

The Trinitarian Shape of Methodist Worship and Interfaith Liturgical Participation
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 (a discussion text/paper in progress)

Worship in a Trinitarian Frame

At the meeting of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal (1963), the section on “Worship and the Oneness of Christ’s Church” was able to put forward and receive approval for a remarkable statement of fundamental agreement about the nature of Christian worship:

In Christian worship, God comes to us in Christ through the Holy Spirit, sustains us through his grace, establishes us in fellowship with him and with one another, and empowers us for his service in the world. In worship, we come to God in Christ, the True Worshipper, who by his incarnation, servanthood, obedience unto death, resurrection and ascension, has made us participants in the worship which he offers. In him, truly God, we have access to the Father; in him, truly Man, we are restored to our true nature as worshippers of God. Christian worship is, therefore, a service to God the Father by men redeemed by his Son, who are continually finding new life in the power of the Holy Spirit.¹

Here affirmed are a trinitarian basis, content, shape, expression, and benefit of worship. Indeed, the statement indicates that Christians are only able to engage in *Christian* worship by the gifts provided by this triune God. Thirty-one years later, in what has become known as the “Ditchingham Report” (1994), this trinitarian explanation of Christian worship was again asserted and the christological emphasis further developed:

Through the coming of the Spirit, Christian worship is thus a continual meeting with Christ, so that we might be gathered into the grace and life of God. Many different Christian traditions enrich us as we think of the meaning of this encounter. It is a speaking of the gospel of Christ so that we might come to faith. It is grace flowing from the sacrifice of Christ. It is the beginning of the transfiguration of all things in the Spirit of Christ. It is a gift and call for personal holiness according to the measure of Christ. It is the visible manifestation of the incarnation of Christ so that we might be formed in incarnational living amid the “sacrament of the world”. It is beholding Christ in the gathering so that we may be able to behold him and love him among the marginalized, outcast and disfigured ones of the world. It is the participation in the Spirit-led meetings as “baptism” and in every shared meal as the “Lord’s Supper”. It is praise and thanksgiving to the Father through Christ in the unity of the Spirit. But all these understandings depend upon Christian worship being centred in the encounter with God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit enlivening the word and the sacraments.

¹ P. C. Rodger and L. Vischer, *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, Faith and Order Paper No. 42 (London: SCM, 1964), 70. Participating in the development of this statement were Methodists representing the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Church of South India, the Methodist Church (USA), the Methodist Church in Great Britain, the Methodist Church in the Philippines, the Methodist Church of Australasia, and the United Church of Canada.

And all these understandings presuppose that this encounter occurs in an assembly which is itself a witness to God's intentions with the world and which forms its participants for a life of witness and service. The liturgy of Christians occurs in assembly: it also occurs in the midst of daily life in the world.²

These two statements give evidence of the fruit of decades of sustained ecumenical dialogue. But they also point to an ecumenical and liturgical recovery (or greater awareness) of the theological reflection and worship praxis of the early church. For example, the "paschal mystery" of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection has been restored to a central place conceptually in the worship of many of the churches. This Christian Pascha is, in fact, a trinitarian event: Christ offered himself without blemish to God through the eternal Spirit (Hebrews 9:14); and, by the Spirit, the Father raised the Son from the dead (Romans 8:11). The trinitarian expression of the paschal mystery is made tangible in Christian communities at baptism when, accompanied by the triune name (in both the profession of faith and the baptismal formula), new believers die to sin and rise with Christ to new life, and are thereby incorporated by the power of the Holy Spirit into Christ's body, the Church. For another example, the prayer of the Church takes a trinitarian structure unconsciously or consciously when it is offered through the Son in the power of the Spirit to God (the Father)—language that was developed and defended by Basil the Great in his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* (c. 373). This trinitarian shape of prayer is evident today in the construction of certain eucharistic prayers which not only follow the mediatorial language, but also structure the prayer to remember in sequence the distinct yet unified work of the three Persons. In this structure, the work of the Holy Spirit—petitioned in the epiclesis—is given a new prominence.

The Wesleys, Trinity, and Worship

Methodists/Wesleyans need not limit themselves to the early church to find in "their" tradition the trinitarian basis and expression of worship, for it can be recovered through the prose of John and Charles Wesley, and especially through Charles' hymns. For the Wesleys, affirmation and articulation of the trinitarian faith had a special urgency given the rise of Deism and Unitarianism in their day. John insisted that religion "properly and directly consists in the knowledge and love of God, as manifested in the Son of his love, through the eternal Spirit."³ But trinitarian faith was not abstract:

[T]he knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all vital religion. . . . I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till 'he hath' (as St. John speaks) 'the witness in himself'; till 'the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God'—that is, in effect, till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son—and having this witness he honours the Son and the blessed Spirit 'even as he honours the Father'.⁴

² Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, eds., *So We Believe, So We Pray: Towards Koinonia in Worship*, Faith and Order Paper No. 171 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), 6.

³ John Wesley, "Spiritual Worship," In *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 99.

⁴ John Wesley, "On the Trinity," In *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 385.

True Christians were expected to have a real relationship, an intimate relationship with the Three-One God. In checking on the spiritual state of a Mrs. Cock, John Wesley wrote on November 3, 1789: “How is it with you now, my dear friend? Is your soul now as much alive as ever? Do you still find deep and uninterrupted communion with God, with the Three-One God, with the Father and the Son through the Spirit?”⁵ This “uninterrupted communion” was of necessity connected with worship, which was to be offered “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24)—in the power of the Spirit, and in the name of the one who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

The essential place of the Trinity in Wesleyan theological and liturgical expression is most clearly represented by the 188 hymns included in Charles Wesley’s 1767 publication *Hymns on the Trinity*.⁶ This collection is not the only one on the Trinity, for Charles had already in 1746 published twenty-four short doxologies in *Gloria Patri &c., or Hymns to the Trinity*; and hymns to the Trinity (so identified) appeared in other collections, as did hundreds of hymns with the final stanza a trinitarian doxology. The three hymns below come from the section “Hymns and Prayers to the Trinity,” and demonstrate the multifaceted understanding of the Trinity relative to worship.

In the first hymn, the salvific work of each Person is acknowledged as is the divine agency in enabling the doxology of the worshiper (stanza 3):

All hail mysterious Trinity!
 Every person of the Three
 In my salvation meets:
 The Father draws me to the Son,
 Accepts for Jesus’ sake alone,
 And all my sins forgets.

The Son his cleansing blood applies,
 Breaks my heart, and bids me rise
 A penitent forgiven:
 The Holy Ghost his witness bears,
 Numbers me with the royal heirs,
 And gives a taste of heaven.

The Father multiplies my peace,
 Jesus doth my faith increase,
 And teaches me to pray;
 The Spirit purifies my heart,
 And makes me, Saviour, as Thou art,
 And seals me to thy day.

Thus, only thus I surely know

⁵ John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, vol. 8 (London: Epworth, 1931), 183.

⁶ Bristol: William Pine, 1767; facsimile ed. Madison, N.J. The Charles Wesley Society, 1998.

God was manifest below
 The God of pardoning grace,
 Whom saints in Persons Three admire,
 Whom I with all that heavenly Quire
 World without end shall praise.⁷

The second hymn speaks more fully to the activity of the Three-One God in providing both the means and the substance of doxology. The Trinity is the teacher and lyricist of new songs that are to be sung, and is the animator of that song (indicated by the verbs “bestowed,” “revealed,” “showed,” “attests”).

Worship and praise belong
 To God the Lord most high:
 Who taught us the new song
 His name we magnify,
 The Trinity in One we bless,
 The Unity in Three confess.

Not from our Creeds alone
 The doctrine we receive:
 Jehovah Three in One,
He give us to believe,
 The God of truth Himself imparts,
 And writes his name upon our hearts.

His Son on us bestow'd
 The Father hath reveal'd:
 The Son his Father show'd
 From mortal eye conceal'd;
 Th'indwelling Comforter attests
 That One is Three, in faithful breasts.

Thrice holy God, in whom
 We live, and move, and are,
 To do thy will we come,
 Thy glory to declare,
 By all our converse here to show
 That God is manifest below.

Baptiz'd into thy name,
 Mysterious One in Three,
 Our souls and bodies claim.
 A sacrifice to Thee:
 We only live our faith to prove

⁷ No. 7, pp. 92-93.

The faith which works by humble love.

O that our light may shine,
 And all our lives express
 The character Divine,
 The Real Holiness!
 Then, then receive us up t'adore
 The Tri-une God for evermore.⁸

In this hymn, the Trinity is understood to be active and present in the midst of the gathered assembly. This is a real presence of all three, and not of Christ alone. Thus praise to the Trinity is offered in the assumed context of the “deep and uninterrupted communion” of which John Wesley spoke to Mrs. Cock.

Fountain of Divine compassion,
 Father of the ransom'd race,
 Christ, our Saviour and salvation,
 Spirit of consecrating grace;
 See us prostrated before Thee;
 Co-essential Three in One,
 Glorious God, our souls adore Thee
 High on thine eternal throne

While we in thy name assemble,
 Overshadow'd from above,
 Let us at thy presence tremble,
 Holy, Tri-une God of love:
 Father, Son, and Spirit, bless us,
 Who the true Jehovah art:
 Plenitude of God in Jesus,
 Enter every contrite heart.

Challenge now thine humble dwelling,
 O Thou High and Lofty One,
 Thy own Deity revealing,
 God in Persons Three come down:
 Thou, the Witnesses in heaven,
 Dost on earth thy record bear:
 Shew us here our sins forgiven,
 Show us all thy glory there.⁹

⁸ No. 8, pp. 93-94.

⁹ No. 9, p. 94.

The Trinitarian Shape of Methodist Worship

Methodists/Wesleyans have inherited this trinitarian liturgical ethos of the early church and of the Wesleys and early Methodism via the hymns penned by the Wesley brothers and from John Wesley, the abridgement of the *Book of Common Prayer* known as the *Sunday Service of the Methodists* (1784), the Articles of Religion, and “standard” sermons.¹⁰ The Apostles’ and/or Nicene Creeds, when used regularly in Sunday worship and particularly on occasions of baptism, lay out the trinitarian foundations of the Christian faith. The classic structure of prayers—to God (the Father), through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit—that are found in the euchology of our worship books (including eucharistic anaphorae) and frame the shaping of extemporaneous prayer perpetuate a trinitarian formation. A prayer used commonly across Methodism received through the *Sunday Service* (and originally a prayer of the medieval Roman Catholic Sarum Use), the so-called Collect for Purity, is trinitarian in scope:

Almighty God,
to you all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from you no secrets are hidden.
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The singing of a trinitarian doxology in the course of Sunday worship anchors belief in the trinity of God.

Even though our worship services presume a trinitarian ethos, in actuality, because of few textual reminders in a single liturgical event, they may not reinforce the “deep and uninterrupted communion” of the Three-One God sought by our spiritual ancestors. Many of the hymns chosen today are not as Trinity rich as would have been in the diet of hymns sung by the early Methodists and Methodists of a few generations ago, and even the language of prayer may not be Trinity explicit. In most cases, this is not the result of an intentional Unitarianism, especially since pastoral leaders are generally exposed in their education to the resurgence of academic theological reflection on the Trinity that took place after the “death of God” movement in the 1960s in the West. It is, it seems, to be the consequence of two principal factors. First, is the adjustment in trinitarian language required by the concern for inclusive God language. This is not intended as a deliberate subordination of the Son and Spirit as was found in the Arian/Unitarian liturgical revisions against which the Wesleys wrote and spoke. But the result may be similar as God the Father is simply addressed as God, which implies that Son and Spirit are not God. Admittedly, the biblical text makes it clear that the first Person alone can rightly be called God, but an exclusive use of this shorthand means a loss of nuance of trinitarian particularity. The second factor is the “Jesulolatry” that drives some worship. As the ecumenical statements noted above make clear, a christological emphasis is needed to make worship *Christian*. But as Lester Ruth has shown, much “contemporary” worship music in use today is predominantly Jesus-focused, with the first Person in a second place and the Spirit a distant third;

¹⁰ See, for example, the essays in Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, ed., *The Sunday Service of the Methodists: Twentieth-Century Worship in Worldwide Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

full trinitarian references within a single song are rare.¹¹ Prayers may be directed to the first Person and abound in christological assertions, but the work of the Holy Spirit largely goes unmentioned.

Interfaith Participation in Methodist Worship

Given that trinitarian specificity has been substituted in some congregations for the more generic “God,” it is not surprising that the matter of the attendance of non-Christians at Methodist/Wesleyan worship has been broached. Here is meant more than hospitality or welcoming of the stranger to experience the distinctions of Christian worship. Instead, adjustment of Methodist prayer and practice is sought to incorporate the “other” and not cause offense. Of course, in contexts where Christianity is a minority this is usually not an issue, but considerations along these lines are indeed arising in some liberal Western congregations. Arguments in favor of such a practice sometime use trinitarian referents even though a full trinitarian scheme is not intended: the assumption of a common monotheism—the one “God”; the recovery of the early Christian concept of the spermatic Logos—that the seed of the Word is planted in other cultures and religions; the notion of “spirit” inspiration that is not limited to Christianity and even pervades non-Christian worship. John Wesley’s “catholic spirit” is sometime prooftexted along with his phrase “think and let think,” though this latter ignores the full quotation from “The Character of a Methodist”: “We believe Christ to be the Eternal Supreme God; and herein are we distinguished from the Socinians and Arians. But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity we ‘think and let think’.”¹² For Wesley, the root of Christianity, as has been seen, is belief in the Three-One God.

So, this leads to several questions:

How fully is the trinitarian basis, content, shape, expression, and benefit of worship articulated in the Methodist/Wesleyan worship of your region?

Can, in fact, Methodist/Wesleyan worship be “genericized” on the matter of the Trinity? Must Methodist/Wesleyan worship of necessity be cast within a trinitarian framework?

What liturgical and pastoral responses may be offered to the attendance of non-Christians at Methodist/Wesleyan worship if a Trinitarian ethos is assumed?

¹¹ Lester Ruth, “Lex amandi, lex orandi: The Trinity in the Most-used Contemporary Christian Worship Songs,” in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer: Trinity, Christology, and Liturgical Theology*, ed. Bryan D. Spinks, 342-59 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2008).

¹² “The Character of a Methodist,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 9, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 34.