Tenth Oxford Institute
Somerville College, August 1997

Mary Mason and the Women of Early American Methodism:
Consecrated to the Trinitarian Life

Diane H. Lobody
Methodist Theological School in Ohio
Delaware, Ohio, U.S.A

To tell the truth,
I believe I could be happy
doing nothing but reading old diaries
morning to night.
---Denise Levertov, Sands of the Well

We need them.
Brands that flare to show us
the dark we are in,
to keep us moving in it.
---Denise Levertov, To Stay Alive

It is a terrible temptation we scholars face, this lure to move into a dwelling place
furnished with clean, lucid ideas and blissfully entertain ourselves with elegant research
projects and sleekly persuasive arguments. Even church historians and theologians long,
on occasion, to nestle ourselves comfortably in the realm of pure abstraction. As
nostalgic as any wandering Israelite, we gripe and murmur in our ecclesiastical
wilderness and yearn, from time to time, to return to the flesh pots of graduate school. I
am blessed---and just as often profoundly annoyed---by the community of Christians who
insist on keeping me tethered to the questions that matter to a pilgrim people.
Conference colleagues who serve urban churches, students who pastor tiny rural charges,
members of my own inner city congregation, clergy and laypersons who follow the call
of Jesus Christ in many different contexts---these are the people who hold me
accountable for my scholarship and consistently remind me, if only by a slight lift of an
eyebrow or a skeptical silence, that my teaching and my research have value only when
they are responsive to the real questions asked by real people who struggle to live the
gospel in a heart-broken and heart-breaking world.

Among this loving and critical bunch is my mother Connie, a retired professional
church worker and an active member of a United Methodist church. In a recent
conversation about the forthcoming Oxford Institute, she wanted to know what exactly I
would be writing about in my working paper (no doubt due to a lingering maternal
concern that her daughter wouldn't complete her paper on time). I got only as far as telling her that the theme of this year's Institute was the doctrine of the Trinity when she interrupted with a question.

"Wait a minute," she said. "I don't mean to sound ignorant. What do you mean by doctrine?"

"Well, what the Church teaches and believes about the Trinity," I replied.

"One God, and three persons," said my mother, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, right? I mean, that's what I believe."

"Terrific, mom!" I responded gleefully. "You are an early church person! What you believe is early Christian orthodox doctrine."

My mother mused in silence. "That's how I understand and experience God," she said, "but I don't really spend any time thinking about the Trinity. It's just a given; it's the basic content of my faith. Everything else in my life pretty much flows out of that—prayer, worship, the way I live my life, service to the church, love for people."

"Aha!" I said, as entranced by discovering in my own family a genuine if ingenuous daughter of our father in Christ, Mr. Wesley, as an anthropologist would be upon stumbling upon the lost tribe of Israel, "and that's what makes you a Methodist—we don't tie ourselves into knots fussing about doctrine or killing each other in theological debates or devising new dogmas or obsessing ourselves over nuances. What matters in our tradition is how we practice this faith, how we live out this doctrine that we believe. The fact is," I continued, "as a rule Methodists are not particularly innovative theologians. Mostly we don't much bother with that sort of thing."

My mother gave this all due consideration. And then asked the only reasonable question. "Then why, if I may be so bold as to ask, is this the theme of the Institute? You people are going to spend a lot of time talking about a doctrine that you all pretty much agree is basic to the Christian faith and what all normal Methodists believe, right? So tell me this. What can you possibly have to say about the Trinity that will take up ten days of meetings?"

And that, of course, is the rub, at least for historians of Methodism in the United States and especially for historians whose interests center on reform movements, popular piety, social contexts, and the like. It may well be that earlier generations of Methodist theologians in the U.S. explored and re-interpreted trinitarian doctrine to very great effect, and historians of the Wesleyan denominations in particular, and the Protestant mainstream more generally, will benefit from research into those endeavors. And given the growing preoccupation in The United Methodist Church with such matters as the teaching office of the episcopacy, the widespread uncertainty over denominational identity, theological illiteracy in congregations, doctrinal standards for the clergy, and divisive ecclesiastical controversies, it is crucial that the commitment be made to careful
and responsible study of Methodist theological traditions by competent historians of doctrine.

But historians cannot claim for Methodism in the U.S. a grand heritage of doctrinal genius. For whatever reasons—the Wesleyan model of doing theology on the run, identification with the wider American critique of European intellectual authority, a passion for saving souls that would not wait for a supply of formally educated clergy, failure to make significant headway in New England where the trinitarian battles were primarily waged, the experiential and autobiographical structures of spirituality, urgent commitment to social reform—any or all of these may account for a tradition that was not, by and large, interested in extensive discussions of trinitarian doctrine. To be sure, nineteenth-century Methodists were deeply engaged in theological exploration, but the questions that consumed their energies tended to be either issues that were essential to a Wesleyan identity (e.g. sanctification) or matters of conflict with competitor denominations (e.g. infant baptism).

Notwithstanding the astonishingly (almost preposterously) broad call for papers for this Working Group, it has been no easy task for this particular historian to determine and then pursue a research project, not only because I had no idea where one might even begin to find anything remotely relevant to the theme in American Methodism of the early nineteenth century, but also because of an appallingly parochial opinion that the only really captivating doctrinal history is to be found in the writings of the early church. But that bias has unexpectedly provided the very pathway leading to this paper. I have not uncovered some obscure nineteenth-century Methodist who wrote a marvelously original (or even mildly stimulating) work of trinitarian theology—nor, to be honest, have I even looked for one. I haven't examined nineteenth-century Methodist theological writings and investigated the influence of the doctrine on the mission or ministry or spirituality or liturgy or discipline of the Church.

Instead, I began with the early church. Catherine LaCugna's brilliant study of the history of the doctrine, God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life, explores in exquisite detail the patristic and medieval debates over the Trinity, the disastrous separation of trinitarian doctrine from soteriology, and the eventual division of the work and the persons of the Trinity from the being and nature of God. Arguing that this process finally results in both shoddy theology and a trinitarian doctrine that is both incomprehensible and irrelevant, LaCugna recovers the Ante-Nicene union of God's nature and God's personhood, reformulates the doctrine in light of the diversity of contemporary Christological insights, and challenges us to reclaim trinitarian doctrine as the vibrant theology from which the whole of the Christian life and identity flows.

I want to suggest that we subvert the customary pattern of doctrinal history and not assume the priority or the precedence of the doctrine. Indeed, for the purposes of this paper, I do not even intend to describe or analyze the trinitarian theology of any nineteenth-century Methodist. Let us not worry about what these early Methodists believed. The individual who will serve as the focus of this paper—an early American Methodist named Mary Morgan Mason—is trinitarian in her theology; her understanding...
of that doctrine is basically orthodox, and she spends no time worrying over any of the
details. Her theology is transparently clear. Rather, let us ask of Mason and her
contemporaries a distinctively Wesleyan question: How did these people live the
doctrine of the Trinity? Can these early Methodists mirror for us today a liberating vision
of the Trinity, one that leads us to a deeper and more loving relationship with God and
with one another? Can we behold the Trinity through the lens of early Methodism?

LaCugna's book is a massive and richly complex work, and I do not wish to
summarize her historical analysis, replicate her arguments, or report in full detail her re-
vision of a usable and meaningful trinitarian theology. I do, however, want to lift up
those essential teachings of the doctrine, as LaCugna discerns them, that might serve as a
trinitarian template for early nineteenth-century Methodism in the U.S, and particularly
as a trinitarian framework for the life of Mary Mason.

Mary Morgan Mason, born in 1791, is remarkable typical of the first generations of
American Methodist women. Like many of her female peers, Mason's conversion and
subsequent allegiance to Wesleyan theology and practice were considered suspect and
abhorrent to friends and family; she paid a heavy emotional and physical price for her
intense devotional life and her decision to abandon luxury and uselessness in favor of
simplicity and service. On discovering her journal, Mason's father humiliated her by
forcing her to read aloud her most private meditations, following which he threw the
journal into the fire and burned it to ashes. Forbidden by her parents to attend class
meetings, she hid her class tickets in the linings of her shoes. Determined to continue in
this Methodist society, she persuaded her parents to let her work as a servant in her own
home in exchange for permission to go to the class and society meetings. Mason became
a school teacher, living with her parents in Philadelphia until she was offered a position
as teacher in the first free school for girls in New York City, and it was in this setting that
she voluntarily added experimental Sunday morning classes, for the purpose of teaching
scripture and providing basic education for indigent children and adults who otherwise
had no access to school. That experiment led to the formation of the first Methodist
Sunday School in New York City.

Throughout her life, she was plagued by chronic illness and severe domestic trials.
After her marriage to Thomas Mason, a Methodist preacher, she also endured the almost
annual exhaustion of pregnancy and childbirth, with the subsequent responsibility for
raising, nursing, and all too frequently burying her children. At first the marriage was
marked by unusual stability, since Thomas was appointed as Book Agent for several
years running. But eventually life as the wife of an itinerant preacher meant frequent
moves to strange and isolated circuits, the concomitant loss of beloved communities; and
long periods when Thomas was on the road, while Mary bore the burden of running the
household, caring for all the children (in generally wretched houses) and functioning as
the surrogate pastor in Thomas's absence.

But wherever Mary went, like thousands of her Methodist sisters, she established
and administered out an astounding array of ministries, and organized and directed
societies for benevolence, mission, and social reform. In her lifetime, Mason founded
schools for girls, sabbath schools, literacy classes for adults and children, and a seemingly endless stream of benevolent societies: for poor women, pregnant women, sick women, orphans, missionary sponsors, elderly people, youth, retired preachers and their widows and dependents. She formed bible study groups, prayer meetings, temperance societies, and at least one hospital. She took in foster children, adopted orphans, raised the grandchildren when two of her daughters died in childbirth, and taught children in schools and in her home for more than forty years. Her home became a hostel for exhausted itinerant clergy, traveling missionaries, Native American Christians, and weary bishops. She kept up an awesome correspondence with a network of other evangelical women, particularly women missionaries, spoke frequently to groups of women, visited the poor and the sick from house to house, and wrote dozens and dozens of reports and articles on behalf of the various societies of which she was director or manager. And in the midst of all this activity, she remained constant in her commitment to the spiritual disciplines of early Methodism: private prayer, class meetings, band meetings, journaling, worship, meditation on scripture, holy communion, love feasts, quarterly meetings, and the occasional camp meeting.

The story of Mary Mason's life was published in a classic Methodist memoir, called *Consecrated Talents: or, the Life of Mrs. Mary W. Mason*. As was common in this genre, much of the narrative consists of lengthy extracts from Mason's journal and letters, and her own words, standing aside the biographical data, provides for us a portrait of a Methodist way, in LaCugna's words, of living trinitarian faith.

For LaCugna, the central truth communicated in trinitarian doctrine is that God is personal and relational:

The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately therefore a teaching not about the abstract nature of God, nor about God in isolation from everything other than God, but a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other. Trinitarian theology could be described as par excellence a theology of relationship, which explores the mysteries of love, relationship, personhood and communion within the framework of God's self-revelation in the person of Christ and the activity of the Spirit. (LaCugna, 1)

And this is also the heart truth, the core reality, for Mason and other early Methodists. Faith is not a matter of intellectual apprehension or conceptual belief in a God who is wholly other and, therefore, so transcendent and omni-everything as to be utterly distant from the creation. Faith, for Mason, is all about an ever-deepening relationship of love—God's love for her, ever initiating and inviting, and Mason's love for God, ever responsive and maturing:

I bless God that I still feel his presence near me, and have a consciousness that wherever I am he is there. I often feel my mind in converse with him, as though with a visible friend. (Mason, 35)
LaCugna compellingly speaks of the purpose of trinitarian doctrine as a signpost pointing to God's nature and God's intention for humankind and all creation. The lesson of this doctrine is this continual assurance that God loves, that God desires us and comes to us and walks in intimate friendship with us. God creates, and the purpose of creation—our meaning, if you will—is to be in union with God and communion with one another, just as the persons of the Trinity are in union with one another, eternally in relationship with one another. And we, who are made in the image of God, are likewise called to this communion:

God is self-communicating, existing from all eternity in relation to another. The ultimate ground and meaning of being is therefore communion among persons. God is ecstatic, fecund, self-emptying out of love for another, a personal God who comes to self through another. The Life and communion of the divine persons is not 'intradivine': God is not self-contained, egotistical, and self-absorbed, but overflowing love, outreaching desire for union with all that God has made. The communion of divine life is God's communion with us in Christ and as Spirit. (LaCugna, 15)

Trinitarian theology is...a theology of relationship: God to us, we to God, we to each other. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that the 'essence' of God is relational, otherward, that God exists as diverse persons united in a communion of freedom, love, and knowledge. (LaCugna, 243)

Mason longs for this union:

Why, O Lord, when I look around and see thee in all thy works, do I not find thee more eminently in my heart? I feel yet a blank in my soul that must be filled with the fullness of God. O that the blessed Lord would come and possess me whole, leaving no void, but all my soul be perfect love! ...O my dear Lord, grant that every succeeding day may bring me nearer to thee, until at last I shall be swallowed up of life in Christ. (Mason 26)

But LaCugna refuses to succumb to an understanding of union with God that is private, highly individualized, and, finally, thoroughly solitary and therefore stunningly self-referential. And yet, she is equally critical of those popular definitions of Christian holiness that begin and end with the all-consuming needs of others, and inevitably result in a consequent loss of any sense of self (an epidemic problem for white evangelical women in the U.S.) Rather, she argues, the Christian is defined and illuminated by orientation to God:

Autonomy literally means naming oneself with reference to oneself; heteronomy means naming oneself with reference to another..... Both pure autonomy and pure heteronomy are destructive of persons. The doctrine of the Trinity helps us to see that the true person is neither autonomous nor heteronomous but theonomous: the human person is named with reference to its origin and destiny in God. The theonomous aspect of personhood does not indicate a return to a 'me and God' piety.
that bypasses the community. Indeed, both the experience of God and the emergence of personhood are ineluctably mediated by other persons. (LaCugna 290)

Perhaps it is this last phrase—"the experience of God and the emergence of personhood are ineluctably mediated by other persons"—that most vividly characterizes the ethos and power of early Methodism. Again and again in Mason's writings—and in countless journals of other early Methodist men and women—we witness the same process of spiritual growth and deeper and more profound experiences of prayer and communion with God. From the vague uneasiness of solitary thought, to the greater comfort of private prayer, to the power of the presence of God manifested in the company of a class or a prayer meeting, Mason moves from self-absorption to self-emptying through the mediation and companionship of her sisters in the faith. One example from Mason's writings is both typical and exemplary of what is, in fact, a long and arduous journey from sinful isolation to social holiness:

Overcast in the morning, relieved in private devotion at noon, strengthened in class-meeting, instructed in religious company, and abundantly refreshed in the women's prayer-meeting in the evening. O! bless the Lord for the means of grace and religious privileges. (Mason, 45)

And for these early Methodists this mutuality and corporate spirituality will literally transform the world, ushering in the reign of God:

I was yesterday at a good, plain, female prayer-meeting. I found it good to be there. I could not but help thinking while there, if all our sisters throughout the connection should unite themselves in such meetings, we should have a gracious revival of the work of God among us.... I know not that I should be wrong in saying that most revivals of religion, from the holy women who followed and ministered to Jesus to the present day, commenced among females. And I believe that this is the secret agency that, under Divine Providence, will reform the world. This is the leaven that a woman hid in three measures of meal till the whole was leavened. (Mason 144)

Union with God is accomplished only when the love of God is mediated through other persons—in prayer meetings, class meetings, the sacrament of holy communion, quarterly meetings, love feasts. And the transformation of the creation, which groans in travail waiting for our transformation, is also initiated and furthered in holy companionship. But for Mason—and many, many other early Methodist women—claiming her calling is also a function of the gospel bonds of sisterhood.

This day the Lord has graciously owned my labors, with a couple more of my sisters, in forming a little society for the religious instruction and temporal relief of poor sick women. We met each other in the street, and found that our minds had been individually directed to the same thing. Our utmost ambition was to get five or six others to join us, and we proposed to each other to go among our acquaintances and solicit subscribers, and tonight we find that the Lord was with us, touching the hearts of the people, so that we have a hundred to give in their names as subscribers, and
sixteen to volunteer as managers, and all this has been brought about in a few days. Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thee be all the glory, O Lord! (Mason, 59)

After her marriage, Mason agonizes over the propriety of speaking and praying in public. She becomes so paralyzed with terror and anxiety that she drops out of her class meeting and withdraws from all the means of grace for fear that God will call upon her in any one of those contexts. She simply does not feel worthy. She does continue going to her women's prayer meeting, a safe enough place for a time. And then one day, her sisters in the faith decide to appoint Mason as their leader.

I bowed in submission and [the Lord] was pleased to manifest his presence and approbation at every meeting. I was also called upon to exercise the gifts he has bestowed in sundry ways; sometimes in leading a class, by exhortation or prayer in my school, in the Sabbath-School, or in several societies, of which I was a privileged member, but particularly in a select meeting where a number were wanted to pray for a deeper work of grace on their souls, even their entire sanctification. Here the Lord has sometimes almost overpowered me by his love. (Mason, 91)

The trinitarian life is marked by the reign of God; the community called together through the power of the Holy Spirit to be the body of Christ is a household distinguished by justice, equality, and love. Mason's societies were, of course, not such households of justice and equality. These were the middle-class organizations of financially comfortable Methodist women who poured themselves into raising funds for good works. But the institutions founded by Mason were extraordinarily inclusive ministries. Her journal reflects the exceptional dignity shown to the poor women she served, and her organizations and schools were racially diverse at a time when the Methodist Episcopal Church was rapidly backing away from its original stance against slavery. LaCugna's description of the trinitarian community is not so far from the deliberate efforts of Mason and other women to embrace and serve the most marginalized of persons:

The goal of the Christian community, constituted by the Spirit in union with Jesus Christ, is to provide a place where everyone is accepted as an ineffable, unique, and unrepeatable image of God, irrespective of how the dignity of a person might otherwise be determined: level of intelligence, political correctness, physical beauty, monetary value. The communion of persons, however, remains the context of personhood. The community of Jesus Christ is the one gathering place in which all persons are to be accepted and valued unconditionally, as equal partners in the divine dance. The equality of persons derives from the fact that all are equally companions in the mystery of divine-human communion. (LaCugna 299)

Classic in early Methodist diary literature is the explicit concern to live in imitatio Christi, to become Christ-like by living as Jesus lived. In dreams, visions, biblical meditation, and the concrete realities of a life often lived under persecution and in extreme hardship, early Methodists delighted in their call to become more and more like Jesus. LaCugna borrows the language of the Greek Fathers—deification or theosis, and speaks of this imitatio in very Wesleyan terms as well—becoming holy:
We were created for the purpose of glorifying God by living in right relationship by living as Jesus Christ did, by becoming holy through the power of the Spirit of God, by existing as persons in communion with God and every other creature. (LaCugna 342)

Deification is another name for...the common vocation to glory. In the process of being transformed and deified by the Holy Spirit, we come to resemble more closely Jesus himself. The Spirit enable us to embrace the enemy, to rejoice in others' happiness, to take care of those who lack in any respect. Conformity to Christ means participating in the very life of God, the life of communion among persons, divine and human, and among all other creatures. (LaCugna 346)

Mason, in quite a different use of language, also unconsciously adopts the imagery of the Greek theologians, in this instance the Cappadocians, as she prays to become more like Christ:

My God, continue to humble my spirit within me, until my soul shall melt in thy presence, like wax before the sun, and be thus prepared to take the impression of my blessed Redeemer. The preparation of the heart is of God, and this, I believe, is the preparation my soul requires, to receive the blessing I so ardently desire: namely, the whole mind of Christ to be implanted in me. (Mason, 100)

It can no doubt be argued persuasively that early nineteenth-century Methodists contributed little to the creative labor of formulating doctrine and collaborating with the more theologically adept Reformed brethren in the ongoing conversation about the nature and work of God. We are, after all, the spiritual children of a practical theologian, a theologian, as Albert Outler reminded us, "of the folk." We ought not look to early Methodists for much in the way of sophisticated wordplay and dogmatic complexities. If we are to learn from early Methodist women, we might turn our doctrinal agendas upside down and invite our sisters to teach us about the Trinity by showing us what it means to live a trinitarian faith with distinctively Methodist flair. Catherine LaCugna sketches out such a task:

Living trinitarian faith means living God's life: living from and for God, from and for others. Living trinitarian faith means living as Jesus Christ lived, in persona Christi: preaching the gospel; relying totally on God; offering healing and reconciliation; rejecting laws, customs, conventions, that place persons beneath rules; resisting temptation; praying constantly; eating with modern-day lepers and other outcasts; embracing the enemy and the sinner; dying for the sake of the gospel if it is God's will. Living trinitarian faith means living according to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit: training the eyes of the heart on God's face and name proclaimed before us in the economy; responding to God in faith, hope, and love; eventually becoming unrestrictedly united with God. Living trinitarian faith means living together in harmony and union with every other creature in the common household of God, 'doing all things to the praise and glory of God.' Living trinitarian faith means
adhering to the gospel of liberation from sin and fractured relationship: liberation from everything that misleads us into false worship, from everything that promotes unnatural, nonrelational personhood, from everything that displaces us to an exclusive household, from everything that deceives us into believing self-aggrandizing archisms [the setting up of something or someone other than God as the arche, the rule, over another]. (LaCugna 401)

And Mary Mason offers us a gospel word, and a vision in miniature of the trinitarian life:

I often feel my soul melted by love. Yet I long to love him more, to love him only, and those whom he loves.... I want to become holy and pure as mortal can be, and God would have me to be---wholly consecrated to him. I know this is my privilege, and the privilege of all whom God has created and Christ redeemed. (Mason, 27)

Sources:


Elizabeth Mason North. *Consecrated Talents: or, the Life of Mrs. Mary W. Mason*. New York: Carlton and Lanahan, 1870.