



What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us?

On the Trinity

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John Wesley's sermon, 'On the Trinity' was first preached in Cork on 8th May 1775, on the text 1 John 5:7, 'For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one' (KJV). As part of the series entitled 'What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us?', this article explores how John Wesley's sermon gives some 'wriggle-room' in understanding the intricacies of the classic fourth- and fifth-century trinitarian formulation today. The sermon – and this article – claims Christian experience as the necessary 'proof' of the biblical claim that God is 'Father, Son and Spirit', rather than relying (or insisting) upon philosophical argumentation.

TRINITY • WESLEY'S SERMONS • METHODIST CATECHISM • TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Why this Sermon?

I delight in this sermon because it sets me free to relax into my biblical faith, to belong to the Methodist Church and to be a preacher and presbyter in the Methodist Church with a clear conscience. This claim may *sound* a little wild and excessive, but I think it true. Moreover, I once put this little-known sermon in the hands of a fine preacher who was being given a hard time by his local zealots and, to my delight, it did for him what it has done for me: it rescued his ministry.

I suspect that I am not the only one to have accepted ordination and set out on the itinerant journey with paradoxical feelings of utter certainty and theological disquiet. There are things we say because they are required of us; especially, we Methodist presbyters and preachers promise to preach 'our doctrines'. According to the Deed of Union of the British Methodist Church, the Church 'loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation'. It was raised up to proclaim 'the doctrines of the evangelical faith' which are 'based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures'.¹ This is easily stated: but the problem is to know what it means.

There are many who are clear that part of what is thereby insisted upon is a belief in a particular doctrine of trinity that formulates the Godhead to be of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; each of those three being utterly and completely God. The three being completely distinct, and the Godhead being understood to be a unity of three persons in one substance. What they are proposing is that, in effect, by 'the historic creeds' is meant not only the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, but also the Athanasian Creed (the *Quicumque Vult*²) in which classic trinitarian belief is spelt out in mind-numbing detail. The same formula is also summarised in the first of the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England: 'In unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost'.³

The British Methodist Catechism notes that although the Methodist Church 'uses' only two creeds (the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed), the Western Church also 'used' the Athanasian Creed, which is described by the Catechism as 'more a sermon or instructional hymn than a creed, expounding the doctrine of the Trinity and opposing contemporary [ie fifth century] heresies'.⁴ The reversion to the past tense – 'used' – in the Catechism is strange, but perhaps instructive.

My problem with the Athanasian Creed is not that I do not understand it, but that I think I *do*. At least, I understand it in the sense that I believe it maps out the philosophical and theological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. It is an extremely subtle intellectual sleight-of-hand that proved adequate for its own time. But philosophy moves on; we are no longer Christian neo-Platonists. Theology moves on. Most wonderfully, God's own revelation to us of divine truth moves on.⁵ And we move on.

In his sermon *On the Trinity*, John Wesley, to my utter delight, makes it clear that though he does not agree with me, in his view I am perfectly at liberty to come to this conclusion about the trinity and to call myself a Christian and, by implication, a Methodist.

This article began as a presentation in Cambridge to the Wesley House *Theology and Spirituality* Seminar. I think I may summarise the response of some of my fellow seminarians as (i) that I have been cavalier in my interpretation of Wesley's sermon and that (ii) notwithstanding what the sermon and the Deed of Union may say, when one looks at the liturgies and statements of the contemporary Methodist Church, one finds a full-blown trinitarian faith therein expressed.

My response to these comments is threefold: (i) although I grant that I have taken all the wriggle-room John Wesley offers me, I do not think I have misrepresented him or taken more than he offers; (ii) I note that the current Methodist Catechism provides, in its answer to Question 65 'What do we mean by the Holy Trinity?', a careful account of God as Father, Son and Spirit that is completely compatible with the position I here describe; and (iii) provided I can reconcile what I believe to be the case with my Bible and my experience of the living Lord, I am content to carry John Wesley's wriggle-room into the liturgies of the church with a clear conscience.

The Argument of the Sermon

Wesley's sermon was preached in Cork on 8th May 1775. According to Albert Outler, it represents a favourite preaching theme of John Wesley. The sermon was published repeatedly in his lifetime, but after his death it was ignored. For example, it never appeared in the Armenian magazine.⁶ My guess is that then, as now, it was something of an embarrassment to Georgian/Victorian Methodists anxious to affirm their full orthodoxy and to cement their place within the Church catholic.

Wesley begins with his oft-repeated distinction between opinions and truths (religious truths especially). Then, having declined to speak of there being 'fundamental truths' in relation to Christianity, he supposes that some religious truths are surely more vital to true religion than others. One of the most vital truths, he suggests, is 'contained in the words' to be found in the King James Bible at 1 John 5:7:

For there are three that bear record in heaven,
the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost:
and these three are one.⁷

Immediately, Wesley distances himself from any particular explanation couched in terms of doctrinal formulae. 'I do not mean, that it is of importance, to believe this or that *explication* of these words.' He includes among such explications those 'given us in the Creed commonly ascribed to Athanasius'. He also declines to interpret the dread warning at the end of that creed, namely that 'This is the Catholick Faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved', as meaning that those who fail to assent to the creed are damned. Indeed, he concedes that for some time he hesitated to subscribe to the creed himself, until he came to the view that the warning related only to 'the *substance* of the doctrine there delivered; not the philosophical *illustrations* of it'. By 'the substance', it would seem that he means that God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost/Spirit, and that these three are one.

Wesley declares, 'I dare not insist upon any one's using the word *Trinity*, or *Person*'. (Here, I rejoice.) He uses them himself for he believes he knows 'none better'. He is content that some people may say '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.'⁸ Rather, Wesley says, 'I would insist only on the direct words unexplained, just as they lie in the text'.

This last insistence raises the (to-our-ears modern) question, 'What *does* lie in the text?' Certainly, not the word 'trinity'. That notwithstanding, do we find in our New Testament that which is sufficient to insist on us affirming God as trinity in the sense of the Athanasian creed? Wesley has chosen this sermon text (1 John 5:7) because, of all the verses to be found in the King James Bible (the version that the vast majority of his hearers accepted as the one and only Word of God), this verse comes nearest to such an affirmation.

Wesley now turns to the question, 'Should we find this verse in our Bible?' 1 John 5:7–8 reads as follows in the King James Version:

⁷For there are three that bear record in heaven,
the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost:
and these three are one.

⁸And there are three that bear witness in earth,
the Spirit, and the water, and the blood:
and these three agree in one.

Wesley was a great admirer of Johann Bengel (1687–1752), the originator of the method of biblical textual criticism in which so much modern textual critical scholarship is rooted. In his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* of 1754 Wesley remarks that Bengel discusses both what might be the correct order of these two verses and 'the authority of the controverted verse' – the verse shown as verse [7] above, and verse [8] below. In his Notes, Wesley follows Bengel, translating as:

[⁷]For there are three that testify on earth,
the Spirit, and the water, and the blood:
and these three agree in one.

[⁸]And there are three that testify in heaven,
the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost:
and these three are one.⁹

In other words, Wesley, like Bengel, reverses the two verses, and favours 'testify' over 'witness'. He comments at length upon the supposedly-trinitarian verse [8] (as it now becomes) without further discussion of its validity. He does not employ the word 'trinity' at all in his description of the relationships there described.

Twenty years later, when composing the sermon under consideration here, Wesley saw fit to remark further that though Bengel seriously questioned verse [8] because of the ancient texts known to him from which it was absent,¹⁰ Bengel (and subsequently, Wesley) eventually accepted it on the conjecture that the verse was only absent from texts allegedly produced by Arian sources hostile to the Athanasian formulation.¹¹ Nevertheless, Wesley still declined to suggest that this verse added up to a trinitarian formula, or to attach the word 'trinity' to it. And, as if to signal his continuing uncertainty concerning validity, his next remark begins, 'Whatever becomes of the text'.

Wesley comes next to what he supposes for many to be the meat of the problem: is it reasonable to expect people to accept what they cannot comprehend? To this Wesley has two answers.

- (a) A general answer: we already, as a necessity of life, accept many things that we do not comprehend. Wesley produces many eighteenth-century examples. My own example might be that though I have absolutely no idea how the ignition system of my current car works (as opposed to my long-disposed-of Morris Traveller, which I understood very well), it does not cross my mind that this is a reason for my not driving my car.
- (b) A specific answer: no-one is requiring of us that we believe what we cannot comprehend *in this case*. For, Wesley supposes, it isn't the *facts* of the case that are incomprehensible to us. We understand what it means to say that God is Father, that God is Son, and that God is Holy Spirit. We understand what it means to say that there is but one God.

The issue, Wesley supposes, is the '*manner*' in which these facts are presumed to be related to each other. Though many presume that the Athanasian Creed spells out the manner of the relation, Wesley suggests that this is not a necessary conclusion for Christian belief. What *is* necessary for Christian belief is that 'these three are one'.

Wesley believes that 'these three are one' amounts to saying that 'God is Three and One'. The sermon ends with his admission that he does not see how anyone can affirm this yet not affirm trinity, for to his mind, 'trinity' sums it up perfectly. Yet he knows they can and they do, and, to his great credit, he does not condemn them on the grounds of his own failure to understand them.

Comment on the Sermon

I happen to think Wesley wrong about his conclusion that 'these three are one' amounts to saying that 'God is Three and One'. He is doing what he accuses others of doing – imposing his theological conviction upon the text (as he believes it to be). Without the imposition of further theological conditions not found in the text, does the text's use of the words 'Father', 'Son', 'Spirit' and 'One' make God a three-and-one God. From the point of view of my own faith, I am, of course, greatly aided by the fact that modern scholarship has removed this troublesome verse from the text.¹² The biblical oneness that I must address is now that of John's gospel which sets very different challenges.¹³

However, Wesley's instinct, in this sermon as elsewhere, is to submit to the text, neither adding to it nor taking from it. He invites us to receive the four facts as best we can, as grace is given to us. This is the instinct also at work in Wesley's theology of Holy Communion, where he once again privileges experience over explanation. Wesley's sacramental theology is set out in lines from the cleric Daniel Brevint which Wesley borrowed to form an explanatory preface to the original (1745) publication of his and his brother's *A Selection of Hymns on The Lord's Supper*. The key passage for present purposes lies in Section IV, where Brevint ponders how there could be such blessing in the mere eating of bread and drinking of wine.

Indeed in what *manner* this is done, I know not; it is enough for me to admire.
'One thing I know', (as said the blind man of our Lord,) 'he laid clay upon mine eyes, and behold I see'. He hath blessed, and given me this bread, and my soul receiveth comfort. I know, that clay hath nothing in itself, which could have wrought such a miracle. And I know that this *bread* hath nothing in itself, which can impart grace, holiness, and salvation.
But I know also, that it is the ordinary way of God to produce his greatest works at the presence (though not by the power) of the most useless instruments.

But yet, since it pleaseth Christ to work thereby, O my God, whensoever thou shalt bid me, 'Go, and wash in Jordan', I will go; and will no more doubt of being made clean from my sins, than if I had bathed in thy blood. And when thou sayest, 'Go, take and eat this bread, which I have blessed', I will doubt no more of being fed with the bread of Life, than if I were eating thy very flesh.¹⁴

In other words, if you obey in humble obedience, and your experience bears out that it is so, does that not suffice?

I (in company, I believe, with John Wesley) approach the nature of the Godhead in a similar manner. In common with all who seek faithfully to follow their risen Lord, I encounter God as Father, Son and Spirit. Yet I encounter but one God. In Wesleyan vocabulary, my experience 'proves' the biblical witness. What need I more?

If it is our convention to describe a life so lived as one lived in trinitarian faith then so be it. But if the anachronisms of fourth- and fifth-century philosophical theology are necessarily to be added as essential to the package before that word is used, then I bless John Wesley and claim all the wriggle-room he offers me.

Some final observations

The ancient pressure to clarify precisely what Christians believe (that is, to define orthodoxy) arose in some measure from the Constantinian adoption of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. If Christianity were to become officially acceptable, it was necessary to know precisely *what* was becoming acceptable. All beyond the agreed definition might then be rejected as not true Christianity (ie heresy). In recent decades, though, the notion that there ever was a 'true' proto-Christianity from which all deviations were heretical perversions has been radically and convincingly questioned.¹⁵

At the heart of the myth lay institutional lust for centralised power and control (both secular and spiritual). The same is broadly true, surely, of the role of the Athanasian Creed in the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* subsequent to the Act of Uniformity of 1584 and its liturgical successors? The rubric requires that it replace the Apostles' Creed at Morning Prayer on thirteen occasions in the year, including Christmas Day, Easter Day, Ascension Day, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday, complete with its closing anathemas. Such is an imposed uniformity of both belief and practice.

The wriggle-room that I believe John Wesley's sermon warrants is, therefore, precious in mainstream Christianity. It is afforded to neither Anglican nor Roman Catholic. Technically, for the Anglican Church, the *Book of Common Prayer* still rules. The Roman Catholic Catechism still teaches Gregory of Nazianzus.¹⁶ Wesley's sermon (and Methodist doctrine) is willing to sit much

closer to the Bible, where, I suggest, trinitarianism in the manner of the Athanasian Creed – as opposed to the Nicene or Apostles' Creed – is not found. For this, we can be thankful to John Wesley.

Notes

1. Deed of Union of the Methodist Church, 1932, Section 2 Clause 4.
2. www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/creed-s-athanasius [accessed March 2019].
3. www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/articles-religion [accessed March 2019].
4. 2013. *A Catechism for the Use of the People called Methodists*. London: Methodist Publishing. ¶53 and associated note 53.
5. John 16:13.
6. Outler tells us it was published seven times in Wesley's lifetime. Wesley is recorded as having preached on the theme twenty-three times. Outler also reports its subsequent non-appearance. Outler, Albert C. 1985. *The Works of John Wesley Vol 2*. Nashville: Abingdon. p. 373.
7. These words do not appear in modern translations, see below.
8. As Michael Sevetus, who was burned for blasphemy in Geneva in 1553, was notoriously reputed to have said.
9. Wesley, John. 1977. *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. London: Epworth. pp. 917–8.
10. Outler (1985) tells us that Bengel's discussion of this verse runs to sixteen pages, p. 379 fn 12.
11. In our day, the direction of this argument is reversed. In modern Greek and English texts, the King James additional verse is relegated to a footnote. In other words, it is understood probably to be a later marginal theological comment on verse seven that has been copied, in some manuscripts, into the body of the epistle. It is not that a verse has been wilfully removed from some texts, but that another has been accidentally added to others.
12. As Outler (1985) observes, using the King James order of verses, 'The words between "bear record" (ver.7) and "the spirit" (ver. 8) are included in no modern critical edn.' P. 379 fn 12.
13. See John 10:30 and John 17:20–24.
14. www.archive.org/details/hymnsonlordssupp00wesl/page/16 [accessed March 2019], Preface pp. 3–4.
15. See, for one example from many, Brakke, David. 2010. *The Gnostics – Myth, Ritual and Diversity in Early Christianity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
16. 1994. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. London: Geoffrey Chapman. Section 2, Chapter 1, ¶iii.

