SERMON

On The Trinity

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John Wesley: Homiletic Theologian

During almost twenty years of pastoral ministry I heard-the name of John Wesley invoked innumerable times as both an example and inspiration for the utilization of sermons as a means of evangelism and church growth. This consistent appeal to Wesley as a “practical” exemplar has led me to conclude that in our enthusiasm to emulate Wesley’s methods and replicate his impressive results, we have failed to pay attention to the theological (scriptural and doctrinal) wisdom that shaped his life and ministry. As Albert Outler notes,

Traditionally, Wesley has been revered (by Methodists and non-Methodists alike), rather more in the light of the consequences of his career (i.e., as founder and patriarch of the Methodists) than in light of his involvements in the crowded forum of eighteenth century theological debate. What have been missed thereby are his deep roots in the Christian tradition, and his refocusing of this tradition in an age of radical transitions.¹

Unlike typical models of evangelism in the tradition of American pragmatic revivalism, Charles Finney being its best known representative, Wesley’s pastoral ministry was consistently directed by a controlling interest which was theological; his preaching was thus informed and shaped by basic doctrinal and ecclesial convictions.² And while Wesley confessed his great desire to be a man of just “one book” — Holy Scripture — he immersed himself in the entire Christian tradition, paying particular attention to the life of the early church and the legacy of the sixteenth century Reformers to discern patterns of faithful Christian identity, speech and life exemplifying scriptural wisdom. Moreover, he expressed often his deep indebtedness to the Church of England’s Book of Homilies, the
Book of Common Prayer, and Articles of Religion for mediating the form and power of the “religion of the Bible.” Many of Wesley’s spiritual descendents may therefore be surprised to know that he was not a revisionist, but instead viewed the road to the future as leading through the past. Wesley’s primary concern, therefore, was the sin of idolatry rather than the problem of irrelevance, since an idolatrous church is always in danger of making itself irrelevant to its vocation of worshiping the Triune God.

Throughout a life long commitment to Anglicanism, his theological training as a student at Oxford, and searching conversations and vigorous debates with past and present theological figures - Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox - Wesley was led to work his way back through the Christian tradition to a fresh experience and understanding of the scriptural way of salvation. This was embodied in the character and devotion classically associated with theology: a way of knowing revealed as the love of God and neighbor, which is realized through the gift of saving wisdom, truth lived and spoken, that constitutes the recovery of holiness.3

The content and purpose of Wesley’s preaching ministry was therefore a combination of evangelizing those not yet converted while instructing and exhorting onto holiness of life the already justified who were supposed to be going “on to perfection.” To this end, Wesley personally set out to provide Methodists, preachers and laity alike, with the appropriate resources that were needed for theological competence in conducting their evangelical life and mission. The very keystone of this theological and pastoral program was Wesley’s published sermons, which, along with hymns and biblical commentary, was a primary medium for bringing doctrine and life into close relationship. This form of communicating the Word or “homiletic theology” provided a vocabulary and grammar of Christian speech, a verbal means by which the people called Methodists might order the very stuff of their personal and corporate identity and life in response to divine grace bestowed by the Father through Christ in the Spirit.

I want to invite you to hear the central focus of Wesley’s 1775 sermon “On the Trinity” as offering wisdom for our contemporary theological and pastoral task of Christian conversion and formation.4 In a time when preachers, including many who identify themselves within the Wesleyan tradition, tell listeners that the meaning of Christianity can be reduced to simple formulaic slogans such as, “You can find meaning and purpose!” or “God has a wonderful plan for your life!” or “It’s about you!” Wesley’s fight to retain a fully Trinitarian faith against competing forms of abstracted, functional, “enlightened” Christianity calls us back to the scriptural revelation of creation and redemption that begins with Christ and the Spirit: the perfection of love in communion with the Triune God.

“On the Trinity” was first preached and then composed at Cork, Ireland.
in 1775. In response to a request from the local Methodist societies Wesley preached on the text, I John 5:7, and its theme, “There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.”5 The sermon is scriptural in substance, soteriological in scope, and doxological in intention; a homiletic theology that is biblical, evangelically catholic, and liturgical.6 As Wesley asserts,

But I know not how anyone can be a Christian believer till ‘he hath (as St. John speaks) “the witness in himself, ‘till the Spirit of God witnesses with his Spirit that he is a child of God — that is, in effect, till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son — and having this witness he honours the Son and blessed Spirit ‘even as he honours the Father.’ (Works, 2:385)

According to Wesley, this is the very heart of Christianity, which “lies at the root of all vital religion” The knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true religion” (Works, 2:384-5). At the same time, however, a quest for knowledge which was grounded in human reason and the observation of empirical evidence had exploded during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.7 Addressing the profound effects such human forms of knowing were having within the church, Wesley affirmed the knowledge of faith given through divine revelation by the Triune God, which is mysterious in its manner. According to Wesley, that God creates and the Word became flesh are fact to Christians; this has been revealed by the Spirit. But the manner, the how of the things of God, remains unveiled and known only by God. Wesley concedes that not every believer adverts to this confession, suggesting that perhaps only one in twenty do, but states that if pressed more closely most will affirm personal faith in the three persons of the Holy Trinity (Works, 2:384-5).

It is interesting to compare Wesley’s “On the Trinity” with his earlier sermon, “The Way to the Kingdom” (1746), in which he writes,

A man may be orthodox in every point; he may not only espouse right opinions, but zealously defend them against all opposers; he may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, concerning the ever blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine contained in the oracles of God. He may assent to all three creeds – that called the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian – and yet ‘tis possible he may have no religion at all, no more than a Jew, Turk, or pagan. He may be almost as orthodox as the devil (though indeed not altogether; for every man errs in something, whereas we can’t well conceive him [the devil] to hold any erroneous opinion) and may all the while be as great a stranger as he to the religion of the heart. (Works, 1:220-221)
Wesley is here speaking against “dead” orthodoxy, the antithesis of “living faith” that has Christian doctrine as the formulation of its content. Significantly, the “ever blessed Trinity” is among those doctrines contained in the “oracles of God” — Holy Scripture — the source and norm of all vital religion which is the subject of Christian preaching: “I would insist on the direct words unexplained, just as they be in the text: “There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one” (Works, 2: 378).

Communicating central theological convictions in the form of pastoral wisdom, Wesley’s sermon “On the Trinity” addresses intellectual challenges to the church’s received faith as given in scripture. Although Wesley is often cited for asserting “but to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think,” he continued to judge living faith, the gift of knowing and loving the persons of the Holy Trinity - not mere assent to the doctrine of the Trinity - to be essential to Christianity. Because he was neither latitudinarian nor doctrinally indifferent he refused to extend his hand to the anti-Trinitarians of his time: Arians, Socianians and Deists who viewed religion as a form of morality valued for its personal or social utility, but which rendered irrelevant faith in the Triune God. According to Wesley, these anti-trinitarians did not share a “catholic spirit” that is cultivated by the gift of divine grace in communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Works, 2: 79-95).

In a 1789 sermon, “On the Unity of Divine Being,” Wesley again addressed the displacement of the Three-One God by functional forms of religion; morality derived from human reason and experience, yet unrelated to scriptural wisdom. We would do well to hear his words as a warning to our time when much popular, pragmatic preaching reduces the church’s Trinitarian faith to principles to apply, rules to follow, and things to do. Promoting the practical utility of such programs as their primary market value, these “evangelistic” strategies end up offering a technological approach to faith, a form of “moralist therapeutic deism” which places the self at the center of salvation rather than God. Wesley writes,

Thus almost all men of letters, both in England, France and Germany, yea, and all the civilized countries of Europe, extol “humanity” to the skies, as he very essence of religion. That this great triumvirate, Rousseau, Voltaire, and David Hume, have contributed all their labours, sparing no pains to establish a religion which should stand on its own foundation, independent of any revelation whatever, yea, not supposing even the being of a God. So leaving him, if he has any being, to himself, they have found out both a religion and a happiness which have no relation at all to God, nor any dependence upon him. It is no wonder
that this religion should grow fashionable, and spread far and wide in the world. But call it “humanity,” “virtue,” “morality,” or what you please, it is neither, better or worse than atheism. Men hereby willfully and designedly put asunder what God has joined, the duties of the first and second table. It is separating the love of our neighbor from the love of God. It is a plausible way of thrusting God out of the world he has made. (Works, 4: 69)

Notes


3. For a detailed interpretation of Wesley as a “practical theologian” see Randy L. Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).


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ON THE TRINITY

Some days since I was desired to preach on this text. I did so yesterday morning. In the afternoon I was pressed to write down and print my sermon, if possible, before I left Cork. I have writ it this morning; but I must beg the reader to make allowance for the disadvantages I am under; as I have not here any books to consult, nor indeed any time to consult them.

—John Wesley at Cork, May 8, 1775

“There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: And these three are one.”

1 John 5:7

1. WHATSOEVER the generality of people may think, it is certain that opinion is not religion: No, not right opinion; assent to one, or to ten thousand truths. There is a wide difference between them: Even right opinion is as distant from religion as the east is from the west. Persons may be quite right in their opinions, and yet have no religion at all; and, on the other hand, persons may be truly religious, who hold many wrong opinions. Can any one possibly doubt of this, while there are Romanists in the world? For who can deny, not only that many of them formerly have been truly religious, as Thomas à Kempis, Gregory Lopez, and the Marquis de Renty; but that many of them even at this day, are real inward Christians? And yet what a heap of erroneous opinions do they hold, delivered by tradition from their fathers! Nay, who can doubt of it while there are Calvinists in the world, — assertors of absolute predestination? For who will dare to affirm that none of these are truly religious men? Not only many of them in the last century were burning and shining lights, but many of them are now real Christians, loving God and all mankind. And yet what are all the absurd opinions of all the Romanists in the world, compared to that one, that the God of love, the wise, just, merciful Father of the spirits of all flesh, has, from all eternity, fixed an absolute, unchangeable, irresistible decree, that part of mankind shall be saved, do what they will; and the rest damned, do what they can!

2. Hence, we cannot but infer, that there are ten thousand mistakes which may consist with real religion; with regard to which every candid, considerate man will think and let think. But there are some truths more important than others. It seems there are some which are of deep importance. I do not term them fundamental truths; because that is an ambiguous word: And hence there have been so many warm disputes about the number of fundamentals. But surely there are some which it nearly concerns us to know, as having a close connexion with vital religion. And
doubtless we may rank among these that contained in the words above cited: “There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: And these three are one.”

3. I do not mean that it is of importance to believe this or that explication of these words. I know not that any well-judging man would attempt to explain them at all. One of the best tracts which that great man, Dean Swift, ever wrote, was his Sermon upon the Trinity. Herein he shows, that all who endeavoured to explain it at all, have utterly lost their way; have, above all other persons, hurt the cause which they intended to promote; having only, as Job speaks, “darkened counsel by words without knowledge.” It was in an evil hour that these explainers began their fruitless work. I insist upon no explication at all; no, not even on the best I ever saw; I mean, that which is given us in the creed commonly ascribed to Athanasius. I am far from saying, he who does not assent to this “shall without doubt perish everlastingly.” For the sake of that and another clause, I, for some time, scrupled subscribing to that creed; till I considered, (1.) That these sentences only relate to wilful, not involuntary, unbelievers; to those who, having all the means of knowing the truth, nevertheless obstinately reject it: (2.) That they relate only to the substance of the doctrine there delivered; not the philosophical illustrations of it.

4. I dare not insist upon any one’s using the word Trinity, or Person. I use them myself without any scruple, because I know of none better: But if any man has any scruple concerning them, who shall constrain him to use them? I cannot: Much less would I burn a man alive, and that with moist, green wood, for saying, “Though I believe the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God; yet I scruple using the words Trinity and Persons, because I do not find those terms in the Bible.” These are the words which merciful John Calvin cites as wrote by Servetus in a letter to himself. I would insist only on the direct words, unexplained, just as they lie in the text: “There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: And these three are one.”

5. “As they lie in the text:” — But here arises a question: Is that text genuine? Was it originally written by the Apostle, or inserted in later ages? Many have doubted of this; and, in particular, that great light of the Christian Church, lately removed to the Church above, Bengelius, — the most pious, the most judicious, and the most laborious, of all the modern Commentators on the New Testament. For some time he stood in doubt of its authenticity, because it is wanting in many of the ancient copies. But his doubts were removed by three considerations: (1.) That though it is wanting in many copies, yet it is found in more; and those copies of the greatest authority: — (9.) That it is cited by a whole train of ancient writers, from the time of St. John to that of Constantine. This argument is conclusive:
For they could not have cited it, had it not then been in the sacred canon: — (3.) That we can easily account for its being, after that time, wanting in many copies, when we remember that Constantine’s successor was a zealous Arian, who used every means to promote his bad cause, to spread Arianism throughout the empire; in particular the erasing this text out of as many copies as fell into his hands. And he so far prevailed, that the age in which he lived is commonly styled, Seculum Arianum, — “the Arian age;” there being then only one eminent man who opposed him at the peril of his life. So that it was a proverb, Athanasius contra mundum: “Athanasius against the world.”

6. But it is objected: “Whatever becomes of the text, we cannot believe what we cannot comprehend. When, therefore, you require us to believe mysteries, we pray you to have us excused.” Here is a two-fold mistake: (1.) We do not require you to believe any mystery in this; whereas you suppose the contrary. But, (2.) You do already believe many things which you cannot comprehend.

7 To begin with the latter: You do already believe many things which you cannot comprehend. For you believe there is a sun over your head. But whether he stands still in the midst of his system, or not only revolves on his own axis, but “rejoiceth as a giant to run his course;” you cannot comprehend either one or the other: How he moves, or how he rests. By what power, what natural, mechanical power, is he upheld in the fluid ether? You cannot deny the fact: Yet you cannot account for it, so as to satisfy any rational inquirer. You may indeed give us the hypothesis of Ptolemy, Tycho Brahe, Copernicus, and twenty more. I have read them over and over: I am sick of them; I care not three straws for them all.

Each new solution but once more affords New change of terms, and scaffolding of words: In other garb my question I receive, And take my doubt the very same I gave. Still I insist, the fact you believe, you cannot deny; but the manner you cannot comprehend.

8. You believe there is such a thing as light, whether flowing from the sun, or any other luminous body; but you cannot comprehend either its nature, or the manner wherein it flows. How does it move from Jupiter to the earth in eight minutes, two hundred thousand miles in a moment? How do the rays of the candle, brought into the room, instantly disperse into every corner? Again: Here are three candles, yet there is but one light. Explain this, and I will explain the Three-One God.

9. You believe there is such a thing as air. It both covers you as a garment, and, Wide interfused,
Embraces round this florid earth.

But can you comprehend how? Can you give me a satisfactory account of its nature, or the cause of its properties? Think only of one, its elasticity: Can you account for this? It may be owing to electric fire attached to each particle of it; it may not; and neither you nor I can tell. But if we will not breathe it till we can comprehend it, our life is very near its period.

10. You believe there is such a thing as earth. Here you fix your foot upon it: You are supported by it. But do you comprehend what it is that supports the earth? “O, an elephant,” says a Malabarian philosopher; “and a bull supports him.” But what supports the bull? The Indian and the Briton are equally at a loss for an answer. We know it is God that “spreadeth the north over the empty space, and hangeth the earth upon nothing.” This is the fact. But how? Who can account for this? Perhaps angelic but not human creatures.

I know what is plausibly said concerning the powers of projection and attraction. But spin as fine as we can, matter of fact sweeps away our cobweb hypothesis. Connect the force of projection and attraction flow you can, they will never produce a circular motion. The moment the projected steel comes within the attraction of the magnet, it does not form a curve, but drops down.

11. You believe you have a soul. “Hold there,” says the Doctor;* “I believe no such thing. If you have an immaterial soul, so have the brutes too.” I will not quarrel with any that think they have; nay, I wish he could prove it: And surely I would rather allow them souls, than I would give up my own. In this I cordially concur in the sentiment of the honest Heathen, Si erro, libenter erro; et me redargui vale valde recusem. “If I err, I err willingly; and I vehemently refuse to be convinced of it.” And I trust most of those who do not believe a Trinity are of the same mind. Permit me then to go on. You believe you have a soul connected with this house of clay. But can you comprehend how? What are the ties that unite the heavenly flame with the earthly clod? You understand just nothing of the matter. So it is; but how none can tell.

12. You surely believe you have a body, together with your souls and that each is dependent on the other. Run only a thorn into your hand; immediately pain is felt in your soul. On the other side, Is shame felt in your soul? Instantly a blush overspreads your cheek. Does the soul feel fear or violent anger? Presently the body trembles. These also are facts which you cannot deny; nor can you account for them.

13. I bring but one instance more: At the command of your soul, your hand is lifted up. But who is able to account for this? For the connexion between the act of the mind, and the outward actions? Nay, who can account for muscular motion at all; in any instance of it whatever? When one of the
most ingenious Physicians in England had finished his lecture upon that head, he added, “Now, gentlemen, I have told you all the discoveries of our enlightened age; and now, if you understand one jot of the matter, you understand more than I do.” The short of the matter is this: Those who will not believe anything but what they can comprehend, must not believe that there is a sun in the firmament; that there is light shining around them; that there is air, though it encompasses them on every side; that there is any earth, though they stand upon it. They must not believe they have a soul; no, nor that they have a body.

14. But, secondly, as strange as it may seem, in requiring you to believe, “there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: And these three are one;” you are not required to believe any mystery. Nay, that great and good man, Dr. Peter Browne, some time Bishop of Cork, has proved at large that the Bible does not require you to believe any mystery at all. The Bible barely requires you to believe such facts; not the manner of them. Now the mystery does not lie in the fact, but altogether in the manner.

For instance: “God said, Let there be light: And there was light.” I believe it: I believe the plain fact: There is no mystery at all in this. The mystery lies in the manner of it. But of this I believe nothing at all; nor does God require it of me.

Again: “The Word was made flesh.” I believe this fact also. There is no mystery in it; but as to the manner how he was made flesh, wherein the mystery lies, I know nothing about it; I believe nothing about it: It is no more the object of my faith, than it is of my understanding.

15. To apply this to the case before us: “There are three that bear record in heaven: And these three are one.” I believe this fact also, (if I may use the expression,) that God is Three and One. But the manner how I do not comprehend; and I do not believe it. Now in this, in the manner, lies the mystery; and so it may; I have no concern with it: It is no object of my faith: I believe just so much as God has revealed, and no more. But this, the manner, he has not revealed; therefore, I believe nothing about it. But would it not be absurd in me to deny the fact, because I do not understand the manner? That is, to reject what God has revealed, because I do not comprehend what he has not revealed.

16. This is a point much to be observed. There are many things “which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive.” Part of these God hath “revealed to us by his Spirit:” — “Revealed;” that is, unveiled, uncovered: That part he requires us to believe. Part of them he has not revealed: That we need not, and indeed cannot, believe: It is far above, out of our sight. Now, where is the wisdom of rejecting what is revealed, because we do not understand what is not
revealed? of denying the fact which God has unveiled, because we cannot see the manner, which is veiled still?

17 Especially when we consider that what God has been pleased to reveal upon this head, is far from being a point of indifference, is a truth of the last importance. It enters into the very heart of Christianity: It lies at the root of all vital religion.

Unless these Three are One, how can “all men honour the Son, even as they honour the Father?” “I know not what to do,” says Socinus in a letter to his friend, “with my untoward followers: They will not worship Jesus Christ. I tell them it is written, ‘Let all the angels of God worship him.’ They answer, However that be, if he is not God, we dare not worship him. For ‘it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.’”

But the thing which I here particularly mean is this: The knowledge of the Three-One God is interwoven with all true Christian faith; with all vital religion. I do not say that every real Christian can say with the Marquis de Renty, “I bear about with me continually an experimental verity, and a plenitude of the presence of the ever-blessed Trinity.” I apprehend this is not the experience of “babes,” but rather “fathers in Christ.”

But I know not how any one can be a Christian believer till he “hath,” as St. John speaks, “the witness in himself;” till “the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit, that he is a child of God;” that is, in effect, till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son: And, having this witness, he honours the Son, and the blessed Spirit, “even as he honours the Father.”

18. Not that every Christian believer adverts to this; perhaps, at first, not one in twenty: But if you ask any of them a few questions, you will easily find it is implied in what he believes. Therefore, I do not see how it is possible for any to have vital religion who denies that these Three are One. And all my hope for them is, not that they will be saved during their unbelief, (unless on the footing of honest Heathens, upon the plea of invincible ignorance,) but that God, before they go hence, will “bring them to the knowledge of the truth.”