

We are pleased to publish in this issue of *OXFORDnotes* the CALL for the Tenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological studies which will convene at Somerville College, Oxford, England, August 11-22, 1997. There will be a pre-Institute Colloquy of persons from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean August 9-11.

Members of the last Institute will receive in the next few weeks more detailed information and a form for recommending persons for the 1997 Institute as well as a form for applying for membership. Others may request these materials by writing Dean M. Douglas Meeks, Wesley Theological Seminary, 4500 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington, DC 20016.

We invite persons to submit short articles for *OXFORDnotes* on the theme of the next Institute.

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**1997 OXFORD INSTITUTE OF
METHODIST THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES**

August 11-22, 1997
Somerville College, Oxford

*TRINITY, COMMUNITY, AND POWER:
MAPPING TRAJECTORIES IN
WESLEYAN THEOLOGY*

THE THEME

The theme of the tenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies will be *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*. The issue concerns the implications of a Wesleyan doctrine of God for the questions of community and power in church and world.

This theme will build

constructively upon earlier Institutes. The 1982 Institute highlighted the diversity of the Methodist traditions. This led to consideration of the teaching office of the church in 1987. The 1992 Institute then probed the various theological implications of taking seriously the contextual challenge of poverty. In retrospect, these gatherings initiated the transition to what Albert Outler has proposed as the third phase of Wesleyan scholarship: mapping future trajectories of Wesleyan theology. The intent of the next Institute is to pursue

this agenda self-consciously through focus on a classic doctrinal locus.

Taking Wesley as a mentor, this focus on the doctrine of God should not be construed narrowly. Neither should it be confined to restating the perennial assumptions that have dominated Western Christianity. Wesley's distinctive insights into the nature of God and the implications of God's nature for questions of community and power find liveliest expression within his treatment of the broader issues of salvation, revelation, and so on. In these contexts his distinctive claims sometimes resonate more with the emphases of the Eastern Christian tradition and serve to counterbalance many of the standard assumptions about the traditional terms found in his most formulaic summaries of the doctrine of God. This means that attention should be given to the breadth of the "economy of God in the world," both in investigating Wesley's doctrine of God and in developing trajectories of this doctrine for today that are resourceful for new praxis of community and power in church and world.

One aspect of Wesley's doctrine of God that is sure to be central to this Institute is the theological dynamic expressed in his short treatise, "Thoughts Upon God's Sovereignty." Here Wesley is concerned with the two-fold character of God: as Creator and Governor. He argues that God cannot deny God's own character or being, since the law of justice and mercy is within God's being. "Whenever, therefore, God acts as a

Governor...he no longer acts as a mere Sovereign, by his own sole will and pleasure; but as an impartial Judge, guided in all things by invariable justice" (Jackson *Works*, 10:362). While formulated in the specific terms of the Calvinist controversies of the 1770's, we find here Wesley's distinctive concern to affirm the sovereign prevenience of God's salvific grace in ways that ground, rather than undercut, the integrity and accountability of humans and their communal structures.

The other aspect of Wesley's doctrine of God highlighted for this Institute is his trinitarian understanding of God and the correlated call for humans to be "transcripts of the Trinity" (*Bicentennial Works*, 7:88). Wesley was notorious in his day for the prominent role that he assigned to the Holy Spirit (relative to the Western tradition) in the economy of God in the world. This prominence has implications still to be mined--both about the nature of God and about humans as the Image of God in the world. Such explorations are critical for the church today, as the autonomous, self-possessive individualism of Western culture continues to come under scrutiny. A truly trinitarian concept of God could provide the basis for a profound criticism of the concepts of domination which have justified oppressive and exploitative structures in church and world. Furthermore, a trinitarian emphasis suggests constructive correspondences for personal and social relationships within the church, in the

church's mission to the world, and in our relationship to threatened nature.

WORKING GROUPS

Biblical Studies
 Contextual Theology
 Ecclesiology
 Evangelism
 Global Society and Political Economy
 History of Wesleyan Traditions (19th and
 20th Centuries)
 Practical Theology
 Spirituality and Discipleship
 Systematic Theology
 Wesley Studies

Editor's Note: The following is a summary (prepared by the author) of a paper given in the Wesleyan Studies Group of the 1992 Oxford Institute.

"Methodist Societies, Evangelical Economics, and Social Change"

By John R. Tyson
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This paper examined the rise of the Methodist movement amidst the religious, social, economic, and political forces that shaped early Methodism. Particular attention was given to Ted Jennings' thesis (elaborated in *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*, Nashville: 1990) that early Methodism was rooted in Wesley's "evangelical economics" -- a posture which combined the criticism of wealth, solidarity with the poor, with his

theology of stewardship, and vision for economic practice based on the egalitarian principles of Acts 2. Hence, early Methodism had an overt advocacy for the poor which was gradually lost as the eighteenth century wore on. An examination of the social forces and ecclesiastical adjustments that shaped Methodism from the mid-point of the century indicated how and why the movement's earlier advocacy for the oppressed was diminished. This historical assessment offered significant trajectories for modern reflection upon the authentic Wesleyan ethical vision.

The genius of early Methodism, given the tumultuous socio-political context of the 1740's, lay in the liberating and empowering structures of the Methodist societies. The combination of lay leadership, individual expression, along with spiritual and economic support was particularly attractive to workers who found themselves enmeshed in multiple social dislocations. These factors also caused early Methodism to be viewed as a reforming movement by many within and outside of the movement.

The Methodist societies were the chief vehicle for the implementation of Wesley's "evangelical economics." His preferential option for the poor was written into various aspects of the Methodist infrastructure -- most notably the classes' weekly subscription of "what they are willing to give toward the relief of the poor." Methodist class and society

rules also committed members to the mutual improvement of fellow Methodists. Members of the Methodist societies were, for example, instructed to do good "especially to them that are of the household of faith...employing them preferably to others, buying one of another, helping each other in business -- and that so much more because the world will love its own." This Methodist network of employers, buyers, and sellers was an attempt to protect and undergird society members amidst the economic injustices of industrializing England.

Supported by Wesley's stewardship theology and by the practical services of the Methodist societies, the Methodists gradually climbed up the economic ladder. This situation reveals a tension at the heart of Wesley's economics; it was a tension between his recognition of the evils that flow from a preoccupation with worldly goods and Wesley's desire to embrace an economic ethic which would enable the working poor to improve their plight -- and thereby run the risk of the destructive aspects of affluence.

The process of separation from the Church of England and the rapid growth of Methodism's membership towards the end of the eighteenth century entrusted the Wesleys' successors with challenges that had been beyond the purview and experience of the earlier movement. The task of financing the movement put increased strain on the "grass-roots" style of leadership and local fund-raising (including funds for the poor).

As the Methodism moved towards a professional clergy the weekly subscription was diverted to ministerial support. In many instances the solutions embraced by the Wesleyan Conference were borrowed from Anglicanism (such as pew rental), and seemed antithetical to the original vision of the Methodist movement. The task of consolidating the movement led to a centralization of benevolence ministries which had formerly been performed on a local level by Methodist classes. During almost two decades of English political and social unrest the Wesleyan Connexion sought to prove its legitimacy by disassociating itself from radicalism as well as from political and economic reform.

Our historical foundations suggest that an implementation of the primitive Wesleyan social posture will be possible and significant only if local Methodists are involved in spiritual, practical, and economic disciplines that align them with the poor. Advocacy for the poor must grow out of practical experiences of and with the poor. Our history impels us to ask whether the tasks of consolidating, financing and achieving legitimacy for modern Methodism have separated the movement from Wesley's "evangelical economics." We must also ask whether our ecclesial structures are designed to answer spiritual and ethical ends, or whether they reflect too much the concerns of consolidating the Methodist movement (size, deployment, finances, etc.).

The Mystery of the First Article of Religion, and the Mystery of Divine Passibility

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The next Oxford Institute will consider the theme of “Trinity, Community and Power” and will ask (among other things) about Wesleyan and Methodist understandings of God. It might be helpful to consider, in preparation for this Institute, the difference between the first Anglican Article of Religion and the first Methodist Article (as used by Episcopal Methodist Churches). The Anglican Article states:

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions... (cited from the 1979 Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church in the U.S., p. 867).

The Methodist Article is very close but has a significant omission:

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts... (cited from the 1992 *Discipline* of The United Methodist Church, par. 67, p. 58).

The Methodist Article drops the claim that God is “without passions” (in the Latin of the Articles, *impassibilis*). That is to say, the Methodist Article refuses to affirm divine impassibility and in doing so the Methodist Article opens the possibility of

thinking of God as passible, as somehow embracing “passions.”

One mystery concerns the editorial responsibility for this change. John Wesley presumably edited the Prayer Book, including the Articles of Religion, as *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (1784), but the first edition of the *Sunday Service* does not include the alteration (in the edition of James F. White, p. 306). We might presume, then, that Thomas Coke or Francis Asbury altered the Article in subsequent editions. Does anyone know who might have been responsible for this?

Regardless of who was editorially responsible, it is worth pondering the importance of this alteration for Methodist understandings of God. The doctrine of divine impassibility was strenuously defended by Hellenistic Christians in the early centuries, but has come increasingly into question in the last hundred years. Hellenistic thinkers wanted to say that God is not subject to the changeable, destructive “passions” to which human beings are subject. But how could the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob be described as “impassible” or “passionless”?

Early Methodists were a passionate people. Perhaps, one might say, this is a case where they conceived of God after their own image. But in this there may have been genuine insight into the character of God, the mystery of God’s eternal passibility.

Internet Access to OXFORDnotes and Wesleyan Materials

Ted A. Campbell, editor

Readers of OXFORDnotes can communicate with the editor at tcamp@delphi.com (on the Internet). We're hoping to establish a World Wide Web Page for the Oxford Institute. Stay tuned on that score. Meanwhile, if you'd like to receive email about Wesleyan Studies, send a note to the address above and Ted Campbell will put you on his "WesleyNet" mailing list.

Here are some Wesleyan- and Methodist-related World Wide Web sites:

<http://www.umc.org> Homepage of The United Methodist Church

<http://www.umc.org/umns.html> United Methodist News Service

<http://www.netins.net/showcase/umsour>
ce United Methodist Church (an unofficial home page)

<http://www.netins.net/showcase/umsour>
ce/umchurch.html Listing of Local United Methodist Congregations on the Internet

<http://www.umc.org/umabout.html>
About United Methodism

<http://www.waidsoft.com/methodist.html>
Methodist History Web Page

<http://users.aol.com/Barratts/home.html>
Barratt's Chapel & Museum: "The Cradle of Methodism"

<http://wesley.nnc.edu> Jackson edition of the Works of John Wesley available for download

<http://gbgm-umc.org/> UM General Board of Global Ministries

<http://www.peacenet.org/umoun/> UM Office for the United Nations

<http://rylibweb.man.ac.uk/data1/dg/text/method.html> Methodist Archives at John Rylands University Library

<http://www.ifu.net/~booton/library.htm>
The Nazarene Online Church Library of Edison First Nazarene

<http://wesley.nnc.edu> Wesley Center for Applied Theology



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