The Trinitarian Dimension of John Wesley’s Theology

ELMER M. COLYER

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The name *New Room Books* comes from the New Room, a historic building in Bristol, England, and place of John Wesley’s study. Built in 1739, it is the oldest Methodist chapel in the world.

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## Preface

After my first encounter with John Wesley as a seminarian many years ago, I never thought I would write a book on his theology. In fact, I considered his thought unworthy of further investigation, since, like others, I viewed Wesley as the leader of a renewal movement who had little to contribute to theological reflection. I was both amused and chagrined when, at the begin- ning my teaching career at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (UDTS), the dean asked me to offer courses that took me deeply into Wes- ley’s theology.

While studying Wesley in order to teach his theology to seminarians, I was astonished at how theologically astute and pastorally wise he had become in the decade since I had read him in my seminary days. A PhD program in theology had deepened and widened my encounter with theol- ogy throughout the history of Christian faith, so I could now hear, in many places in Wesley’s writing, reverberations of theological voices from the early church. I rediscovered what Albert Outler and many others learned and shared about Wesley being a serious theologian who has something to say to today’s church.

The idea of this monograph came as a surprise to me. Studying, teach- ing, and writing about Wesley’s theology, especially the Trinitarian dimension of his work, became a joyful endeavor of discovery in which I have been theologically, pastorally, and personally enriched. What has been particularly gratifying is that a whole generation of United Methodist seminarians, as well

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as my colleagues here at UDTS, share my enthusiasm for Wesley as I have recounted what I have learned from him.

I dedicate the book to my United Methodist colleagues at UDTS, Tom Albin, Russ May, Phil Jamieson, Les Longden, Matt Schlimm, and Stephanie Schlimm, and to my many United Methodist students over the past twenty- five years.

I am grateful to the various scholars who read parts or all of the manu- script and provided innumerable criticisms and suggestions that improved the book. I also want to thank my student research assistants, Greg Schimpf, Cindy Marino, Travis Stevick, Corrie Aukema-Cieslukowski, Adam Penn, Gail Ray, and Robby Higgins, who helped me with all manner of mundane tasks from tracking down references to acquiring scholarly articles during the research and writing of this book. Thanks to everyone who helped move this project from an idea to a completed manuscript. Dr. M. Kathryn Armistead, publisher for New Room Books at The United Methodist General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, deserves special recognition for her enthusi- asm for this book, matched only by her kindness throughout the process of getting the manuscript into print.

Christmas 2017

## Introduction

One of the curious facts evident to anyone who spends time examining the secondary literature on John Wesley’s theology is how little has been written about the Trinitarian dimension of his thought compared with how much has been published on other aspects of his theology.

With notable exceptions, the secondary literature on Wesley’s theology often struggles to integrate Wesley’s doctrine of the Trinity into an overarch- ing account of his theology and fails to note the Trinitarian dimension when dealing with his soteriology and ecclesiology. Nearly all of the scholars who have written on Wesley’s doctrine of the Trinity grant the importance of the Trinity in his theology. The Trinitarian dimension of Wesley’s theology is far more pervasive than is evident in much of the secondary literature. Docu- menting the pervasive Trinitarian dimension of Wesley’s theology is the goal of this monograph.

The first chapter situates Wesley’s doctrine of the Trinity within the Trini- tarian controversies in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What is noteworthy is that precisely during the period when many intel- lectuals in the British Isles questioned the doctrine of the Trinity, John and Charles Wesley injected a robust Trinitarian dimension back into Christian faith, thought, worship, and life in early Methodism.

For over a century, heated debate about the Trinity inundated Britain in wave after wave of deep and bitter controversy, leading to preferment for some, marginalization for others, and, for one critic of the Trinity, death. Moreover, these Trinitarian controversies were part of a profound rupture

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of consensus about the foundations and limits of human knowledge, what constitutes a viable organization of society and government, and the place of the church in the midst of it all. The quarrel was part of far-reaching social turmoil and transition that birthed modern Western culture.

For readers who are interested in how those Trinitarian debates were part of the wider turmoil and transition, I have included substantial discussions of this historical background in the footnotes for chapter 1, as well as refer- ences to primary sources and secondary literature on the subject. Including this information in the notes keeps the central nerve of narrative recounting the Trinitarian controversies uncluttered by this additional material.

I have benefited greatly from the secondary sources dealing with various aspects of the Trinitarian controversies. Chapter 1 summarizes these Trinitar- ian debates from the inroads of Socinianism in the early seventeenth century through the arguments that rendered the doctrine of the Trinity unintelligible and irrelevant and finally led to the founding of the first independent and openly Unitarian congregation in England in 1774 by Theophilus Lindsey and Joseph Priestley.

These debates cast considerable light on Wesley’s understanding of the Trinity and the Trinitarian dimension of his theology. What becomes clear is that the Wesley brothers’ Trinitarian vision of Christian faith offered an alter- native to the arid speculative accounts of the Trinity published by those who sought to defend the doctrine and in the process detached the doctrine of the Trinity from vibrant Christian faith and life. John and Charles reclaimed the doctrine of the Trinity and the Trinitarian dimension of vital Christian faith and practice. In so doing, the Wesley brothers adopted a participatory, evangelical, doxological, economic approach to the Trinity similar to what we find in the origins of Trinitarian doctrine and piety in the early church, an approach quite unlike what we see in the publications of those who sought to defend the doctrine of the Trinity in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The final section of chapter 1 examines Wesley’s sermon “On the Trin- ity” in light of the Trinitarian controversies, revealing just how different Wes- ley’s vision of the Trinity and the Trinitarian character Christian faith are when compared to the defenders whose writing profoundly damaged the doctrine and rendered it irrelevant. What Wesley said about the Trinity and its ines- capable connection with the essence of the gospel raises the question of whether Wesley’s summaries of the gospel in his publications bear the Trini- tarian imprint his sermon on the Trinity suggests.

Chapter 2 begins by pointing out that, apart from a spate of articles on the Trinity in Wesley’s theology and several discussions of the Trinity

in chapters of books on Wesley’s theology that include scattered insight- ful comments, not much has been written about the Trinitarian dimension in Wesley’s theology. The rest of the chapter identifies, documents, and explains the pervasive participatory, economic Trinitarian depictions of the essence of Christian faith or the vital religion throughout Wesley’s publica- tions from the spring of 1738 to the end of his career. These Trinitarian sum- maries of the gospel bear a striking similarity to what Wesley said about the doctrine of the Trinity in his sermon “On the Trinity,” examined in chapter 1. By the end of chapter 2, it becomes clear that this economic Trinitarian summary of the essence of Christian faith is actually Wesley’s characteristic way of conceptualizing vital religion after 1738. Those who read my book will find it difficult not to see and identify these Trinitarian summaries when

they read Wesley again.

Although we do not find Trinitarian summaries of the gospel in Wesley’s publications prior to 1738, it is clear that he affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity before that crucial year. This begs the question of what happened in 1738 that caused Wesley to define vital religion in participatory Trinitarian terms? The final section of chapter 2 poses and documents an answer to this question.

If Wesley saw a Trinitarian dimension in the essence of the gospel, was his entire *ordo salutis* Trinitarian as well? Chapter 3 shows that there is a participatory, economic Trinitarian dimension in the entire fabric or pattern of salvation from beginning to end.

The first section of chapter 3 provides a brief summary of Wesley’s struggle to make theological sense of his Christian faith and life within the Holy Living Tradition that profoundly influenced him from 1724 to 1738. The next section demonstrates that Wesley had a robust Trinitarian under- standing of grace, not a predominately pneumatological account, as some scholars have argued. The rest of the chapter documents how Wesley often incorporated a Trinitarian dimension in his discussions of various aspects of the order of salvation, and at times in areas we would never expect, as in his reading the Trinitarian dimension back into the Genesis account of Creation and the Fall of humanity.

Since there is a Trinitarian dimension in the essence of gospel and throughout the *ordo salutis* in Wesley’s theology, one would expect to him to develop a parallel Trinitarian account of the church. This leads to the con- tent of chapter 4, Wesley’s Trinitarian vision of the church.

The first section of chapter 4 deals with some of the accounts of Wes- ley’s ecclesiology found in secondary literature that characterize his vision of the church as functionalist, or essentially practical and primarily a means of

grace. An examination follows of Wesley’s sermon “Of the Church,” written late in life and reflecting Wesley’s mature position. This sermon reveals a profound Trinitarian understanding of the *esse* of the church similar to, and inextricably interconnected with, Wesley’s Trinitarian soteriology, discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

A careful reading of this sermon makes clear that Wesley’s vision of the essence of the church is unlike the Anglican Church and the Anabap- tist tradition within which some scholars try to locate Wesley’s ecclesiology. The same understanding of the *esse* of the church, including the Trinitarian dimension, can be found elsewhere in Wesley’s writings. Even more intrigu- ing is that Wesley’s sermon “On Schism,” written soon after his sermon “Of the Church,” reveals an account of this unpleasant subject that parallels his discussion of the essence of the church. Schism is an unraveling of the essence of the church.

Chapter 4 provides a close reading of places in Wesley’s writing where he construes the church in functionalist terms as a means of grace and dem- onstrates that Wesley was not speaking of the essence of the church but rather of the right functioning (*bene esse*) of the church in its institutional embodiment with its various structures and ministries. The key to unlocking Wesley’s reflection on the *esse* of the church in relation to its *bene esse* is found in his sermon “On Zeal,” one of the places where Wesley defined the church in functionalist categories. As soon as the social and ecclesial charac- ter of love and the holy tempers comes into view in the sermon “On Zeal,” the consistency of Wesley’s Trinitarian vision of salvation and the essence of the church becomes clear. The essence of salvation and the essence of the church are, in the end, different dimensions of a single reality within Wesley’s participatory, economic Trinitarian understanding of Christian faith. The chapter provides a different spin on Wesley’s often-quoted statement that Christianity is a social religion and to turn it into a solitary religion is to destroy it. Chapter 4 concludes with a discussion of the Trinitarian dimension in Wesley’s account of the sacraments and the means of grace.

Did Wesley’s Trinitarian vision of Christian faith actually get embodied in the life, community, worship, and ministry of the early Methodist movement? Here early Methodism is particularly interesting as the communal character of the early Methodist practices of discipleship and ministry embodies and reflects Wesley’s Trinitarian participatory understanding of soteriology and ecclesiology. Chapter 5 describes how the practices, forms of community, and ministries in early Methodism both embody this Trinitarian communion at the heart of Wesley’s soteriology and ecclesiology, as well as mediate it to others.

One of the fascinating things about Wesley’s ecclesiology is his selection of texts when he dealt with the essence of the church (Ephesians 4) and when he provided an example of what a real Christian community should look like (Acts 2 and 4). The first section of chapter 5 identifies and dis- cusses Wesley’s appeal to Acts 2 and 4 as the dawning of a gospel day and a proper Christian church. The second section reveals that Wesley interpreted the rise Methodism in light of Acts 2 and 4 and the gospel day and church bound up with it.

The main body of chapter 5 documents and explains the Trinitarian dimension in Wesley’s accounts of the various forms of community and ministry that developed in early Methodism. Together, this material solidifies the pervasiveness and significance of the Trinitarian dimension of Wesley’s ecclesiology and soteriology.

The conclusion draws the various strands of the individual chapters together in a summary of the Trinitarian dimension of Wesley’s theology. This book is not a sequential argument or series of arguments; rather, the chapters identify, document, explain, and describe the Trinitarian dimension found in various themes in Wesley’s theology across a wide spectrum of Wesley’s publications from 1738 to the end of his life. The persuasiveness of this reading of Wesley is holistic in the way all the chapters together illumine the Trinitarian dimension of Wesley’s theology.

While the primary intention of this work is to present a Trinitarian read- ing of Wesley’s theology and to allow the Trinitarian dimension of Wesley’s theology to be heard, I hope the book will also encourage appropriation and extension of Wesley’s Trinitarian insights. To this end of engaging Wesley’s insights, the postscript notes that these insights suggest a more comprehen- sive Trinitarian expression of Wesleyan/Methodist Christian faith than we have seen to date. The postscript also points out some unresolved problems in Wesley’s theology, including his depiction of the moral law in Christo- logical incarnational categories and the lack of a Trinitarian dimension in his discussions of God’s attributes and the divine providence. There are better alternative ways forward while still building on Wesley’s Trinitarian insights.

My hope is that this fresh reading of the Trinitarian dimension of Wes- ley’s work will not only contribute to our understanding of the Trinitarian character of Wesley’s theology and early Methodism but will also reinvigo- rate Trinitarian theological reflection and ecclesial vision and practice in our own day within the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition and beyond.