

# Introduction

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The Tenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies convened in summer 1997 at Somerville College, Oxford, England, to consider the theme "Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Theological Trajectories in the Wesleyan Tradition." The essays in this volume were plenary presentations at this Institute.

The essays capture the well-known aversion of Wesley and of many Wesleyans to speculation on the Trinity, in favor of "practical divinity." But it is becoming ever more apparent that without a sound doctrine of the Trinity, Methodism is weakened in its attempt to live the "social religion" in which faith expresses love in the public contexts of the "postmodern" world. Efforts to proclaim and embody the gospel publicly in our time encounter new forms of power that destroy or prevent human community. The concentration of power in the human technological control of nature, in the accumulation of vast wealth by the few, and in the media's ability to control communication and the formation of values causes us to ask about the power of God: Where is it and what does it look like? Where is the power of God in the face of the powerlessness of people who have no guns, no money, little technological knowledge, and no access to the means of communication? Where is the power of God in

the powerlessness of nature to withstand the human pollution of the atmosphere and streams, the logging of the rain forests, and the decrease of the ecosphere's biodiversity? Where is the power of God in the lives of so many persons who suffer hopelessness through addiction, isolation from others, and absorption in a death-oriented culture? Wesleyan theology cannot sidestep these questions.

Framed by this conviction, the Institute addressed itself to the questions: Is there a distinctively Wesleyan perspective on the Trinity; and if so, how would it affect the questions of power and community that are so perplexing both within the church and in all aspects of present life in the world?

Two traditional functions of the Trinity are reclaimed in some of these essays as essential for contemporary Methodism. First, as the peculiar Christian name for God, the Trinity works to identify which God it is we are worshiping. The Trinity arises out of and serves the integrity of the biblical narratives' uncovering of God's love in Israel and Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Second, the Trinity is the church's way of teaching about the being of God, about how the persons of the divine community are internally related and united. But all of the essays go beyond these functions in viewing the Trinity as an eminently practical way of displaying God's way of working in the world and of empowering the discipleship, life, and mission of the church.

Theology that furthers the communal and personal Christian work of love can never be primarily abstract. Thus the distinctive perspective on the Trinity in these essays is that it is a practical theory of discipleship. The Trinity is not only about God's unique being but also about our way of being in the world; said more adequately, it is about our way of living in the triune God in our life in the world. The disciples of Jesus Christ enter God's way of salvation by living in the triune community of God. A Wesleyan view of God will be what Jürgen Moltmann calls the "open Trinity," open to the world and to the life of holiness. These essays give ample evidence that, as Frances Young says of Wesleyan theology, "trinitarian theology alone accounts for Christian experience."

The essays also agree on the Wesleyan theme that God's being is love and that God expresses God's being to us in grace. That is, we do not know God's being directly but only insofar as God gifts us with God's love. Thus grace is the means of our knowing God and the empowerment in which we are made able to love under the con-

ditions of history—that is, in the face of sin, death, and evil. The differences among the essayists arise with respect to the questions of (1) whether our graced knowledge of God (the economic Trinity) uncovers the character of God's internal life of relationships (the immanent Trinity), and (2) whether the trinitarian relationships within God's life lead to an understanding and practice of ecclesial community and a social ethic.

Ted Campbell's essay "Pure, Unbounded Love" provides a historical framework for the discussion of love in terms of power and indwelling ("enthusiasm"). He provides a finely wrought tracing of the place of the Trinity in the doctrine and worship of historic Wesleyan communities. He concludes that the trend of the Methodist tradition is "to restrict, at least by implication, divine power or omnipotence." God's absolute power cannot be asserted at the expense of God's goodness. In the Wesleyan tradition, classical notions of omnipotence and impassibility are limited in practice by a passionate insistence on God's goodness and compassion for God's creatures. Campbell also highlights the significance of the divine attributes for Wesleyan spirituality. In the quest for sanctification the believer is to assume progressively the attributes of divinity, especially God's holiness. Sanctification is a kind of *theosis*, a "process in which the human is not 'deified' but 'divinized' by God's own gift of holy love," as Campbell puts it.

Frances Young gives a close reading of Wesley's appropriation of the early Syrian Christian writer he thought to be Macarius. According to Macarius read through "Wesleyan spectacles," we cannot know the essence of God but rather we know God through the energies and activities of God—that is, through God's way of managing the creation (*oikonomia*). Young is thus opposed to "using the doctrine of the Trinity in speaking about community as if the internal relationships within God were known to us." And yet because God cannot lie, the way in which God has revealed the divine self must be as "true as it could be, given human limitations." Young underscores the Wesleyan view of salvation as "the image of God impressed on a created spirit," and that image is the *imago trinitatis*. Thus full redemption as *theopoiesis* (divinization) means that we were ordained to be, in the words of Charles Wesley's hymn, "transcripts of the Trinity." Macarius and Wesley "see Christianity in terms of a divine 'inbreathing' and *enthousiasmos* that is both power and communion and is grounded in a doctrine of the Trinity that reserves the mystery

of the divine essence while experiencing the divine energies in the transformation of both heart and life."

J. Philip Wogaman offers a much more cautious word about the possibility of a social ethic developing out of the Trinitarian understanding of God's love. Seeing the Wesleyan legacy as one of "principled realism," Wogaman argues that to love sometimes means engaging in negative forms of power. Christians live under the command to "lovingly organize the world for community." In order to safeguard the principle of the protection of life, this means intervention in situations of violence even though great violence may be threatened by the intervention. Or it could mean allowing free-trade policies to work themselves out in spite of the fact that millions of people suffer from these policies. In any case, the practice of love is always complexly related to God's grace, and human justice.

Roberta C. Bondi, while not dealing with trinitarian themes directly, gives a beautiful example of practicing trinitarian theology in the congregational setting. Bondi is looking for the kind of theological thinking "that in the most practical and concrete way furthers the goal of the Christian life," which according to Wesley is "nothing higher and nothing lower than this: the pure love of God and [humankind]—the loving God with all our heart and soul and our neighbor as ourselves." The nature of God, power, and communion are debated in the midst of the anguish and acrimony caused by the conflict between those who feel that "father language" supports patriarchal oppression, and those who feel that obedience to Christ's command and respect for the tradition require praying the Lord's Prayer. Bondi sees parallels between the practice-oriented theological tradition of early monasticism and the Wesleyan emphasis on the formation of the ways of love in the communion between the passions of the soul and energies of God. This is a practical theology that allows doctrine and prayer to challenge what is most oppressive in the church and culture.

The remaining essays attempt a more direct connection between the Trinity and a social ethic of love and community.

Jürgen Moltmann, who was a primary originator of the recent renaissance in trinitarian theology, presents an understanding of the Trinity that will enhance our ability to live once again spatially in nature after the modern theological tendency to set the human being in time alone. "We ourselves cannot exist in time only, hastening with the speed of the modern/already 'postmodern' world accelerated

into the future; we must also dwell in our bodies and with our senses linger in the sensual world of nature and find rest again and again in the peace of God. We don't only exist and struggle against each other in a hostile world; we must also live together and make home in neighborhoods, friendships, and love." Moltmann works with the ancient trinitarian concept of *perichoresis*, which refers to community without conformity; personality without individualism. Mutual indwelling and perichoresis are also the life secrets of the whole new creation, because in the end God will be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28), and everything will be in God. The perichoretic unity of the triune God should therefore be understood as a social, inviting, integrating, unifying, and thus world-open community.

José Míguez Bonino played a special role at the Institute, delivering the first Dow and Marjorie Kirkpatrick Lecture. This lecture was inaugurated to honor the visionary work that Dow Kirkpatrick has done in relating the theologies and church practice of South and North America, and in the founding and growth of the Oxford Institute. In his essay Míguez Bonino asks what significance the Trinity would have for the concrete understanding of salvation that has developed in Latin America. While Latin American theological conceptions of the Trinity begin with the biblical story and its uncovering of God's history with the poor, Míguez Bonino argues that it is crucial to stress that "the acts [of God] reveal an eternal trinitarian transcendence." This would correct "a hyperinflation of the human" in some early Liberation Theology. Míguez Bonino also advances the Wesleyan discussion of synergism by a creative discussion of "enhyphostasis," that is, the way the persons of the Trinity and persons in human community find their identity in each other.

M. Douglas Meeks develops an understanding of the Trinity as a community of gifting and relates the question of gifting within the divine community to the crisis of gifting in a market society in which everything has become a commodity and we have forgotten how to gift and be gifted. For Wesley *charis* (gift/grace) was the being of Christian existence. Wesleyan theology therefore would do well to focus on the question of how God the Holy Spirit through the means of grace actually creates the time and space in which gifts can be given, received, and returned.

In his engaging "Reflections" on the work and "spirit" of the Institute, Brian E. Beck probes the significance of its breakthroughs for the church and pinpoints questions that await further research

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and ecclesial deliberation. He helpfully sets the proceedings in a wider ecumenical framework, and, by pointing to our failure of the common cup in Communion, catches off guard all who would practice life in the trinitarian community while holding on to the world's obsession with "safety."

These essays are meant to be a contribution to the everyday struggle of Christians to live in the time and space opened up by the grace of the triune God and there to discover the peculiar love that can create a community of life against the death-orientations of the world.