

A Note from M. Douglas Meeks:

We are pleased in this issue of *OXFORDnotes* to begin printing the final reports of the Working Groups of the Tenth Oxford Institute. Included in this issue are the reports of the Biblical Studies, the Systematic Theology, and the Wesley Studies Working Groups.

We invite the submission of papers that 1) reflect on the issues of the last Institute at several months remove, 2) propose new problematics or research topics out of the last Institute, or 3) treat any issue in Methodist theological studies. Please send your paper to Prof. Ted Campbell, the editor.

There were many impressive papers given in the Working Groups last August. Some of these papers will be published in *Quarterly Review*. We are searching for other journals in which papers can be published. Please let us know if you have ideas in this direction.

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***OXFORDnotes* on the World Wide Web**

The text of articles from *OXFORDnotes*, along with some links to other Wesleyan and Methodist web sites, is available at the following address:

<http://www.nccusa.org/wmc/oxford97>

Please check the site from time to time for updates on Oxford Institute matters.

working groups

**BIBLICAL STUDIES
WORKING GROUP**

The Biblical Studies Working Group decided, for our report, to treat the three Institute terms "Trinity," "Power," and "Community" in turn. We recognize, of course, that these terms are interrelated and, in fact, can be quite difficult to isolate adequately.

Trinity

There is the additional difficulty for us that the first term, "Trinity," is not

strictly applicable to the Bible and is most fully defined in the centuries of the early church. We took this, however, as an opportunity to explore the nature and character of God as described in the Old and New Testaments. As Prof. Moltmann reminded us, Trinitarian thought in the Christian tradition begins with the person of God, God's son Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of God, who are found in the Bible--although the language of biblical story, song, and proclamation is far from later theological formulations. Thus, instead of Trinity we discussed the concept of God in the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Samuel, and the Pentateuch; in the Gospels, Paul, and Acts. Our papers spanned biblical history from the earliest period of Israelite tradition to the second century of the Common Era. In all our work on this question, we asked how the concept of God was linked with particular communities of faith. We saw this in terms of power dynamics both inside and outside the community. Our assumption has been that a biblical view of God's character should always be related to the lives, frustrations, joy, hope, and salvation of these communities.

The first and most basic category of biblical talk about God is that of God's attributes or God's character.

These are affirmed by what God says and does and by how God is encountered by humankind.

Thus, in Exodus God offers this self-introduction: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This brief statement, connected with an entire web of narrative and legislation, enables us to see God as the gracious and loving deliverer who *moves* people and moves *with* people to form a new community based on God's own justice. We see this self-revelation no less in Proverbs, where God sends Lady Wisdom to show the divine capacity for maternal care, household ordering, and delight in creation. Israel's vital experience of this God draws together separate strands of tradition and names for God used in the text.

In Jesus, likewise, we learn the content of the Reign of God by Jesus' self-identification: "The Spirit of God is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." In the death of Jesus on the cross we see God's vulnerability, and in the resurrection, the power of God. Paul expresses this in the opening words of his letter to the Galatians: "God the Father, who raised him from the dead." In the Spirit's activity in the early Christian communities we see

God's power to save universally, unbounded by human institutions or perceptions.

Our view of God's essential qualities does not amount to a portrait but a drama. God's character is complex, despite the biblical insistence on monotheism. The God who creates and rules all things must also be responsible for a world in which there is misery, failure, and destruction. So the scriptures attest with boldness that God can regret decisions and change God's mind, often at great human cost. But a God who has passions--shown chiefly by loving and choosing a people and eventually the whole world--can also be appealed to with complaint and lament. As we explored these traditional psalm types, we noted that this form of connectedness with God seems to be missing from contemporary worship--to our general loss. We also paid attention to the daring poetry of Job to probe the nature of God's justice and sovereignty.

The Bible presents at its core a view of God who is both loving protector and fearsome judge of all. In its refusal to compromise or whitewash these contradictory truths, the biblical witness grounds its vision in reality. In so doing, it continues to be our

primary source for the encounter with the God of our faith.

Power

Nearly all the papers presented to the working group also explored the theme of power. Several, particularly the studies of the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians, showed how the structures and effects of human power create both differences and divisions. As the original contexts of the writings were examined, and interpretive insights shared, it became clear that social location, whether that of the Biblical writer or that of the interpreter, is important.

In the end, all 'power' stand under the judgment of God, even the power of prophet and king (a study of 1 Samuel), power exercised both within the Church and by the Church in history (studies of power in Paul and the empirical test of faith's effects in history, as seen, for example, in Galatians), and finally, even the 'principalities and powers' whose final subjection to Christ has been anticipated in the resurrection (1 Cor 15:22-28).

But there is a paradox about divine power, exemplified in the Incarnation and Cross of Jesus. Papers on the character of God, the nature of salvation, and the sovereignty of God

according to Paul helped us towards the connection that God's own self-limitation is the foundation for a prophetic critique of all human power. Religious experience, however, may well have to encompass the enigmatic experience of God as portrayed in the Book of Job or the struggles of the community to survive as a minority in an alien environment (witness biblical stories, such as Daniel, Esther, Ruth, Jonah, perhaps written in and for the Diaspora).

Finally, several of our studies showed how God's reign finds 'space' when the Spirit is experienced in the Church (papers especially on Acts and Galatians), as the power of love, building new, inclusive communities. In such communities power and authority are exercised (as a study of Paul's letters showed), but these are legitimated only by the paradox of God's power.

Community

The hermeneutical challenge of connecting present day Christian communities with authorial and canonical audiences was very much in the forefront of papers and discussions. The group itself was well suited for this task, with members from Argentina, Brazil, Congo, Hong Kong-China, Korea,

India, Sweden, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. The papers and discussions addressed the needs of these modern communities as they grappled with text and context. For example, Latin American scholars use social location as sources of raw material for approaching theology and Bible; Korean seminaries look to the Bible for how to live in a liberated land; Hong Kong and Indian Christian minorities' leaders turn to scripture for possible assistance in relating to majority and pluralistic cultures, using such sources as Romans 14-15 (the strong and the weak), and Exodus 6:1-9 (names of God); an African teacher desires to find a methodology for examining possible influence between ancient Hebrew and African cultures. And all communities of the Wesleyan tradition reported on the struggle with, and the need to address, current economic, political and social forces through the Bible, if possible.

The ways whereby communities use symbols (such as wilderness), liturgies (Psalms), large blocks of scripture (such as the Pentateuch), a gospel, narratives such as Acts or Esther, and theological terms (salvation and grace) were analyzed for their importance then and now.

Finally, communities of faith have served, and are serving, the vital roles of:

- a. Being places where doctrine arises (for example, in Galatians);
- b. Mediating salvation from God;
- c. Bringing persons into the Kingdom/Realm of God, which is God's space into which persons are urged to enter;
- d. Being able, through conversion, to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ;
- e. Serving to lift up the divine promise of what is to be;
- f. Being loci for grace and assurance;
- g. Working out the meaning of Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, (and today Paul would add--there is no longer first world or third world); for all of you are one in Christ."

Postscript

We would like to close with an appeal to those planning future Oxford Institutes. It is clear that John Wesley regarded scripture as central and foundational for his theology. It is

also clear to those of us in the Biblical Studies Working Group that the people called Methodists around the world regard themselves as biblical people and are discovering new vitality in the biblical word as well as new and renewed forms for expressing and interpreting that new vitality. Our hope is that topics and ways of working in future Oxford Institutes may allow for a greater sharing of our encounters with those biblical foundations, and a more self-conscious consideration of the ways scripture informs and transforms all our work. Since most of the interdisciplinary groups to which we were assigned could not come up with any papers appropriate for discussion with our working group, and since there was no plenary address focused explicitly on biblical, it is clear that biblical studies as foundational to our work was not high on the list of this year's priorities. May it not always be so.

Submitted for the Biblical Studies Working Group by Bruce C. Birch and Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, co-chairs.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY GROUP

Our working group has purposefully limited itself to a modest agenda. We

operated under no illusions or desire of creating a (let alone, *the*) definitive Wesleyan articulation of the doctrine of the trinity. We have been content instead to engage the phenomenon of the renewed interest in Trinitarian theology that has emerged over the last few decades, with an eye to assessing the cogency, fruitfulness and appropriateness of the phenomenon itself and central emphases within it to the varying situations in which we find ourselves called to confess and embody Christian faith. The question of appropriateness frequently included reference to characteristic Wesleyan theological emphases, but was by no means limited to this issue. Rather, in keeping with Wesley's own precedent, our discussion kept pressing to the dimension of the relation of theological convictions to the most concrete aspects of life—such as, the challenge of accounting christianly with both the moral and natural dimensions of evil that this century has again graphically reminded us; the widening gap between rich and poor, with resulting debates between alternative forms of economics; the need to address the alienating and destructive forms that the modern Western emphasis on individuals and their rights have taken; the parallel need to continue

seeking even more inclusive and effective ways of embodying the *Shalom* that defines the God we know and seek to follow in Christ; the heightened encounter of Christians with peoples of other faiths, including increasingly in some parts of the world a radically secularized "faith"; and overall the continuing missional challenge of fostering reconciliation in the various interrelated dimensions of life: human persons with the divine, human persons with one another, communities with communities, and humanity with the larger creation.

In our considerations, some emphases in the recent Trinitarian discussions drew particular positive interest. Perhaps the strongest case is the decided shift from the monarchical tendencies of Western Christian theistic accounts of the triune God towards the deeper appreciation of the genuine otherness of each of the "persons" of the trinity that has been the more characteristic emphasis of the Eastern churches. But it is not just the otherness of each "person" that drew our interest; it was much more the suggestive attempt to articulate their unity dynamically in *perichoresis*. We state this first in the Greek precisely because some of our most vigorous and helpful debates were over how best to translate and

conceive it. Is "community" a sufficient term? Some sensed in it continuing connotations of its historical derivation from the confining and defensive wall around a city. Others heard overtones of essentially monadic individuals who are only incidentally and voluntarily related to one another. This pushed us to consider such notions as "participation," "koinonia" and "interliving" as potentially better alternatives. Finally we had to admit that the reality we are attempting to name is not subsumable to any single term, thereby allowing whatever term we use to be a "broken" or "open" term, and encouraging a dance with various terms to enrich our understanding of how God both exemplifies "koinonia" in Godself and invites all creation into that "interliving," that type of "community."

We hasten to add in the face of such a claim about God that we also continually danced around the issue of the *apophatic* limits of our ability to make any claims about God. Granting all these limits we found the concreteness of God's revelation in Christ through the Spirit driving us to affirm at least that God per se cannot be fundamentally different from this self-revelation. We also quickly embraced the long-standing

theological instinct that any claim about God is as crucial for what it tells us about ourselves and the larger creation as for what it tells us about God per se. Thus, some of our most substantial discussions were about how the *perichoretic* vision of true community might provide helpful parallels for conceiving authentic koinonia at a human level. There was considerable attraction to notions that what it means to be a human person is much better understood in terms of our standing within community (in the various concrete senses of family, village, ancestors, etc.) than in terms of the absolute "subject" that has dominated modern Western thought (and *life!*). There was also virtual consensus that any adequate communal model of human existence must embrace more fully than much traditional Christian theology has done our interliving with the larger creation.

In the very midst of this agreement, however, we were repeatedly reminded of the danger that language about "community" can easily degenerate into a sugary "I'm OK, you're OK" mush. In this regard several papers found help in the recent philosophical emphasis on the way that the truly "other" continually seeks to erupt into our existence, serving as a gift that can help liberate

us from our monadic isolation—if we will honor it as truly other. This suggestion sparked us to reflect on how God as truly "other" takes concrete form in the crucified Jesus, the excluded others of our communities, the Spirit that "strangely" warms hearts, and so on.

It was at this point that we noted appreciatively another characteristic of the renewed consideration of the triune God in recent decades. This renewal was sparked by Karl Rahner's grounding of all claims about the immanent trinity (God in Godself) in the specifics of God's actual salvific and revelatory activity in the world. Jürgen Moltmann quickly focused this further by insisting that any consideration of the triune God must be focused through the specific event of the crucified Jesus *as* the crucified God. We broadly welcomed this insistence, affirming the danger of any account of the triune God (and any correlated model of Christian life) that jumps to a theology of glory apart from the theology of the cross. The God we know and seek to serve is not just any God, but the God revealed with us and for us in the cross. As such, the Christian life must be a life that identifies with the crucified one. However, the gospel message is that it is also a life that is made continually possible by the

transforming and guiding power of the Spirit! The very vigor with which this point was repeatedly made, and the way the most recent attempts to bring the Spirit more into the Trinitarian reconsiderations by Moltmann and others were lauded, was an indication of how deeply we have imbibed the Wesleyan conviction of the need to focus redemption ultimately on the goal of the new creation that is possible through the transforming power of the Spirit (our suggested focus for the next Institute).

We might add that one of our most intriguing debates, about which there appeared to remain some genuine disagreement, was how these emphases related to the traditional theological affirmation of the impassibility of God. Most of us found the greater openness to talk about God truly and passionately interacting with the world, particularly in its various forms of suffering, a welcome move. However, others reminded us that God's sympathy is not enough, if it is at the expense of God's action. And still others worried that too much emphasis on God being affected by temporal pain and anguish can result in a God who is overwhelmed and rendered ineffective in providential care.

Likewise, we were drawn to a particular emphasis from the Bolivian context of how they view a "trinity of three" as radically incomplete, requiring the complement of creation to form a "trinity of four." Connections between this suggestion and some forms of process theology were noted, with much appreciation. At the same time there was some worry about how these points can be made in a way that emphasizes that the suggested "dependence" of God on creation is an expression of God's gracious love and commitment, not a metaphysical imposition upon God.

When our attention turned most directly to Wesley's own specific reflections on the doctrine of the trinity, it was with some surprising and potentially fruitful results. These clustered around the distinction that Wesley made between believing the "fact" of the trinity, which he considered essential to Christian life, and accepting particular philosophical accounts of the "how" of the trinity, which he insisted was not essential. One direction this distinction took us was in affirming that the most vital function of doctrinal discourse is not apologetics or constructing ontological/metaphysical accounts of God (though most of us saw a necessary place for both of these enterprises), but providing

"grammatical" guides for the formation and expression of Christian life in the world. We posed in this context the intriguing question of whether trinity is simply one such grammar among others, or whether in some way it provides an archetypal structure for other Christian grammars such as the "offices of Christ," etc.

A second application of Wesley's distinction that we found potentially very fruitful was to the question of authentic contextualization or inculturation of Christian affirmation and praxis of faith in the triune God. While we struggled to find adequate ways to express it, there was a broad sense that affirming the fundamental concerns of the "fact" of the trinity was essential to any contextualization being authentically Christian. Far fewer of us were inclined to suggest that the specific articulation of the "how" of the trinity in the Greco-Roman philosophical categories of the classical creeds was essential, allowing instead for engagement with the alternative categories of various contexts in our continual mission of bringing the truth of God revealed in Christ into living engagement with our peoples. On these terms, the vital question became how a dialogue with one another across alternative contexts can help us all to discern

when our particular attempts to inculturate our faith are authentic, and when they verge on capitulation to "gods" other than the God known in Christ through the Spirit. In our discussions this question kept returning more to the matter of process (creating a place of dialogue open to all apart from undue force) than to any suggestion of some abstract ideal articulation.

This brings us to a worry that threaded its way through all of our discussions. While there was appreciation for the general renewed interest in the doctrine of the trinity and its relation to Christian life in the world, there was also an uneasiness about the various agendas that can be tied to this renewal. What are we to make of calls to reaffirm the centrality of the trinity to Christian identity? In some senses we strongly affirm these calls. But in other senses they appear to be more concerned with using the trinity as another club in ideological debates than with seeking to take seriously the implications of affirming that the God we seek to serve is the Abba of the crucified Jesus who pours out the Spirit upon all who will receive this Gift. If instead of battling over claims about who "owns" the doctrine of the trinity we could begin in halting ways to build "communities" of respectful

dialogue across our ideological divides we could move a little closer to being "transcripts of the trinity," reflecting in our lives—corporately, and with creation—the God of *perichoretic* love.

The last question we spent significant time upon is how we as Christians can and ought to bear witness to our commitment to the triune God to peoples of other faiths. We reached nothing like resolution, but there was a shared sense of the importance of both sides of the apparent dilemma: on the one hand we would be inauthentic and unfaithful to bear witness only to God in general rather than to the specific triune God, on the other hand the very example of Jesus calls us to share this witness in a way that affirms and embodies God's redemptive concern for all, and particularly for the excluded and marginalized.

WESLEY STUDIES GROUP

Introduction

The Wesley Studies Group involved **participants** from Brazil, Canada, Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Our group contained men and women, pastors, professors and lay teachers.

We recognize that many Wesleyan scholars are now engaged in other groups in the Institute, and so we send our greetings to sisters and brothers of the Wesley Studies Diaspora.

We heard **papers** that involved John and Charles Wesley, John William Fletcher of Madeley, and a twentieth century Wesleyan interpreter, Robert Cushman. Papers and presentations examined a number of trajectories in later Wesleyan history that began in the eighteenth century and continue up until the present situation of Wesleyan and Methodist churches, including issues of women's ordination, the Wesleyan understanding of sanctification, the meaning of the Trinity in Wesleyan thought, the Eucharist, particular forms of Wesleyan community, and twentieth-century appropriations of the Wesleyan heritage.

Our group also participated in **interdisciplinary discussions** with the following groups: Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology, Practical Theology, Evangelism, and Contextual Theology. Although we were not able to carry through our scheduled meeting with the Spirituality Group, we invited Gregory Clapper from that group for a discussion of his paper.

Some Insights Arising from Our Presentations and Discussions:

We cannot represent in this report the depth and breadth and excellence of presentations and discussions in our group, but the following are some important summary insights arising out of our discussions.

Trinity:

- the Wesleyan sources suggest an understanding of the Trinity that can be described as ecumenical and orthodox;
- these same sources suggest that the Wesleys' underlying concern was for our life in the Trinity, as contrasted with a merely speculative understanding of God; the "triune image" is stamped on every human, and the renewal of that image is the goal of our life;
- the path to Christian perfection or entire sanctification is a process of $\theta\epsilon\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$ in which humans participate in God's triune life of love;
- the Trinity is known to humankind in God's unflinching providence and in the prevenient grace offered to all humans; these expressions of God's universal love allow us

to understand the whole world and all peoples in the light of God's gracious purpose;

- the Trinity is the focus of the Christian community's worship as we experience God drawing us beyond ourselves (ekstasis); the singing of hymns is a characteristically Methodist way of expressing this worship;

Community:

- Trinitarian worship empowers a human community, which should model the mysterious communion (κοινωνία) of love between the divine Persons;
- the consummate expression of this community lies in its sacramental character, both as the church receives Christ through the means of grace, and as the Christian community becomes itself a kind of sacrament in service to the world;
- the Trinitarian community witnesses to God's inclusive love; one sign of this in the Wesleyan tradition has been the opening up of the roles of exhorting, preaching and ordained ministry to women;

Power:

- divine power is shown in the unexpected form of Christ's humiliation and suffering; power in the Christian community can be exercised only when we model Christ's own humility with sincere repentance;
- just as God's power is displayed in God's self-giving, so the Christian community must surrender its own power in the gift of love.

Some Actions Warranted by Our Discussions:

Our group was not content simply to discuss ideas from eighteenth century Britain. We recognize that our studies have implications for action. The following, then, are actions that we believe to be warranted by our considerations, and we commend these to the Institute leadership and to our sisters and brothers in Wesleyan churches.

Implications for the Field of Wesley Studies:

- we want to encourage the completion of the Wesley Works Project, and the extension of the project by providing translations and locally adapted versions of the Wesley Works materials, as well as editions of

significant works by Charles Wesley, John William Fletcher, and other early Methodists; we also encourage the production of machine-readable forms of these Wesleyan sources;

- we also want to encourage the study of those scholars who have mediated Wesley Studies to us, such as Robert Earl Cushman and Albert C. Outler;

Implications for Teaching in Our Churches:

- we want to encourage Churches to renew their efforts to teach our Trinitarian heritage, not only as part of our doctrine but also as an expression of Christian devotion and spirituality;
- we also want to challenge Christian leaders not only to repeat historic Trinitarian teaching, but also to struggle with new ways to express this teaching in a diversity of cultural contexts, and even to offer critical assessment of historic Trinitarian teachings;
- we want to encourage Methodist churches to teach the universality of God's prevenient grace, and to teach that God's "pure, unbounded

love" is the model for human relationships;

Some More Particular Actions:

- we should humble ourselves and cultivate deeper spirituality as the basis of all our actions;
- we should sing anew Charles Wesley's *Hymns on the Trinity*;
- in order to model God's self-giving nature, we should learn to share our resources with the poor, following the teachings and examples of our Methodist forebears;
- we should celebrate the theme of "Jubilee," God's renewal of the earth and all peoples, praying for the reconciliation of Korea (which we have discussed in our group), and all other peoples divided against their own will;
- perhaps we should encourage Methodist leaders to proclaim the year 2000 as a year of Jubilee, announcing the deliverance of all oppressed peoples, and singing Charles Wesley's hymn, "The Year of Jubilee is Come!"

Conclusion

The Wesley Studies Group has explored a variety of ways in which the love of the triune God becomes incarnate in human communities when power is shared humbly and in the service of God's suffering creation. We leave you with these words of blessing: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

[Report prepared by Professor Hoo-Jung Lee and Professor Ted A. Campbell.]



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