it is to be ecumenical in its narrower sense in reference to the church. It would be a betrayal if the study of the Holy Trinity led Methodists further away from the wider church of which they are a part, rather than closer to a new ecclesial community.

In reflection upon the Trinity, this writer found himself asking questions about the image of God. The key text is Genesis 1:26-27: “God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image . . .’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” That last phrase has rightly been underlined: Man and woman alike are created in the image of God. But is that all there is to say?

In Colossians 1:15 we have the christological counterpart: God’s Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. So the point is often made that the purpose of redemption is to be remade after the image of our Creator. But if we read that text with trinitarian eyes, we know that the Son is the Son of the Father, anointed in baptism and raised from the dead by the Spirit. It is the Son *in Trinity* who is the image; who becomes incarnate, crucified, and risen; and who, as the firstborn from the dead, is also the head of the body, the church (Col. 1:18). The image of God is of persons in communion.

What does that say to trinitarian believers about the Genesis passage? Not just that both the male and the female of the species are created in the image of God; not that any individual is in the image of God; but that human beings *together*—man and woman created for

each other's comfort; humans in community—are created in God's image, and we cannot be restored to that image singly, only together. The plural in 2 Corinthians 3:18 is significant: "and all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the LORD as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the LORD, the Spirit." The individualism of modern society is just one more evidence of the loss of the image of God, and an individualistic search for personal salvation will not bring us any closer to recovering it. There is no salvation outside the church—provided that by "church" we mean *ecclesia*, communion, *koinonia*, and not just institution. The "transcript of the Trinity" is corporate, the Body of Christ.

The 1997 Institute saw the inauguration of the Dow and Marjorie Kirkpatrick Lecture. José Míguez Bonino gave a splendid statement of the power of the doctrine of the Trinity as an integrating insight, and spelled it out from the perspective of the poor. Institute members from Latin America have served the rest of us well over the years in forcing us to face up to the reality of the world's poor and to see God and the world (including ourselves) through their eyes. The Institute is beginning to respond. Of course the poor are everywhere in the world. One of the strengths of the Latin American tradition, in the service of all the world's poor, is that Latin Americans have learned to be so articulate in speaking out of their context.

The Institute (with the exception of the contextual theology group and perhaps one other) did not serve other parts of the Third World so well. It is not easy to enter into African and Asian contexts with their specifically religious dimensions; and when the attempt is made, the temptation is to universalize them, as though all the particulars of an African or Asian culture held true throughout the continent. There is diversity everywhere.

The dialogue between Gabriel Setiloane and Mercy Amba Oduyoye made this clear.² Setiloane issued a plea to take seriously African traditional beliefs because they come from that part of the world that is the birthplace of the human race. This plea was reminiscent of the complaint made by Celsus in the second century: How can Christians claim to have the truth when they have only just arrived upon the scene, and Greek religion and philosophy have been around for so much longer?

The classic Christian response to this complaint was to argue that the wisdom of the ancients was given them by the Son of God,

the Logos, who ultimately became incarnate in Jesus. It was important therefore to listen for anticipations of the Christian revelation in the traditions that Setiloane described to us. We heard of *Modimo*, the divine force that energizes all things, but in special measure may energize particular persons and transform them, and which unites the people of the past, the dead, with those who are living now. We heard that in African thought, a representative is the one whom he or she represents. One listener at least thought of the Son, whom to see is to see the Father, and of the Holy Spirit, who was active in creation, and who sanctifies the people of God and unites them in the communion of saints. The listener realized that here were ancient anticipations of the Christian revelation that offered a language in which, with appropriate qualifications (all theological language needs to be qualified), the gospel might be made intelligible in African culture.

The questions after that lecture were about conversion, about what we take with us and what we have to leave behind when we become Christian. The question of continuity and discontinuity was raised in a number of groups in other contexts. But the more fundamental issue was raised (though not with reference to Setiloane's paper) by Míguez Bonino in his lecture: Is what is revealed to us in Christ the supreme, definitive, clarifying illustration of truth that is also revealed, though more allusively, less clearly, less completely or coherently, elsewhere in the religions of the world and human philosophy; or did something unique, decisive, determinative happen in Christ that has changed history for us all? That is a question to which much Western philosophy would be hard put to find an answer.

However that may be, the Institute as an international gathering needs to do more work on entering sympathetically into each other's contexts, especially where those contexts embrace a worldview radically different from the dominant Western view. So it is right to ask how the Institute itself looked in the light of the questions of community and power that were being discussed.

Of course there is power in the Institute, as in any comparable gathering—the power of money, without which the Institute could not have been held; the power of memory and knowledge; and the power of holding office. So far as one who held office could judge, it seemed to be agreed that such power was not exercised oppressively, but openly, responsibly, and responsively.

Did the Institute become a community? Differences remained, as they should, for diversity can be a strength, and reference has

already been made to one aspect of the need for attentiveness to one another. Nevertheless this observer felt that the Institute did develop into a community. Space was made for one another's views, which were treated with seriousness and respect. Personal friendships were formed or renewed. There was shared prayer, song, and laughter.

Only one detail disturbed the writer of these reflections. It amounts to a criticism not of the Institute itself but of the churches represented at it, churches whose traditions the Institute had to respect and reflect. In Britain, the use of a common cup at Holy Communion is slowly becoming more common but remains the exception. In some churches the common cup is placed on the Communion table but not used. In most churches there are little glasses for individual use. In The United Methodist tradition, in the U.S. and elsewhere, the common cup may be used, but the bread is dipped into it. Intinction is, of course, a widespread liturgical practice, but it was not in the ancient church, nor was it originally for general use. The fact is, Methodists have a common cup but do not drink from it.

The reason is clear: We are afraid of disease. Communicants fear that by drinking from the same cup as another they will catch something unpleasant or life-threatening. Scientifically, the risk is minimal; theologically and spiritually, the result is disastrous. For the single cup, like the single loaf of bread, is not merely a visual aid, but a means by which communion is effected. It is to bring the communicants together. If we are not willing to share the one loaf (and how long will it be before we demand that the minister wear gloves when serving the bread?), and to drink from the common cup, our communion is impaired. What sort of fellowship is it in which we are not willing to take risks with one another, indeed to share one another's risks? This is more than a matter of legitimate diversity in liturgical practice. We are bidden to take and eat the bread and drink from the cup. We do not give ourselves to one another if we hold back from being vulnerable to one another. Jesus touched the leper.

The Holy Trinity is a Trinity of love, and we know that to be so because the Son entered into our life, befriended the poor, and poured out his soul unto death. No discussion of the Trinity is complete therefore without the question "What is to be done?" What concrete commitments are to be undertaken to share in the mission of God?

J. Philip Wogaman's lecture, and the work of the group on glob-

al mission and political economy illustrated how hard that question is to answer. The idealism of our theology comes up hard against the sharp realities of actual situations and the fact that, when we make choices, often all the options have bad consequences. "What is to be done?" is not a simple question, nor are there simple answers. Moreover, on the political scene, Christians have to come to terms with their own powerlessness. Often they are the weak of the earth whom the powerful ignore. It is tempting to long for the return of Christendom so that the Church can advise, even direct, the rulers. But the Trinity addresses this, too. The power of God is effective in weakness and crucifixion, and we have to live by hope. We cannot stand back because the choices are hard. We have to learn to take seriously the doctrine of justification by grace, trust in forgiveness, and dare to risk making mistakes.

M. Douglas Meeks, in his keynote lecture, drew attention to the plight of the children of the poor; and at a later stage of the Institute, information was given about the United Methodist Bishops' Initiative on Children and Poverty. There are other issues in other contexts. Reference was made, for example, to Jubilee 2000, aimed at canceling the debts of the world's most impoverished nations by the turn of the millennium. There are the issues of the eradication of land mines, the conservation of the earth's resources, and the need to reclaim the world in some way from the encroaching jungle of a global market society so that God's garden may flourish again. There are many local struggles in which to engage, whether for a humane life for the residents of a housing estate, a decent living wage for a group of workers, or a voice for the voiceless in the determination of their affairs.

Whatever the issue and its context, the challenge of the Institute's theme is not merely to understand the doctrine of the Trinity, nor even to recognize its importance, but to live the Trinity in all its manifold implications for worship and prayer, for church life, but especially for the world in its need of the gospel and new creation. Without that commitment we miss the point. Only with such commitment can we become "transcripts of the Trinity."

The Institute concluded, as it traditionally does, with the Covenant Service and Holy Communion, using a newly revised United Methodist rite. In many ways it was an epitome of the theme. For in covenant and Eucharist we are brought into the presence of the triune God. We receive the grace of the Father, brought to us through

the Son, in the Holy Spirit. We make our response, our whole selves totally given to God as God is totally offered to us. But it is never a simple tit for tat, one gift in return for another. No gift we offer, not even our whole selves, is worthy of the love of God. The gift becomes acceptable and is accepted as it is united to the offering of the Son to the Father. We offer ourselves in him, and do so in the Spirit, who descends upon the gifts and upon us to bind us into the life of God. That is the true synergism. Of course the action lasts, in terms of time, for only a few moments, but in making our covenant and in taking bread and wine, we are joined with Christ at Calvary, with the church throughout the ages, and with the hosts of heaven; and with them all we share already in the heavenly banquet in which one day all creation will join. It was a fitting conclusion.

God of all-redeeming grace,
By thy pardoning love compelled
Up to thee our souls we raise
Up to thee our bodies yield;
Thou our sacrifice receive,
Acceptable through thy Son,
While to thee alone we live,
While we die to thee alone.

Meet it is, and just, and right,
That we should be wholly thine;
In thy only will delight,
In that blessed service join:
O that every work and word
Might proclaim how good thou art!
Holiness unto the Lord
Still be wrote upon our heart!

(Charles Wesley)³

19. *A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity*, 2.7, John Wesley, 189.
20. Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 4, chapter 10. See also Aelred Baker, "Messalianism: The Monastic Heresy," *Monastic Studies* 10 (1974):235-41.
21. Columba Stewart, OSB, *"Working the Earth of the Heart": The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to A.D. 431* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).
22. *Ibid.*, 170.
23. *Ibid.*, 223.
24. *Ibid.*, 1.
25. Outler, Introduction, John Wesley, 30-31.
26. Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," §5.2, *Works* 3:515.
27. *Hymns*, no. 366, *Works* 7:535-36.

8. Reflections (Beck)

1. The reports of some of the working groups can be found on the online version of *OXFORDnotes*: www.wesleyanstudies.org/OXFORDnotes.
2. Gabriel Setiloane's lecture is not included in this published collection. The interested reader will find the substance of the lecture in two of Setiloane's published works: *The Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: Balkema, 1976), especially pp. 77-88; and *African Theology: An Introduction* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986), especially pp. 21-29.
3. *Hymns*, no. 415, *Works* 7:589-90.