

# **The Social Embodiment of Renewal; Trinitarian Ecclesiology**

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## **I. Introduction**

In light of our two sessions together yesterday, it should be clear that Wesley's Trinitarian understanding of Christian faith is rather pervasive. This, of course, means that we should likewise expect Wesley to provide a Trinitarian account of the Church and he does. What is ironic in light of Wesley's Trinitarian vision of the Church that we will examine is a moment, is that American Methodism from the beginning has tended to view the church in pragmatic, functionalist terms as a means of grace to aid individuals in their relationship with God.

## **I. Wesley's Trinitarian Vision of the Church**

### **1. Wesley's Trinitarian Understanding of the Church in his sermon, "Of the Church"**

Wesley's main discussion of the Church is found in his sermon entitled, "Of the Church." Wesley's text is Ephesians 4:1-6, that wonderful Pauline passage encouraging us to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."<sup>1</sup>

Wesley moves rapidly to the two key questions: "who are properly 'the church of God'? [and] What is the true meaning of that term?"<sup>2</sup> Wesley answers the questions with a fully Trinitarian vision of the Church that is in keeping with his understanding of the Trinity and the Trinitarian character of salvation. He writes:

'The church at Ephesus' . . . means 'the saints', the holy persons, 'that are in Ephesus, and . . . worship God the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ. . . . It is the church in general, the . . . universal church, which the Apostle here considers as 'one body'; comprehending not only . . . the Christians of one city . . . or nation; but all the persons upon the face the earth who answer the character here given.

The several particulars contained therein we may now more distinctly consider.

[Wesley goes point by point through the list found in Ephesians.]

‘There is one Spirit’ who animates all these, all the living members of the church of God. . . .

‘There is’ in all those that have received this Spirit, ‘one hope’. . . . They can cheerfully say, ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . . .’

‘There is one Lord’ who has now dominion over them, who has set up his kingdom in their hearts. .

‘There is one faith,’ which is the free gift of God, and is the ground of their hope. . . the faith which enables every true Christian to testify . . . ‘The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. . . .

‘There is one God and Father of all’ that have the Spirit of adoption, which crieth in their hearts, Abba, Father; which ‘witnesseth’ continually ‘with their spirits’ that they are children of God . . . . ‘And in you all’—in a peculiar manner living in you that are one body in one spirit:

Making your souls his abode,  
The temples of indwelling God.

Here then is a clear unexceptionable answer  
to the question, What  
is the church?<sup>3</sup>

Notice that Wesley here defines the Church in the very same participatory Trinitarian terms that Wesley used when he discussed the Trinity in his sermon, “On the Trinity.” The Church is all those persons everywhere throughout the world animated by the Spirit of Christ who bears witness in their hearts that they are children of God the Father through Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior. The Church is constituted by its saving encounter with the activity of all three Persons of the Trinity.

Indeed this encounter with the Triune God is participatory. The Spirit unites us to Christ as the Body of Christ and through Christ with the Father so that we become the temple of this indwelling Triune God and our life in the Spirit is hid with Christ in God the Father. Thus in examining Wesley’s sermon, “Of the Church,” it quickly becomes clear that he has a rather more

substantial vision of the Church than a merely functionalist definition of the Church as a means of grace. Wesley's Trinitarian conception of the Church is virtually identical with his understanding of the core of the Gospel and salvation.<sup>4</sup> The reason is simple—they are all one and the same. The Church is the communal dimension of salvation, just as the order of salvation is the transformative dimension of the Church. For Wesley, the doctrine of the Trinity, salvation and church are finally inseparable.

## 2. Other Trinitarian Definitions of the Church

This Trinitarian understanding of the essence of the Church appears in various other places in Wesley's writings as well. One of his most profound discussions of it is found in his sermon, "Spiritual Worship" based on 1 John.

Wesley says that 1 John deals with "the whole Christian church in all succeeding ages" and "does not treat directly of faith . . . neither of inward or outward holiness . . . but with **the foundation of all, the happy and holy communion which the faithful have with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost** [my emphasis]."<sup>5</sup> Notice that Wesley makes this participatory happy and holy communion with the Triune God the "foundation" or most basic relation constitutive of the *essence* of the Church, of faith and of inward and outward holiness.

Later in the sermon, Wesley summarizes the entire Epistle:

'This is' the sum of 'the testimony which God hath' testified 'of his Son, that God *hath* given us', not only a title to but the real beginning of 'eternal life. And this life is' purchased by, and treasured up 'in his Son', who has all the springs and the fullness of it in himself, to communicate to his body, the church.

This eternal life then commences when it pleases the Father to reveal his Son in our hearts; when we first know Christ, being enabled to 'call him Lord by the Holy Ghost'; when we can testify, our conscience bearing witness in the Holy

Ghost, ‘the life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’ And then it is that happiness begins—happiness real, solid, substantial. . . .

As our knowledge and our love of him increase by the same degrees, and in the same proportion, the kingdom of an inward heaven must necessarily increase also; while we ‘grow up in all things into him who is our head’. And when we are . . . ‘complete in him’, . . . more properly when we are ‘filled with him’; when ‘Christ in us, the hope of glory’, is our God and all, when he has taken full possession of our hearts; when he reigns therein, without a rival, the Lord of every motion there; when we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us, we are one with Christ and Christ with us; then we are completely happy; then we live all ‘the life that is hid with Christ in God’. Then, and not till then, we properly experience what that word meaneth, ‘God is love; and whoever dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him.’<sup>6</sup>

Notice that for Wesley eternal life and the Church as the Body of Christ are intimately related and inseparable. Eternal life refers to our communion in the Spirit with Christ and through Christ with the Father. The Church refers to the reality of our being constituted members together in the Body of Christ, inseparably bound to one another in our communion in the Spirit through Christ with God. The Church as communion with the Triune God and one another is thus **the actual form that eternal life takes both now in history and in the eschaton**. And notice the link Wesley forges between communion with the Triune God and “real, solid, and substantial” happiness.

This, of course, is what it finally means to be “transcripts of the Trinity”; we are united by the Spirit with Christ who **is** our eternal life, who lives his life through us, so that our life is hid with Christ in God. We live in communion with the Three-One God, with one another, indeed with all of redeemed creation in everlasting doxology, overflowing thanksgiving and praise to the Triune God who loves us with the very love that God is.

## II. The Embodiment of a Trinitarian Vision of the Church in Community

So Wesley has a Trinitarian understanding of salvation and a Trinitarian conceptualization of the Church where in communion with the Triune and one another we manifest profound love, trust and openness in our relationships that reflect something of the loving relations between the Trinitarian Persons. But if Wesley's order of salvation and vision of the Church are **participatory**, if we together are to actually become transcripts of the Trinity, then does not this Trinitarian salvation and Church have to be actually embodied in the communal life and ministry of the Methodism and in any genuine movement of renewal today? I dare say that there are very few places in the history of the Church where this kind of Trinitarian vision of Christian faith is actually embodied as fully in the concrete forms of life, community and ministry than we find in early Methodism.

Wesley and the Methodist traveling preachers moved across the landscape of England using a scandalous method of evangelism called "field preaching." Yet why go to all this trouble of field preaching? Because it is inherent in early Methodism's Trinitarian vision of the Christian faith, as Wesley points out, "the more they [Christians] are filled with the life of God, the more tenderly will they be concerned for those who are still without God in the world, still dead in trespasses and sins."<sup>7</sup> If the Triune God loves the world with the very love that God is, even to the point of suffering and dying on the cross, then the more we become transcripts of the Trinity, filled with the Trinitarian love and life of God, the more we are moved beyond ourselves toward all those who do not yet know God's love. Thousands gathered to hear the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ spread abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. And they came forward, weeping and wanting to learn about the love of God in Christ.

## 1. The Practical and Theological Rationale for Discipleship in Connection

Wesley had a serious problem here. What do you do with hundreds of seekers, some a bit unruly straight out of the gin bars, who want to know more about Christian faith and life, but have all kinds of personal issues and problems and are not exactly the kind of folks you normally see in worship on Sunday? Yet this was not only a practical problem, there are profound theological issues involved. Here Wesley was ever so clear that (the emphasis in the text is mine),

it is only when we are **knit together** that we ‘have nourishment from Him [Christ] and increase with the increase of God.’ Neither is there any time, when the weakest can say to the strongest, or the strongest to the weakest, ‘I have no need of thee.’ Accordingly our blessed Lord, when his disciples were in the weakest state, sent them forth not alone, but two by two. **When they were strengthened a little, not by solitude, but by abiding with him and one another, he commanded them to ‘wait,’ not separated, but ‘being assembled together,’ for ‘the promise of the Father.’ And ‘they were all with one accord in one place,’ when they received the gift of the Holy Ghost. . . .** Agreeable to which is the account the great Apostle gives of the manner which he had been taught of God, ‘for perfecting the saints, for edifying the body of Christ,’ even to the end of the world. And according to St. Paul, all who will ever come, in ‘the unity of the faith . . . unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,’ must ‘together grow up into Him . . . according to the effectual working . . . of every part of the body . . . edifying itself in love.’<sup>8</sup>

The Triune God builds up the Church toward full salvation in the context of **connexion** where fellowship and mutual ministry in the Spirit between the members of the Body of Christ leads to ever-deepening communion with the Triune God and one another. For the early Methodists, watching over one another in love, discipleship in connexion is the very form of life

and ministry, the very set of relationships, communal structures and practices that embody this Trinitarian understanding of salvation and the Church.

What Wesley intends by connexion is rather clear: an intimate, personal, participatory set of **relationships** of love, trust and openness with the Triune God and with one another—relationships deep, utterly real, and person-constituting, so that one's very being as a Christian is being-in-communion with one another and the Triune God of the Gospel. This is what the Church as the Body of Christ actually is. For Wesley, this kind of connexion is the context for discipleship and for discipline.

## **2. Developing Structures of Community, Polity and Ministry: Classes and Discipline**

It was to this end of discipleship in connexion that Wesley developed a highly evolved organization designed to nurture those awakened and lead them along the communal path of salvation articulated in Wesley's Trinitarian understanding of salvation and the church.

The reason for this discipleship in connexion is because this is where you were most likely to encounter the Triune God whose Being is communion and whose goal for humanity is a communal, Trinitarian salvation in the church. The small groups in early Methodism were simultaneously an expression of communion with God and neighbor, and also formation toward communion with God and neighbor.

While open to anyone, early Methodist societies and classes had high expectations for those who became a part of the movement. If grace is the presence and power of the Triune God, how could it not transform human lives into transcripts of the Trinity? The communal

character of this discipline was expressed in the phrase “watching over one another in love,” which is at the core of what “connexion” is really all about.

If you wanted to remain in a Methodist society and participate in a class meeting, there were rules called the “General Rules of the Societies.” You were expected to observe them within the love and support of the community. When grace of Three-One God begins to transform peoples lives, Wesley was convinced that it will always manifest itself in fruit: 1. “by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind”; 2. “by doing good of every possible sort”; and 3. by using the means of grace.

If these kinds of rules strike you as something negative, you have completely missed the point of this kind of communal discipline in early Methodism. The early Methodists viewed this as essentially positive. The convicting grace of God is an invitation into communion with God and others that begins to set you free and move you more fully into communion with God and others. Living a careless life and avoiding the very means of grace that God has provided would simply impede your progress.

Discipline took place within the context of connexion, of love, support, and accountability. It was enforced for primarily positive reasons and it was enforced in the context of loving fellowship. Discipleship and discipline within connexion are the very form that real Christian love takes in communion with the Triune God of grace and one another, for discipline is love saying “we love you and care too deeply about you not to uphold you and hold you accountable.”

Wesley was very blunt about this point: “Those who will not meet in class cannot stay with us.” Why? Because failure to be a part of a loving and supportive small group Christian

fellowship that cares enough to hold one another accountable is failure to rightly embody the love of God the Father manifested in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Church needs connexion **and** discipline. Without connection we end up with a conflicted community in which various factions, no longer living in connection, struggle to impose their agendas on one another via parliamentary, political or juridical avenues of power. Without discipline we always end up settling for a superficial form of community that does not care deeply enough to really get involved in one another's lives at a level where holding each other accountable is an act of profound love. Thus while connexion without discipline leads to superficial community, discipline without connexion ends up in a divisive, conflicted, litigious community that resorts to power to solve its problems.

The reason discipline does not work today in the United Methodist Church is that we do not have connexion! Indeed in our conflicted church dispersed into warring factions, discipline is almost a dirty word. Even talk about community most often gets co-opted and defined in terms of the benefits that it provides to individuals rather than community being an end in itself and constitutive of the persons who are a part of it. The kind of vision of humanity, human culture and the Church operative in this state of affairs, however, is not Trinitarian, but rather far more a transcript of classical theism and its strict monotheistic vision of the One God that we discussed yesterday, where human individuals try to impose their agendas on one another by various exercises of power, not unlike the God of classic theism who imposes God's will upon everything else.

Listen to the directions the early Methodists had for one of the small groups called, bands: "We intend to speak each to us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls,

with the faults we have committed in thought, word and deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting.”<sup>9</sup>

Here are some of the questions band members asked each other: “Have you peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ? Is the Love of God shed abroad in your heart? Do you desire to be told your faults? Do you desire to be told all your faults, and that plain and home? Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear concerning you? Do you desire that, in so doing this, we should come as close as possible; that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?”<sup>10</sup> If you hear this as in anyway negative you have entirely missed the genius of connexion in early Methodism, for what really happened in the love, trust and openness that resulted is that these early Methodists could hardly wait meet with their bands and unburden their hearts to others who really listened and really cared.

So essentially every Methodist at every stage of his or her Christian life was a part of a small group, a small group suited to where they were in their spiritual development. Why? Because in Wesley’s words “Christianity is essentially a social religion and to turn it into a solitary religion is to destroy it.” “When I say this [Christianity] is essentially a social religion, I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society. . . .”<sup>11</sup> Our Christian telos is finally communal: union and communion in the Spirit with the Son and through the Son with God the Father, and communion with one another as well. We are together in community in our forms of life and ministry becoming transcripts of the Trinity, persons who find our being, hope and joy in loving relations with God and one another. So these various small groups were both the basic expression of Wesley’s Trinitarian vision of salvation

and the Church, as well as the means by which the Triune God formed and nurtured the early Methodists in their discipleship within the context of connexion.

### **III. The Way Forward Today**

What I do not want you to miss in early Methodism: the deep interconnections between of Wesley and Methodism's Trinitarian vision of 1.) of God, 2.) of salvation and 3.) of the Church, but also the embodiment of that Trinitarian vision in 4.) radical discipleship in connexion, watching over one another in love, that came to expression in 5.) the organized forms of community, life, ministry and mission that were reproducible.

Despite the foibles of Wesley (and there were more than a few) and the nearly continuous problems in the Methodist movement that threatened its unity and its integrity (connexion is always imperfect this side of the eschaton), seldom in the history of the Church has there been this kind of embodiment of all of it in a movement of renewal. I am not suggesting that we simply repeat Wesley's grand experiment in our day. But do we not need something like it in the United Methodist Church?

The Spirit of God and the winds of renewal are evident across church today: astonishing growth and transformation have taken place in some churches through the Disciple Bible Study, the Walk to Emmaus, training for lay ministry and other programs of renewal. We ought to celebrate the success of these movements.

But the problem is that they are still "programs." We buy them and use them, yet despite the good that they do, they simply end up being spiritual goods and services that people in consume without ever challenging the basic corrosive monotheist vision of God, individualist

understanding of salvation as MY spiritual journey, and functionalist conception of the church as a means of grace, a provider of spiritual goods and services for the American religious consumer.

What we need is a much deeper and profounder vision of renewal that is radical, meaning reconnecting us to the biblical Wesleyan Methodism vision of God as Triune, of salvation as restoration to union and communion with the Love of God the Father through the Grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and of the Church as a robust alternative community where we find our deepest happiness not in consumption but communion, deep abiding love, trust, and fellowship with the Triune God and one another.

Finally, all of this raises again the whole issue of connexion in the Church. How much of it do really we have in institutional United Methodism? The United Methodist Church is conflicted and dispersed into warring camps and looks a whole lot more like American society in general with all its culture wars and political battles, than the Body of Christ, the community of fellowship in the Spirit through the Son with the Father and one another. Will we ever see something of the dynamism of early Methodism without a systemic resurgence of the kind of connexion we find there?

I do know this: renewal is still the most pressing issue in the United Methodist Church today. I hope what I have shared with you in our brief time together will stimulate your thinking about renewal here in the Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, motivate your praying for renewal, and galvanize your resolve to settle for nothing less than a robust renewal rooted in the Presence and Activity of the Blessed Triune God of the Gospel who alone is the Source of renewal and our sole hope in this life and the next.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Volume 3. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-50.

<sup>4</sup> In the second sermon of his series on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley warns that true religion is not found in avoiding evil, doing good, and attending all the ordinances of God, the three main headings of Wesley's own Rules for his Societies: "this is only the outside of that religion" which cannot "satisfy . . . a soul that is athirst for God, the living God." *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Volume 1. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 497 & 496. Such a person "wants a religion of a nobler kind, a religion higher and deeper than this." *Ibid.*, 497.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, John Wesley, "Letter to a Roman Catholic," *John Wesley*, ed. A. C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 499.

<sup>8</sup> See Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 150-51 for this quotation from Wesley.

<sup>9</sup> See Outler, *John Wesley*, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 180-81.

<sup>11</sup> *Works*, 1:533-34.