

# THE FORGOTTEN TRINITY IN CONTEMPORARY METHODISM

Norman Wallwork

This lecture was read at the  
Methodist Sacramental Fellowship Public Meeting  
during the Methodist Conference of 2004  
in Loughborough

The three classic locations for appreciating a Methodist approach to the Trinity are its writings, its liturgy and its hymnody.

## **The Trinity in Contemporary Methodist Theology**

In 1784, when Wesley revised the Book of Common Prayer, he reduced the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England to twenty-five. But, of course, heading those articles which remained was still the very first. 'There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts; of infinite power, wisdom and goodness; the Maker and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost' (Wesley; 1792:313).

Rather strangely perhaps, Wesley was not much given to defending the mystery and doctrine of the Trinity, though he mightily assumed it. Wesley made a point of distinguishing between the *fact* of the Trinity, which he undoubtedly accepted and proclaimed, and the *mystery* and manner of the Trinity, about which he was bluntly agnostic. 'I believe the fact,' he wrote, in 1771. 'As to the manner, (wherein the whole mystery lies), I believe nothing about it' (Wesley: 1872:XI 1:293).

In May 1775, while he was in Cork, Wesley was pressed to preach on the Trinity and then to prepare his sermon for publication. His text was from 1 John 5.7. 'There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.' Wesley assumed that the Trinity was one of the very few fundamental truths of Christianity. He praised Dean Swift's sermon on the subject. Wesley didn't mind whether believers used or ignored the actual words 'Trinity' and 'Persons.' What he did insist upon was that believers accepted the objective existence of Father, Son and Spirit and that they were one. He reiterates what he has said elsewhere – the fact of Father, Son and Holy Spirit he believes, but as to the manner of the mystery of the Trinity he is agnostic. Unlike the misguided Unitarians, Wesley's hearers will gladly rejoice that 'knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith; with all vital religion' (Wesley: 1872:VI:205). Wesley does not know how anyone can be a Christian believer till God the Holy Spirit witnesses that God the Father has accepted the believer through the merits of God the Son. When John Fletcher came to sum up Wesley's doctrine, he maintained that Wesley's entire teaching rested on only four fundamentals – the fall, justification through Christ's merits, sanctification by the Spirit, and worship of the one true God in the mysterious distinction of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as maintained in the three historic creeds of Christendom (Langford:1984:33).

British Methodism's first systematic theologian was Richard Watson, whose *Theological Institutes* was first published in 1833. Watson devotes four chapters and almost one hundred pages to the Trinity. Watson concludes his thesis on the Trinity with the observation that all heresies in relation to the doctrine spring from the attempt to make the mystery of the Three in One conceivable to the human mind. In this Watson was a disciple of Wesley. For Watson, at the heart of Christian devotion lies the truth that, though our approaches to the Father are made through the mediation of the Son, and by, or in dependence upon, or with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, yet this does not preclude our direct prayer to Christ and to the Holy Spirit. Direct ascriptions of glory can be addressed to each person of the Trinity. Watson insists, in the face of his contemporary Unitarian readers, that the Jesus of the gospels is the pre-existent Christ present in the unfolding salvation history of the Hebrew Scriptures. He cites as his authorities Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, Origen, Cyprian, Hilary and Basil (Watson:1877:II:261).

If Richard Watson dominated the first half of nineteenth century Methodist theology, William Burt Pope occupied the second and, for a century, ranked as British and American Methodism's greatest systematic theologian. Pope's three volume *Compendium of Christian Theology* was published in 1875 and 1876. An equally well-received second and enlarged edition was published in 1880. Pope dedicated thirty pages of his work to the Church's unfolding understanding of The Trinity in scripture and tradition. He ended his survey with the words, 'The doctrine of the ever-blessed Trinity is essential to Christianity: there is no Theology, there is no Christology without it. That the one divine essence exists in three eternal, co-equal, personal subsistences is the foundation of the Christian Faith. This has been the catholic belief, as the catholic interpretation of Scripture.. [and] though no human language can utter the mystery, Theology . . . demands that the Trinitarian phraseology should be ordered with careful precision as at least guarding the truth against the approach of error' (Pope: 1880:1:284-285).

The only other major Methodist systematic theologian is Geoffrey Wainwright, who was born in 1939, and whose writings are widely accepted and used by catholic and protestant academia on both sides of the Atlantic. Wainwright approaches Trinitarian theology via the language of liturgy and worship. Wainwright's *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* was first published in 1980. Though it contains no specific section on the Trinity, the implications of an orthodox understanding of the Trinity are treated in depth throughout the book.

At the very beginning of his work Wainwright reminds us of the eternal *perichoresis*, by which the divine Persons of the Trinity empty themselves into each other and receive each other's fullness. He also reminds us that the church's worship is a participation in this movement of divine, interpenetrative Trinitarian love. The same *perichoresis* is at the heart of all redeemed society and relationships (Wainwright: 1980:23,29).

Wainwright reminds us that, despite certain episodes in Christian history to the contrary, the church's great tradition is that its worship, even if it is addressed to Christ (and by implication to the Spirit), is *destined* for God the Father (Wainwright: 1980:60). We shall return to this crucial issue when we consider worship and hymnody in contemporary Methodism. Wainwright reminds us that in the development of Trinitarian theology it is impossible to overestimate the experience of the church which, from ancient times, initiated its new members by a baptism into the

Triune name, and knew it was possible to offer the great thanksgiving prayer at the eucharist only to the glory of the Father, through the work of the Son and by invocation of the Holy Spirit. Indeed the theology of receiving and being transformed by God's word in the reading of Scriptures and in the preaching is also ultimately an encounter with the glory of the Father, through the work of the Son and by invocation of the Holy Spirit. In fact, says Wainwright, there is also a recapitulatory encounter with the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit in the corporate recital of the creed in both initiation and eucharist (Wainwright: 1980:186). Wainwright also invites the church to rediscover that its best doctrines of atonement and its avoidance of the worst of them is dependent on a healthy understanding of the eternal relationship within the Trinity (Wainwright: 1980:210 and 480). This of course returns us to the fundamental thesis of *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which lies at the heart of Wainwright's *Doxology*, namely, either 'what is prayed indicates what is believed' or 'the rule of faith governs what is prayed' (Wainwright: 1980: 218). We shall note subsequently how this very issue is exposed and illustrated in the freer worship styles and the homespun liturgies of contemporary Methodism.

However, the lament before us has surely got to be the singular lack of any other systematic theology or theologian in twentieth or twenty-first century Methodism, either side of the Atlantic, to stand beside Geoffrey Wainwright. He is alone among Methodists in recalling us to the Trinitarian roots of our faith. Where are the Methodists to match the other English speaking theologians on the Trinity such as Kallistos Ware on *God as Trinity* (Ware: 1998:27), writing from within the Orthodox tradition? Or Christopher Cocksworth writing from within Anglicanism, with an entire book on *Worshipping the Trinitarian God* (Cocksworth: 1997)? Or Tom Torrance, from within the Scottish tradition, with a three hundred page book on *The Trinitarian Faith* (Torrance:1995)? Or Paul Fiddes, from within the Baptist tradition, with three hundred pages on *A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Fiddes:2000)? Or the late and lamented Colin Gunton, from within the United Reformed Tradition, writing thirteen major essays on the theme of *A Fully Trinitarian Theology* (Gunton:2003)? All this without mentioning either Moltmann's classic *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (Moltmann: 1981) or, from an earlier generation, Leonard Hodgson's *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Hodgson: 1944) or Claude Welch's major review of *The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Welch: 1952). Serious Methodist thinking and writing on the Trinity is profoundly absent from the contemporary Methodist scene, though there are a couple of the tiniest minuscule green Trinitarian shoots from Angela Shier-Jones and David Wilkinson in *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (Marsh: 2004).

### **The Trinity in Contemporary Methodist Liturgy**

When Wesley revised the Prayer Book Morning Service in his *Sunday Service* of 1784, there was a direct use of 'Father, Son and Holy Ghost' at the following points: in the opening versicles and responses, in the content of the *Te Deum*, at the end of the *Jubilate*, in the three sections of the Apostles' Creed, in the Pauline Grace from 2 Corinthians 13.14, in the opening and closing sections of The Litany, and in the Gloria and the Blessing at the end of the Communion Office. Any Methodist attending the Wesleyan Morning Office of Matins, Litany and Communion would have named or ascribed glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, no less than nine times.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, even those town and suburban churches that

had never used the Order of Morning Prayer had happily and regularly chanted the *Gloria Patri* at the end of their Canticles and Psalms, and used the *Gloria in Excelsis* and the Trinitarian Blessing at the end of the Communion Office.

In the 1975 *Methodist Service Book* there was an order for *The Sunday Service without the Lord's Supper*. All five of the sample prayers of Thanksgiving were strongly Trinitarian and everyone of them referred by name to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the 1975 communion order the *Great Prayer of Thanksgiving* was addressed by name to the Father, invoked the Holy Spirit by name and, in the opening preface, referred twice, by name, to God the Son. The 1975 eucharist included the Nicene Creed and the 1975 preaching service included the Apostles' Creed. The current *Methodist Worship Book* of 1999 is positively dripping with Trinitarian formulae invoking or blessing God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is a minimum of four each in morning and evening *Daily Prayer*; there are six in the first order for a *Morning, Afternoon or Evening Service* and four in the second. All seventeen of the eucharistic prayers and their contexts are heavily Trinitarian, with constant doxologies, invocations or blessings referring to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But there are, in contemporary Methodist worship, two significant practices that render our worship almost totally devoid of all use of the historic Trinitarian formula.

The first can be illustrated from the *Iona Abbey Worship Book* of 2001. The book contains 250 pages. Apart from the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed, to which an alternative is provided, there is not a single reference, by name, to God the Father. The references by name to God the Son are sparse. Because the book is heavily influenced by so-called Celtic spirituality the liturgies are strongly Trinitarian in atmosphere, yet almost every Trinitarian reference is either to God, Christ and the Spirit, or to God, Jesus and the Spirit, or to the Creator or the Maker, and Christ and the Spirit. What is completely lacking from all 250 pages is any use of a Trinitarian formula that implies there is any relationship between the persons of the Godhead. Throughout the book there is not a single reference to the eternal relationship between God the Father and God the Son. This tendency, on the grounds of a genderless Trinity, brings the users of Iona liturgies well inside the bounds of incipient Unitarianism. Of course the trend, in many worship books, to reduce the three persons of the Trinity to their job descriptions rather than their objective personhood and relationship is not new. On July 13th 1771, Wesley referred to this very custom in a letter to Jane Catherine March, in which he observed, 'The quaint device of styling (the Trinity as) three offices rather than persons, gives up the whole doctrine' (Wesley: 1872:XII:293).

The second instance which renders contemporary Methodist worship almost devoid of all use of the historic Trinitarian formula is quite simply that in many of our ordinary Sunday services there are no references to the Trinity at all! Unless our preachers use the more conservative prayer anthologies of Susan Sayers, Nick Fawcett or the Methodist series *Companion to the Revised Common Lectionary*, there is little hope of a mention of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This applies to the absence of the Trinity in the opening prayers of invocation or adoration. There are usually no references to the Trinity in the act of penitence. The collect of the day with a shorter or longer Trinitarian doxology is omitted. In free prayer there is hardly ever any direct naming of the Trinity in the prayers of thanksgiving or intercession. Where the Psalter is used, the psalm of the day usually deputizes for the Old Testament reading, with no corporate reading or singing of a prose psalm with its *Gloria Patri*. The reciting of the

Apostles' Creed is unheard of. At the end of the service, the Trinitarian blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, has given way to the rather odd habit of everybody saying the Pauline grace to each other and at the same time bobbing their heads at each other like noddy dogs and grinning like Cheshire cats! The sad truth is that the virtual disappearance of the Trinity from the Methodist preaching service is now paralleled in those evangelical Anglican parishes where, without a weekly eucharist as the main act of Sunday worship, sung Matins has been replaced by an informal and happy service, with very few common texts containing any reference to the Trinity.

In many of our more intense or informal Methodist and Anglican services, most prayer references seem to be simply to 'God,' or often to someone addressed by the single word 'Lord.' The prayer then oscillates between being addressed now to the Father and now to the Son and perhaps, when the penny drops, back again to the Father.

Many contemporary Methodist worship leaders appear to spend the entire worship hour simply addressing Jesus. It is hard to know which is the more reductionist – on the one hand, the radical Quaker-type Methodist who has long ago lost sight of the Trinity and is content to be left only with Jesus, the activist Rabbi from Nazareth, or, on the other hand, the somewhat naive type of evangelical, who appears neither to have heard of nor known the Trinity and spends all moments of public praise simply and really just thanking Jesus, their personal Saviour, Lord and Friend.

The fundamental weakness in each of these approaches is the implicit rejection of the notion that we worship in communion and fellowship with the universal church. The rich Trinitarian forms and imagery of the Orthodox East and the Catholic West, and of the liturgies of the Reformation, are not some antiquarian fad. They do, in fact, constitute the defining language of the fullness of the Christian faith. This is why writers of the calibre of Tom Torrance and Geoffrey Wainright are so anxious, in their Trinitarian writings, about current trends. It is an undeniable fact that, if the early Fathers had not invested their blood, toil, sweat and tears in the fullness of the Trinity in creed, liturgy, preaching, apologetics and devotion, the entire course of Christianity would have fallen dead in its tracks. Liturgically many of our contemporary acts of worship, if they have not already become seriously sub-Christian, are speedily heading in that direction.

Perhaps the oft heard plea to Methodist superintendents from many a supernumerary or local preacher, 'Please don't plan me on Trinity Sunday,' says it all!

### **The Trinity In Contemporary Methodist Hymnody**

One of the strongest pieces of writing against the outbreak of 18th century Arianism in England was a work by the Anglican divine, William Jones of Nayland. It bore the glorious title, *The Catholic Doctrine of a Trinity proved by above an hundred short and dear arguments, expressed in terms of holy Scripture, compared after a manner entirely new, and digested under the four following Titles: 1. The Divinity of Christ; 2. The Divinity of the Holy Ghost; 3. The Plurality of Persons; 4. The Trinity in Unity with a few reflections &c.* The third edition of Jones work, published in 1767, was just what John and Charles Wesley needed. Brother Charles digested Jones original 119 sections, baptized them by full immersion into Methodism's experimental and evangelical religion and turned them into 136 hymns. To these Charles added an

appendix of 52 *Hymns and Prayers on the Trinity* and, in the same year as Jones definitive 3rd Edition, the Wesleys published their 188 *Hymns on the Trinity* {Osborne:1870:VII:201}. The finest hymn in the collection is, of course, *Hail holy, holy, holy Lord*, with its memorable stanza:

One undivided Trinity  
With triumph we proclaim;  
Thy universe is full of thee,  
And speaks thy glorious name. (HP: 1983:6)

Of course Charles wrote his finest Trinitarian hymns outside of the context of anti-Arian polemic. These surely include: *Father of everlasting grace* (1746) (HP:1983:300), *Father, in whom we live and move* (1747) (HP: 1983:4), *Father, Son and Holy Ghost* (1745) (HP:1983:791) and, perhaps Wesley's most amazing Trinitarian hymn of all, to which we shall return, *Sinners, obey the gospel word* (Osborne: 1870.V:63).

Now if any of Charles Wesley hymns are regularly chosen by contemporary Methodist preachers, what is the betting that his Trinity hymns will not be among them, even though each of them offers a superb opening act of praise on most of the ordinary Sundays of the year? Linked with the neglect of Charles Wesley's Trinitarian hymns is, of course, the demise of the other very fine Trinitarian hymns in our present hymnbook. When did many congregations last sing Watts' *We give immortal praise* (HP: 1963:18), Dryden's version of *Creator Spirit* (HP: 1983:286) or Coffin's little gem from the Latin Breviary, *O Holy Spirit, Lord of grace* (HP: 1983:310)?

Out of the current hymn book's general Trinitarian hymns we are probably left with *Thou whose almighty Word* (HP: 1983:29), *Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us* (HP: 1983:68) and one or two good last verse doxologies such as *Angel voices ever singing* (HP: 1983: 484), *The God of Abraham praise* (HP 1983:452), *Blessed city, heavenly Salem* (HP 1983:485) and *Now thank we all our God* (HP:1983:566).

It is interesting to note, in this context, that despite the doxological last verse tradition in Scottish metrical psalms and the popularity of Vaughan Williams' setting of the *Old Hundredth*, subsequent editors of Methodist hymn books have stubbornly and consistently omitted the doxology from *All people that on earth do well*.

One bright spot in the gloomy indifference to the Trinity in much contemporary evangelical praise is, of course, the frequent singing of Thomas Ken's Doxology. In some Methodist churches the custom has developed of singing the doxology as the offering is brought forward.

But the real reduction in Trinitarian praise has come about in those Methodist churches that in large measure have gone over to *Mission Praise*.

In the labyrinth of contemporary evangelical praise, any hymns or worship songs about the glory and love that passes between Father, Son and Holy Spirit will not be found. There are a cluster of hymns and songs with a verse addressed in turn to each person of the Trinity, but the middle verse is invariably addressed to Jesus, with the title of Son rarely mentioned. There is no serious absence of the naming of God as Father nor of the invocation of the Spirit. However, there are two serious issues in contemporary evangelical praise and worship that have gone largely unaddressed.

The first is the issue raised in his *Doxology* by Geoffrey Wainwright. Hymns in Christian worship may sometimes restore the balance, but they can just as easily upset

it. All praise, even if it appears to be addressed to the Son or the Spirit, is ultimately addressed to the Father. This golden rule is largely maintained in the full weight of classic hymnody. Those hymns, by such authors as Charles Wesley, which are addressed to the Son or to the Spirit are in a minority in their overall canon. This is especially true of the hymns of Wesley addressed to the Spirit. However, the number of hymns or songs in the contemporary canon of evangelical praise that dwell on the Spirit is dangerously out of balance.

Even more serious is the place that the contemporary canon of evangelical praise gives to Jesus. There is no end to it! Given the amount of praise and worship songs that dominate contemporary evangelical worship the dominance of ‘Jesus only’ language is terrifying. Of the 800 items in *Mission Praise* half are addressed to the Lord of the psalmist. Of those that remain, a high number are addressed to the Spirit throughout, and a huge proportion only to Jesus. Compared with the Orthodox East and the Catholic West, one would be forgiven for surmising that the contemporary canon of evangelical praise either belongs to another religion or, at best, is a serious departure from the age-long understanding of Christian worship. In 1948 the English and Welsh Presbyterians issued a *Service Book* in which a rubric was inserted at three points in each liturgy of the word. The first hymn was to be addressed to or to be about God the Father, the second was to be addressed to or to be about the work of God the Son, and the third was to be addressed to or to be about the work of God the Holy Spirit – a modest attempt even then to restore a missing balance.

Every Methodist knows that, when John Wesley returned to preach in his native Epworth, and was refused entry to the Parish Church, he preached, as was his right, from his father’s tombstone. It is interesting to recall the words that were carved, at Samuel’s request, on the slab which, at that moment, lay beneath John Wesley’s feet:

‘As he liv’d so he died  
in the true Catholick faith  
of the Holy Trinity in unity  
and that Jesus Christ is God incarnate:  
and the only Saviour of mankind.’

On the grounds of *lex orandi, lex credendi*, contemporary Methodists must, I fear, address the serious erosion of the doctrine and worship of the Holy Trinity. First, apart from Geoffrey Wainwright, there is no other in depth work on the Trinity by any present day Methodist theologian. Secondly, the lemming-like rush towards gender inclusive phrases for the Trinity has left us at best with three separate entities – God, Christ and the Spirit –and at worst with the wholly inadequate and deeply heretical reductionist Creator, Redeemer and Renewer. Thirdly, the contemporary canon of evangelical praise is wholly unbalanced in the light of universal Trinitarian doxology. If we add to this the simple lack of almost all references to the Trinity in contemporary Methodist preaching services we are in a parlous state.

In the 1749 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, Charles Wesley published a remarkable hymn on the parable of the prodigal son. Wesley could not resist the thought that the returning sinner was, as in the open invitation in Rublev’s famous icon, being welcomed home, to share the very hospitality of the adoring Trinity and, for good measure, the joyous welcome of the full concourse of heaven. The hymn was inspired by Luke 15.17, ‘Come, for all things are now ready.’ Even in the shortened version we used to sing in *The Methodist Hymn Book*, only Charles Wesley could employ the word ‘ready’ seven times in twenty lines.

Sinners, obey the gospel word;  
Haste to the supper of my Lord!  
Be wise to know your gracious day;  
All things are ready, come away.

Ready the Father is to own  
And kiss his late returning son;  
Ready your loving Saviour stands,  
And spreads for you his gracious hands.

Ready the Spirit of his love,  
Just now the hardness to remove,  
To apply, and witness with the blood,  
And wash and seal the sons of God.

Ready for you the angels wait,  
To triumph in your blest estate;  
Tuning their harps, they long to praise  
The wonders of redeeming grace.

The Father, Son and Holy Ghost  
Is ready, with the shining host;  
All heaven is ready to resound:  
The dead's alive, the lost is found! (MHB: 1933:326)

## References

- Cocksworth, C (1997): *Holy, Holy, Holy; Worshipping the Trinitarian God*, London: DLT
- Fiddes, P S (2000): *Participating in God*, London: DLT
- Gunton, C E (2003): *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, London: Continuum
- Hodgson, L (1943): *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, London: Nisbet
- Jones, W (1767): *The Catholic Doctrine of a Trinity &c*, London
- Langford, T A (1984): *Wesleyan Theology*, Durham, NC
- Marsh, C (Ed) (2004): *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, London: Continuum
- Moltmann, J (1981) : *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, London: SCM Press
- Osborne G (Ed) (1872): *The Works of Rev. John Wesley*, London
- Pope, W B (1880): *A Compendium of Christian Theology*, London
- Torrance, T F (1988): *The Trinitarian Faith*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark
- Wainwright, G (1980); *Doxology*, London: Epworth Press
- Ware, K (1998): *The Orthodox Way*, New York: St Vladimir's Press
- Watson, R (1877): *Theological Institutes*, London
- Welch, C (1953): *The Trinity in Contemporary Theology*, London: SCM Press
- Wesley, J (1792): *The Sunday Service of the Methodists* (Fourth edition)
- The Methodist Service Book* (1975): London: Methodist Publishing House
- The Methodist Worship Book* (1999): London: Methodist Publishing House
- Iona Abbey Worship Book* (2001): Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications
- MHB (1933): *The Methodist Hymn Book*, London : Methodist Conference
- HP (1983): *Hymns and Psalms*, London: Methodist Publishing House