

# WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THE FATHER?

## The Jesus Heresy in Modern Worship

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I want to begin with three snapshots:

- It is the year 1999. All over the United Kingdom, large, green oval plaques are appearing on the facades of Christian churches. They announce that the millennium is 'Christ's birthday' and that if people would only come inside the church, they could 'worship Him here.'
- It is the Sunday before Christmas, 2001, and a play is being presented at the main worship service of a local Methodist Church by the members of the youth group. In the play, three characters, identified as 'God,' 'Jesus' and the 'Holy Spirit', are debating among themselves which of them should 'go down to earth' and live among human beings. Jesus wins, and God and the Holy Spirit are left to twiddle their supernal thumbs for the next thirty-three years or so.
- It is Ordination Sunday at the Annual Conference of British Methodism, June 30, 2002, and in a number of local churches in and around Wolverhampton the solemn rites of ordination to the diaconate and presbyterate are being conducted. As the Lord's Supper reaches its climax in the act of communion, the congregation joins in the words of the hymn:

From heaven you came helpless babe,  
Entered our world, your glory veiled ...  
This is our God, the Servant King,  
He calls us now to follow him,  
To bring our lives as a daily offering  
Of worship to the Servant King.

The title of this 2002 Methodist Sacramental Fellowship Lecture is 'What ever Happened to the Father? The Jesus Heresy in Modern Worship,' and so the

question becomes, what is happening to the public worship of God? Is worship of the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit an endangered species in the 21st century Christian Church? Are there particular trends characteristic of this particular moment of our Christian liturgical history that are militating against an explicitly Trinitarian shape to our contemporary common prayer? And, maybe most important of all, why should we bother to ask these kinds of questions, why does any of this matter after the events of 11 September 2001, when we have so many other matters to worry about, matters of life and death?

Many of you will have spotted that tricky word 'heresy' in the title of this paper. And perhaps you think that it is an odd word to find in a Methodist essay at the turn of the 21st century. Neither the perennial Methodist concern with the optimistic inclusivism of God's mercy, nor the post-modern concern with equally viable alternative life strategies makes the word 'heresy' a very congenial one to most of us. But let me remind you that the root meaning of the word *haerisis* is choice, choice among mutually exclusive options in thought, word, and action. And that is, it seems to me, exactly what we have laid out before us, a choice between two distinct theological and liturgical options. And choices have implications, so it will also be important to ask here, 'What are the implication of each choice? If we put Jesus at the centre of our worship, what implications does that have for the Christian faith and life, for our relations with other Christians, and with the world around us?'

### **The Diagnosis:**

One of the problems with this whole question of putting Jesus at the centre of Christian worship is that the New Testament is less than crystal clear on the matter, and the texts of the New Testament seem to reflect a debate already going on within the earliest Christian communities about the degree to which liturgical homage is to be paid directly to Jesus. So while the teaching of Jesus himself on the matter of worship and his own worship life are centred on the God whom he calls 'Father' we also get, in the letter to the Philippians, for example, Christological hymns: 'Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (*Philippians 2.9-11*). This was a time when Christology was still being worked out: the earliest Christians asking the question, 'Just who was this Jesus whom we knew? Just who is this Jesus whom we experience now, risen and alive in our midst?' And Christology wasn't being worked out in this early period primarily in theological treatises and learned disputations, but in worship: 'they knew him in the breaking of the bread.'

This means that the ambiguities about the object of our worship run very, very deep in our Christian past. Some of the earliest prayers we have are prayers addressed to Jesus Christ, and these aren't heterodox prayers, but prayers attributed to such

theological heavyweights as Gregory Nazianzus, Saint Augustine, and Ephrem the Syrian. This one by Ambrose of Milan is typical of this genre:

Lord Jesus Christ, who did stretch your hands on the cross, and redeem us by your blood; forgive me, a sinner, for none of my thoughts are hidden from you. Pardon I ask, pardon I hope for, pardon I trust to have. You, who are pitiful and merciful: spare me and forgive.

Most of these prayers to Jesus are devotional prayers. But some are liturgical prayers, to be said by the whole Christian congregation, like this one from the ancient Syriac liturgy (circa late 3rd century):

From all Eternity, O Jesus Christ, you have been our Lord and our God; so did the Father will it. Yet in this, the last of all periods of time, you also had your birth; you were born of a Virgin, of one who had no knowledge of any man... Deliver us, now, Lord, from all that is vain; fulfill your promise and free us from sin and shame; fill our hearts with your Holy Spirit and enable us to say: 'Abba, Father.' Make us true children of your Father. Protect us against all the evil of the world. Grant that we may celebrate this feast in peace. Accept your servants' petitions, as you accepted the confession of Anna, the prophetess. Instead of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, take the pure homage of the worship we offer you. And fill us with the good things that are in your kingdom...

Most liturgical prayer addressed to Christ in this early period is petitionary prayer, prayer for the forgiveness of our sin, and probably resting on the assurance Jesus gives in chapter 5 of John's Gospel: 'The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son; so that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father.' Most of this kind of Christocentric petitionary prayer found a home in the Eastern rites, such as this one from the Liturgy of Saint James:

O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, Lamb and Shepherd, who takest away the sin of the world, who did freely forgive the debts of the two debtors, and gave remission of her sins to the woman that was a sinner, who gave healing to the paralytic, with the remission of his sins; forgive, remit, pardon, O God, our offences, voluntary and involuntary, in knowledge and in ignorance, by transgression and by disobedience, which thy all-Holy Spirit knows better than thy servants do.

And of course with their deep knowledge of and love for these ancient sources, John and Charles Wesley felt entirely comfortable in addressing their own petitionary hymns to Jesus.

Jesus, my strength, my hope,  
On thee I cast my care,  
With humble confidence look up,  
And know thou hear'st my prayer.  
Give me on thee to wait,  
Till I can all things do,  
On thee, almighty to create,  
Almighty to renew.                   (*Hymns and Psalms* 680)<sup>1</sup>

But if this is so, if prayer addressed to Jesus has a certain distinguished pedigree, in the church at large and within our own denominational tradition as Methodist Christians, then what's the problem? Has something changed so dramatically that we are willing to use such terms as 'heresy' when we talk about it? Well it seems to me that it has. And the change is a fairly simple one, if Trinitarian theology can ever be said to be simple. In all of these cases we have looked at from the Christian past, whether in the first century, or the third, or the eighteenth, when the name of Jesus is invoked in prayer, the person being addressed is emphatically not the historical Jesus, the man of Nazareth, but rather the Risen and Ascended Christ, the Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity. There has always been a profound concern that this kind of prayer which speaks of Jesus Christ does nothing whatsoever to undermine faith in the unity of God. The ultimate object of our worship is always the same as the object of Jesus' earthly worship: 'Father in heaven, holy is your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven ...' (*Matthew 6.8ff*) 'Father, if it is your will, remove this cup from me...' (*Luke 22.42*) 'Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing ...' (*Luke 23.34*)

Now this may seem a fine distinction, the distinction between Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus the Christ, but it is an absolutely critical one for both theology and worship, and it is a distinction that unfortunately seems to be lost on many of today's worship leaders, hymn-writers, youth-group skit producers, and ecclesiastical sign-makers. As I look around the contemporary scene, I see several things happening. I see liturgical attention to the Triune God decreasing as liturgical attention to Jesus increases. I see liturgical attention to Jesus of Nazareth increasingly replacing liturgical attention to the Risen and Ascended Christ. And I see liturgical attention to God the Father being gradually abandoned. In some churches the person of Jesus has become virtually the sole object of congregational worship, the name of God the Father is almost never invoked. At the same time, Jesus has gradually taken on all of the key theological attributes of the Triune God. For example, the Graham Kendrick hymn referred to above, that is regularly sung at our ordination services, is clearly talking about Jesus (the 'helpless babe' of the song), but describes him as having 'hands that flung stars into space.'

Increasingly, too, various liturgical ministries have begun to be defined by their role in leading the congregation in the worship of Jesus. In a recent issue of *Worship*

*Leader Magazine*, a publication whose target audience is those interested in the ways and means of contemporary styles of worship, an article on 'the ministry of sound mixing' says that: 'The goal of the church audio team is to provide audio that is worthy of the worship of Jesus. This goal is best accomplished by ministering to the technical, physical, and spiritual needs of... those ministering to the congregation, so that we can impart that message to the hearts and ears of the Body of Christ.'<sup>2</sup>

There are relatively few liturgical prayers in which the Church has regularly demanded that the traditional Triune name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be invoked – in the baptismal formula, the prayer at the laying on of hands at ordinations, the eucharistic prayer, for example – but in these places it has usually served to indicate to the whole Church a particular community's adherence to the Nicene faith and its claim to be a part of the wider Christian family. But in many places today various substitutions are routinely being made for the Trinitarian formula in the sacramental rites, some of which are being made fairly close to home, as it were.

Many of these approaches to liturgical prayer represent new incarnations of old theologies and Christologies which the Church rejected in its earliest centuries as being 'heretical,' theological choices which would result in serious consequences for the redemption of humankind – modalism, monophysitism, Gnosticism, and so forth. But because most advocates of these liturgical options do not share the philosophical framework and presuppositions of our ancient Christian forebears – neither do we, for that matter – to accuse someone of being, for example, a neo-Sabellian, will hardly be helpful, however accurate. It will be more useful, I think, to consider the sources of these calls for the worship of Jesus, and to talk seriously about some of the contemporary redemptive consequences of the liturgical choices being made today.

### **The antecedents:**

This current trend away from the idea that all true Christian worship is necessarily worship of the Father through the Son and in the power of the Spirit arises from at least three distinct sources. The one which probably first comes to mind is the Evangelical Revival. Now we commonly think of Evangelicalism as a monolithic entity, but it is hardly as simple as that: its character and its impact on Christian worship have changed over time, from the first wave which appeared in the eighteenth century, through the second wave in the nineteenth century, and then onto the most recent wave in the late twentieth century which is now having a considerable impact on the worship of 21st century churches.

Now of course we Methodists are at the centre of that first manifestation of Evangelical revival in the eighteenth century. John Wesley and those early Methodist people were seized by the overwhelming sense that God's mercy not only manifests itself as

a sort of general beneficence to all humankind, but also as a personal assurance of love and promise. And John and Charles Wesley make this point over and over again in the prayers and hymns they commend to the Methodist people: 'Tis mercy all, immense and free,' Charles Wesley says, 'For O, my God, it found out me!' (*HP 216*) And the centre of gravity of that experience of grace is Jesus Christ – the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the perpetual intercession of Christ before the throne of grace: in this sense it is a Christocentric piety.

But the eighteenth century revival always managed to balance this strong concern with heart religion, and this strong sense of the mediatorship of Jesus Christ, with an equally strong concern for maintaining the Trinitarian shape of faith and of Christian worship. The experiential core of faith was an experience of the mercy of God the Father through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our reconciliation is a work of God the Father, accomplished in Christ Jesus and carried forward and manifested by the work of the Spirit. This is surely what the Wesleys believed. For Charles Wesley:

The incarnation was an act of God:

Father, whose everlasting love  
Thy only Son for sinners gave,  
Whose grace to all did freely move,  
And sent him down the world to save:     (*HP 520*)

The Cross was an act of God:

My Lord, my love is crucified –  
Is crucified for me and you,  
To bring us rebels back to God,  
Believe, believe the record true ...     (*HP 175*)

The salvific results are acts of God:

The Father hears him pray,  
His dear anointed one;  
He cannot turn away  
The presence of his Son:  
His Spirit answers to the blood,  
And tells me I am born of God.     (*HP 217*)

The continuing Christian life is an act of God:

Father, thy mercies past we own,  
Thy still continued care;  
To thee presenting, through thy Son,  
Whate'er we have or are. (HP 360)

For Charles Silvester Horne, even the promised Second Coming is a work of God:

Kingdom of Christ, for thy coming we pray,  
Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day  
When this new song thy creation shall sing:  
Satan is vanquished and Jesus Is King. (HP 244)

At the same time, the early Methodists understood the crucial difference between devotional and liturgical prayer; between *closet prayer*, prayer through which the heart and soul can explore the furthest reaches of faith and doubt, and which can express a very individual form of religious personality, and the prayer *of the community*, prayer which reflects its common longing and common faith, prayer which connects the community's prayer with the wider prayer of the Church, and which nurtures and reflects its theology.

The nineteenth century wave of Evangelical revival, which had perhaps a more profound impact on American Methodism than on English Methodism, but which did not leave English Methodism untouched, shared the concern of its eighteenth century counterpart with experiential faith and personal assurance of salvation. But for nineteenth century evangelicals, it was experience of friendship with and love for the man Jesus, combined with a particular kind of Jesus-initiated atonement theory, which was at the heart of this experience, and which became the centre and starting place of all Christian theology and worship. And this became intertwined with a kind of romanticism about the person of Jesus which gave rise to a whole genre of hymns and prayers that border on the erotic when describing the worshipper's relationship with Jesus:

When I'm with Him, when I'm with Him,  
The fairest pleasures of the world grow dim;  
And in my heart I feel the thrill of glory,  
When I'm with Him, when I'm with Him.

The twentieth century wave of the Evangelical revival only exacerbated these trends. It managed to combine this theological and spiritual longing for an intimate relationship with Jesus with a desire for a more user-friendly form of religiosity which would appeal to the unchurched and the unhappily churched. Now as a devotional and evangelist! strategy, this combination has myriad benefits, and many, many people have been brought to faith and have matured in faith as result of this deep concern that people claim for themselves the life changing message of the Gospel.

But while it may be a successful devotional and evangelistic strategy, this particular combination of attention to Jesus and accessibility has all too often had an undesirable effect on public worship in the evangelical mode. In many instances, Jesus of Nazareth is portrayed in worship as the 'softer side of God;' if God the Father is the remote and angry judge of human misdeeds, and the ruler of the universe, then the human Jesus is the confidant, the one who understands our woes, share in our misfortunes, and feels compassion for our various human predicaments. We need to focus on Jesus in worship because God the Father is unapproachable. For Jesus' care we are grateful, we are indebted, we are adoring. In short, Jesus becomes the object of worship in his own right, resulting in a kind of Jesus-centered Unitarianism, shading over occasionally into what Sallie McFague first described as 'Jesus-olatry.'<sup>3</sup>

This trend toward the centrality of Jesus in Evangelical worship is exemplified in one of the most popular of contemporary praise hymns:

When the music fades,  
all is stripped away,  
and I simply come.  
Longing just to bring  
something that's of worth  
that will bless Your heart.

*Chorus:*

I'm coming back to the heart of worship,  
and it's all about You, all about You, Jesus.  
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it,  
when it's all about You, all about You, Jesus.

If you think of the vast number of praise choruses, hymnals, worship manuals and websites out there which are written by and consumed by those who would identify themselves as Evangelicals, you begin to catch a glimpse of the impact of the Evangelical renewal on contemporary Christian worship. So that is the first important stimulus to the abandonment of Father in contemporary worship: a displacement of the legitimate evangelical concerns with the experience of Jesus, the desire to avoid the more 'negative' theological attributes of the Fatherhood of God, and a blurring of the traditional distinctions between devotional and liturgical prayer.

The second stimulus to an abandonment of Trinitarian worship has been feminist theology and the desire of many Christians to construct a truly gender-inclusive liturgical language. Now in and of themselves these are noble efforts. Feminist calls for an expansion of our language about God to include a wider range of Biblical images and metaphors, calls to avoid using words that hurt or demean women, calls to recognize that our language about God can become as idolatrous as any graven

image: all these have allowed us to explore the terrain of Christian faith in new and often surprising ways. Feminist theologians have understood, more clearly than most, the power of Christian worship to shape people's values, attitudes, and theological perspectives, and as a result most of us have quite happily incorporated various insights from feminist theology into our liturgical practice. We have become sensitive to language that suggests that God is male, we have become sensitive to language about human beings that presumes that the normative human experience is male, we have become sensitive to language that ascribes negative spiritual attributes to women: weakness, capriciousness, infidelity.

One of the things that many feminists have called for has been the modification or abandonment of certain liturgical words. And probably the most consistent call is for the abandonment of what many of my women friends refer to as 'the "F" word' (Father), and for the modification of the traditional triune name of God. For feminist theologians and liturgists, the word 'Father' represents a whole history of patriarchal dominance in Church and society, and can be understood only as denoting the maleness of the God who is, in truth, beyond human gender. And as you know, most advocate the substitution of other terms for Father: 'Mother,' or 'Parent' or 'Mother and Father.' So, if you look at the new *Methodist Worship Book*, one of the eucharistic prayers begins: 'God, our Father and Mother...'<sup>4</sup> But most of those concerned with the patriarchal associations of the word Father have simply advocated the abandonment of Father altogether as being 'too hot to handle,' opting for the undifferentiated 'God' as the designator for the mystery of the Trinity. Again, the new *Methodist Worship Book* has followed this route in several of the seasonal eucharistic prayers, such as the one for Lent: 'Blessing and praise belong to you, gracious and eternal God. Through your living Word, you created all things...' And although it is a slightly different problem than the problem of Jesus-centred worship, the Trinitarian alternatives proposed by liturgists influenced by Christian feminism have had quite wide currency as well: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer is probably the most commonly used.

Now again, in private devotional prayer these experiments with alternative appellations for the deity can be enormously effective and illuminating. They can heal the soul and enlarge the human heart. But the question arises, what happens when Father drops out of the common prayer of the Christian community altogether? And what happens when the first person of the Trinity is never invoked in those particular liturgical situations where both historical and ecumenical consensus have agreed it should be invoked? Does this push the community's prayer outside the bounds of Christian 'orthodoxy,' of 'right praise'?

The third stream of influence on the Trinitarian shape of worship in the contemporary church is the movement which seeks to inculturate worship to the socio-cultural conditions of the present age. The argument is that worship will never be acceptable to the computer, music video, TV generation if we continue to pray, sing and preach as

we have done in the past. These people are convinced that it is only through the use of the various contemporary media, including power-point, drama, wide-screen projection systems, modern electronic music, that the worship of the church can continue as a source of Christian nurture in the future. Unfortunately, the culture to which worship is being adapted is a culture in which precision and dignity in language is fairly low, and which largely does not share the philosophical presuppositions that lie at the roots of traditional Trinitarian theology. It is a culture where individual feelings are exalted above thought and will.

This desire to conform worship to contemporary culture has several immediate consequences for the shape of Christian common prayer. First, it tends, once again, to place Jesus at the centre of Christian worship. God as a Trinitarian mystery of persons in relationship doesn't make very good video; Jesus of Nazareth is a much better subject for contemporary media of all kinds. And, second, it tends to simplify and flatten the language about God that is used in worship. So you get songs like: 'Shine, Jesus Shine, and 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, there's just something about that name.' These are not wildly unorthodox, theologically, they simply have no theological content whatsoever. And, third, you get a preponderance of liturgical language about how the worshipper feels about Jesus, rather than any content about the nature of God's saving presence in and through Christ.

Songwriter Church Girard's 'Feel the Love' is one example of the hundreds of these kinds of worship songs:

Save the doubting for the morning sun,  
Bringing daylight where there once was none.  
Feel the warmth that each new day can bring  
By believing,... by receiving Him.  
Feel the lo...o.o.o...o.o.o...o...ve  
Feel the lo...o.o.o...o..o.o...o...ve

And as much as the hymn we looked at a few minutes ago insisted that 'It's all about You, Jesus,' when you read the lyrics carefully, it's really all about me.

Now Charles Wesley wrote some pretty emotive hymns about Jesus, but no matter how simple they seemed, they were full of content about the nature of the Christian life and faith.

Love divine all loves excelling,  
Joy of heaven to earth come down,  
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
All thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesu, thou art all compassion,  
Pure, unbounded love thou art;

Visit us with thy salvation,  
Enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,  
Let us all thy life receive;  
Suddenly return and never,  
Never more thy temples leave... *(HP 267)*

Passionate, multivalent, full of theological subtlety, this hymn was written by someone who cared deeply about both the expression of a heartfelt, prayerful religiosity and about the teaching of key Christological concepts to congregations of Christian believers: incarnation, kenosis, the growing of the faithful person into the 'full stature of Christ,' the perfection of Christ's sacrifice in the Christian believer, and so on. Somehow, against this, 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, there's just something about that name. Master, Saviour, Jesus, like the fragrance after the rain' doesn't quite measure up.

### **The Implications:**

So why does any of this matter? At the simplest level, it has implications for faith. Christian worship is the primary place where people internalize the Christian system, where they learn the language of faith, where they are able to find their voices in song and prayer and proclamation and sacrament. When people are deprived of a rich and subtle language about God, it deprives them of their legitimate theological and spiritual inheritance. So, for example, if you've never been given the language in worship which enables you to talk about salvation as an emphatically Trinitarian project, a project of God the Father, in and through the life, death, and resurrection of the Son, and recognized and responded to in the power of the Holy Spirit, then you are likely to see it only in narrowly personalistic terms: 'through a personal relationship with Jesus I am personally transferred from being "lost" to being "saved."' And this becomes the sole object of the process of redemption, to get me from one box into the other. Now that may be some form of Christian theology, but it certainly isn't Methodist theology. Methodist theology begins and ends with the loving purposes of God to restore the world to eternal friendship with God, and everything – including Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, including my own relationship with God in Christ – is a part of that overarching purpose. In other words, my salvation is not the end of the story, it is for some larger redemptive activity of God directed at every single human being and every single human system: political, social, religious. If you place your entire theological and liturgical focus on the person of Jesus, you are much more likely to narrow the scope of God's redemptive activity. This is part of the reason why sacramental practice has such a marginal place in the liturgical lives of those whose worship is essentially Jesus-centred. Many of these Jesus-centred communities celebrate communion for one main reason: because Jesus said to do it. He didn't say what it was to mean, he didn't say how often to do it, he didn't say in

what manner it was to be celebrated. He simply said 'Do this.' So you do it. In some Christian communities only the words of institution are read, as a 'warrant' for the action that is to take place, as a way of saying, 'This is why we are gathered here at this table.' Not a bad reason to celebrate the Holy Communion, because Jesus said to do so, but in such cases communion can become just one among the many things Jesus tells his disciples to do: pray for your enemies, bless those who curse you, wash one another's feet, give up your coat when someone takes your cloak away from you. Communion becomes something primarily to which I am obedient, which helps me to remember my obligation to Jesus, and my personal contribution to the sin which resulted in the crucifixion. Again, none of these are bad things, but they tend to narrow the thematic focus of the Supper, which then tends to become about me rather than about something larger than me.

In communities of faith which retain a lively sense of the Trinitarian activity of God in worship, communion takes place on a wider canvas. And the eucharistic prayer stretches this canvas out before us. It begins with thanksgiving to God the Father, for creation, for the persistence with which God has loved us, stiff-necked people that we are, for liberation from slavery, entry into the Promised Land, for the calling of the prophets, for the sending of the Son, for his openness to the Father's will, for the Cross and resurrection, and for the promise that all things will be brought home to God at the end of time. And in the middle of this larger redemptive canvas are set the words of institution, not primarily as a warrant for our present actions, but as a proclamation, a proclamation that somehow, in the mystery of God, even betrayal, even bloodshed and wounded flesh, can be the source of life and hope and peace-making with God. And in this case, the act of communion becomes not just another of those things that Jesus tells us to do, but a template for all of the redemptive activity of God in the world, a treasure-trove of usable metaphors that open our eyes over and over again and help us to penetrate ever deeper into that redemptive activity of God in the world. We experience, in the Supper, hospitality, as the relief of hunger and thirst, as healing, as a vision of the heavenly banquet prepared for us all, as the bonding of community, as self-offering, as the transforming power of the Spirit, as sacrifice, joy, lament, hope, trust, eternal life, and each time we gather at the Table we understand more and more about the Triune God and the love of the Triune God. And this has enormous implications for our own work for justice and peace in the world.

There are also very serious ecumenical implications of these shifts away from trinitarian worship. The desire to avoid the use of the words Father and Son in worship has led some communities to baptize in the name of the undifferentiated 'God,' or 'Jesus' or, more commonly, in the name of Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer (or Sanctifier). In certain conferences of the United Methodist Church in the United States, as the candidates come forward for ordination at their Annual Conferences, they indicate to the president whether they wish to be ordained in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or in the name of Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Some whole denominations have responded to the concerns about the use of male appellations for God by changing their official service materials or providing gender-neutral alternatives in supplemental texts. One alternative doxology retains the trinitarian concept, but in trying to avoid the words Father and Son, abandons any sense of the Trinity as persons-in-relationship: 'Honour and Glory to the holy and undivided Trinity, God who creates, redeems and inspires, One in Three and Three in One, forever and ever. Amen.'<sup>5</sup>

I feel a strong sense of concern about the willingness of these communities to decide unilaterally on matters of critical ecumenical importance. In the various agreed consensus documents which have come out of bilateral conversations and convocations among churches (such as the World Council of Churches), documents such as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the churches agreed that Christian baptism was administered in the Triune name of God. The recognition of any given person's baptism across denominational lines is rooted in the idea that we are all baptized into one name. This is not to say that the traditional triune name of God is some sort of magic formula: it represents a striving for unity in faith. My baptism in the Congregational Church in America was accepted as valid when I came into the Methodist Church in England because the Methodist Church accepted that my baptizing congregation intended to do what the church does in baptism, and that intention was signalled by and guaranteed by its use of the Trinitarian formula. Ordinations are another of these cases. Did we think to ask the people who are transferring their Conference membership from a Conference in the United States if they were ordained in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or not? Until a new ecumenical consensus emerges, it seems to me that to experiment with this fairly significant, core activity of the Church is fairly risky.

The concern for strong relationships between and among the members of the Christian family is especially critical just now. The Christian Churches are never going to be able to address the extraordinary challenges of this new century – poverty, violence, human degradation – as if we are at peace among ourselves, if we do not do everything we can to reduce those issues that divide us. We cannot be the Church, and we cannot do the urgent business of the Church in the world, if we are fighting among ourselves about internal matters, such as whether we recognize one another's liturgical expressions of the faith (which is almost always what Churches fight about). It is irresponsible in this wider sense not to do everything we can to see that Jesus' prayer 'that they all may be one' is fulfilled. Jesus clearly knew that the Father's mission in the world could not be accomplished without the unity of the churches.

The final implication of the new Jesus-centred worship in the contemporary churches that I want to talk about is a particularly important one, and especially after the events of 11 September 2001. To choose (that word *haerisis* again) to move toward the worship of Jesus in services of Christian worship, to abandon the Fatherhood of

God and a clear sense of inter-trinitarian relations, cannot help but set our work toward interfaith understanding many steps backward. This is particularly important for our relationships with those who share with us the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that is, for relations with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. To replace a robustly trinitarian theocentrism with a narrowly conceived Jesus-centred theology will place a very serious obstacle in the path toward true inter-religious dialogue. The best of the missionaries in the Muslim world have become profoundly aware of the need of the Islamic world to, in the words of John's Gospel, 'see the Father.' Among all their 'Ninety-nine Beautiful Names for God' the name 'Father' is not found. Indeed, some missionaries and theologians have suggested that we Christians need to talk far less about Jesus, and far more about the God we know through Jesus as we meet people of other faith.<sup>6</sup> In writing about the malign consequences of Christian anti-Judaism in the present day, Roman Catholic theologian Anthony Saldarini makes the following bold assertion:

We must take great care not to limit our faith in Jesus to any narrow dogmatism or blind, uncritical creed. Too many of us have made Jesus into an idol, a false god who is created in our own image. This distorts the gospel and turns Jesus into an end rather than a means of God's grace and love.<sup>7</sup>

The question of liturgical prayer in the quest for inter-religious understanding must be left for another lecture. Suffice it to say that the consequences for our inter-religious relationships of turning Jesus into an 'end rather than a means of God's grace and love' are profound. We are likely to concentrate so completely on attainment of this end, on our claiming of Jesus as our own possession, that we lose sight of the wider mission of God in and for the world.

### **The Treatment:**

What can be done? First I think we can encourage our congregations to view their worship as an expression of their essential beliefs. Not every individual occasion of worship will be a complete credal statement, but over all, over the course of each season, the liturgy should, among all the other things it does, proclaim the central theological framework of the Christian community. We need to encourage our congregations to understand that worship is where most people internalize their theology, not always directly, through the proclamation of the Word, for example, but often indirectly, through the prayers they are invited to say and the hymns they are invited to sing. No amount of formal religious education on the nature of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, will make up for week after week of hymns of praise to Jesus.

We also need to prevail on those in authority within our denomination to refrain from using hymns and prayers expressing a defective Christology on highly symbolic lit-

urgical occasions, such as ordinations. 'This is our God, the Servant King' is simply wrong, theologically. Our God is not the 'Servant King': our God is the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And liking the tune, or the sound of the words, or the way the hymn makes us feel does not make up for the fact that the powers-that-be are encouraging a congregation to express in song an unorthodox Christology on this occasion which is so terribly crucial to the future of the Methodist Church in this country. Now I usually get rather exercised over this every year at ordination time, and occasionally I write a letter to someone at Methodist Church House. But I also get angry that we have so completely failed to give our people enough of a sense of the theological importance of the words they sing that a whole congregation will stand up and sing whatever is put in front of them, or pray whatever is put in front of them.

But I think that a serious question yet remains. Will people look back on the late 20th, early 21st century and see it as a time when an essential split within Christianity occurred? Are these two theological and liturgical streams, the one which has Jesus at the centre of its faith and worship, and the other which has the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit at the centre of its faith and worship, are these two streams irrevocably dividing from one another as we speak? Is there a day coming when we will not recognize one another as members of the same Christian family, because of the choices we are making about the object of our worship? In his 1962 book, *Race and the Renewal of the Church*, Will Campbell is talking about the church and its core identity as a sacrament of the love of God to the world, and he uses the example of the coffee shortage in Europe during and after the Second World War. Campbell says, and maybe some of you will remember, that to stretch supplies of coffee they added roasted parsley to it. Of course they continued to call it coffee. Some continued to call it coffee because they couldn't tell the difference in what they were drinking. Others could tell the difference. The parsley-coffee mix was more pleasing to the nose and easier to digest than pure coffee. But they still called it coffee as well. As the coffee shortage increased, more parsley was added until it was nearly all roasted parsley, and still people called it coffee. And Campbell asks, how much can we alter the essence of the thing and still have it be the thing itself? Even though what we are giving people in Christian congregations may be more fragrant and easier to digest, and even though we continue to call it 'church,' how far can we stray from the core of authentic faith and practice and still have the reality that is the Christian Church?

#### NOTES

- 1 Hereinafter cited as *HP*
- 2 Kent Morris, 'The Heart of the Console' in *Worship Leader Magazine*, April 2002, pp 2-3
- 3 Sallie McFague, *Models of God : Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, SCM Press, London 1987, p 54
- 4 Eucharistic Prayer for Ordinary Seasons (2), p 204

- 5 Standing Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Church (USA), *Supplemental Services* (Prayer Book Studies 30), Church Hymnal Corporation, New York, 1989
- 6 This is no new insight among missionaries. The great missionary figures of the nineteenth century also knew of the need to centre their missionary message on the Fatherhood of God. See Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love : Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions, 1846-1914*, Epworth Press, London, 1955
- 7 The Joseph Cardinal Bernadin Lecture, Chicago, 14 April 1999