# A Recommendation of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The purpose of this essay is threefold: first, to demonstrate that the conception of God that has dominated American Wesleyan thought in the last 150 years is a personalistic conception and not a Trinitarian conception; second, to set forth the outlines of a Trinitarian conception of God that is persuasive and attractive; and third, to indicate the implications of such a revised Trinitarian conception of God for our understanding of the Christian life.

It may be helpful to indicate briefly the reasons for the importance of this subject. One and perhaps the most compelling reason is that the doctrine of the Trinity is a venerable doctrine that is affirmed, at least nominally, by all of Christians. As a result, it behooves us to ensure that it fully informs the rest of our theology. It should not be replaced by surrogate views of God.

But let me offer a reason more adapted to our current intellectual situation. It is plausible to interpret twentieth century Protestant theology as a series of attempts to respond to a problem. That problem is how to think of God without simply projecting our own ideas heavenward and then worshiping the resulting projection. Theology has thus rightly sought to escape from the confines of human subjectivity and to establish a sense of realism in its doctrine of God. This is true most clearly of Karl Barth's theology, but also of Paul Tillich's, of process theism, and more recently of narrative theology. If this interpretation is correct, then we must conclude that the personalistic conception of God is fundamentally wrong. It is wrong because it is an express attempt to portray God as analogous to the individual human subject. This fact signals that the personalistic concept does not escape from the limitations of human subjectivity. It is in fact the apotheosis of human subjectivity. In the end, we cannot evade the impression that the God of personalistic thought is a mere projection of the human subject.

As a result, some alternative to the personalistic conception of God must be found. I propose that we give serious consideration to a Trinitarian conception, with suitable adjustments

where the credal doctrine is open to misunderstanding.

First, however, I must establish that Wesleyans have traditionally adopted the personalistic conception as their main way of thinking about God.

## Personalism in the Wesleyan Tradition

In this section I wish to argue that Wesleyans have represented God mainly and sometimes exclusively as a personal being and that this emphasis on the personality of God has tended to diminish the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to introduce two qualifying considerations. First, we must distinguish a personalistic conception of God from the use of personalistic language to describe God. The latter is common in theological literature, in everyday devotion, and in the Bible. Here, all manner of personal characteristics are ascribed to God, from thinking to feeling to acting. When it is properly understood, one can have no objection to such language, embedded as it is in the Christian tradition. However, the matter is quite different with the personalistic *conception* of God and its supporting philosophy, Personalism. Personalism is a metaphysical position in which the truly real is identified with personality. As a metaphysical position, Personalism must be judged according to the philosophical criteria we would use to judge any other metaphysics. It can claim no special Christian status, for it is far from obvious that personality is the highest truth in Christian theology. Of course, as noted above there is warrant in Scripture for the use of personal language to refer to God; however, this devotional use of personalistic language does not justify the metaphysical theses of Personalism.

Second, Personalism, as a distinctive trend in modern theology, extended far beyond the boundaries of Wesleyan thought. It has its roots in the German atheism-controversy of the early

1800s and continued in German theology into this century. It also had British expositors.[1] Even in the United States it was found outside Wesleyan circles.[2] Accordingly, we should understand it as one among several transnational and transdenominational reactions to the materialistic philosophies that gained in popularity in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Wesleyans were not the only tradition heavily invested in Personalism.

But the Wesleyan tradition is an interesting case for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, Personalism endured among us as a living philosophical option for a longer time than it did in other traditions. In fact, its effects are still with us in the Wesleyan affinity for process theism. On the other hand, Wesleyan Personalism arose out of the debates with Calvinist theologians. This means that it extends farther back than Borden Parker Bowne and others of the Boston school. Its roots, in fact, go back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century theologian Daniel Whedon.[3]

Space does not permit a detailed exposition of Whedon's theology and its use of the personalistic conception of God. However, the following points are the most salient and will illustrate some of the main concerns of Wesleyans that inclined them toward Personalism.

First, Whedon associated Calvinist theology with atheism and fatalism:

> The doctrine that one principle of causation or fixed invariable sequence rules all things, material or mental, and all events of Will of or physics, is central with the d'Holbachian

---

[1]For example, Clement C.J. Webb of Oxford.

[2]For example, John Wright Buckham of the Pacific School of Religion. See also *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology*, ed. Paul Deats and Carol Robb (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 5-7 for a brief discussion of Personalist thinkers outside the Boston tradition.

[3]It should also be noted that there was a trajectory in nineteenth century Methodist thought that was not expressly Personalist. This trajectory consists in those theologians whose work was essentially a revision of Richard Watson's *Theological Institutes*. It includes Thomas Ralston (1806-1891) and Samuel Wakefield (1799-1895). Here the concept of personality is not prominent. 'Person', as applied to God, is restricted to the members of the Trinity.

> Atheism and Edwardian Calvinism. . . . The doctrine that there is no soul and no Will exempt from that same invariable sequence which rules the domain of physics, that there is no God who does not come under the same inflexible inalternative law with matter, levels the whole into one system of fatalistic materialism.[4]

We may leave aside any questions about the correctness of Whedon's judgments about Calvinist thought. The important thing is to note how he associates Calvinists with "atheists, pantheists, materialists, and professed fatalists," all of whom are necessitarians.[5] His point is that Reformed theology, with its understanding of God's sovereignty as the all-determining reality, is no different from any other sort of philosophy for which necessity and not freedom is the central category.

Second, he asserted that our moral experience compels us to postulate a personal God. Our moral consciousness demands, he writes,

> God as the *executor of responsibility*. Nor from any other quarter than from this high Personality within which the moral *nature* and free nature blend, can we find, out of Revelation any valid proof of the moral personality of God.[6]

Notice how he links together the central Wesleyan affirmations--responsibility, morality, freedom--with the concept of God's personality. Accordingly, he can conclude that "the *necessary* CONDITION to the *possible existence of a true Divine Government is the volitional* FREEDOM, *both of the infinite and the finite Person*."[7]

I argue, therefore, that long before a school arose with the name of Personalism, American Wesleyans had adopted its main tenets. They did so because this conception of God was logically required to support the affirmations that they had fought for in the debates with the Calvinists.

The evidence for this latter judgment must take the form of a narrative interpretation of

---

[4]Daniel D. Whedon, *Freedom of the Will* (NY: Carlton and Lanaham, 1864), 109.

[5]Whedon, 108.

[6]Whedon, 110. Emphasis original.

[7]Whedon, 436. Emphasis original.

American Wesleyan thought. I refer once again to the intellectual context in which this American Wesleyan theology arose, namely the debate with the Calvinists in the early decades of the 1800s. In these debates, Wesleyan thought came to stand for a collection of ideas, including enabling grace, human responsibility, and God's moral government of the universe. Wesleyans thus distinguished themselves from Calvinism, which, as the quotations from Whedon indicate, they believed posited a deterministic universe in which all happens by necessity. In this deterministic universe God is the sole cause. From this Wesleyans drew the conclusion that Calvinism is a pantheistic system. In turn, this pantheistic character implied, in the nineteenth century way of thinking, that Calvinism is indistinguishable from materialism. They drew this inference because in all these systems of thought--pantheism, materialism and Calvinism--there is a single, all-determining reality that crushes out human freedom. Any differences among these systems faded into irrelevance; the essential thing was their common commitment to a deterministic world-view. In contrast, Wesleyans needed a view of God that would support and make intelligible their ideas about grace and responsibility. Thus was born the personalistic idea of God. According to this idea, God, understood as a person, establishes and maintains the moral order of the universe. Moreover, God had bound himself to act according to this moral order. This was the leading idea behind the moral government theory of atonement. In this theory, Christ had to die, not because God had no choice other than to penalize him for human sin, but in order for God to maintain the moral order of the universe. In summary, the personalistic conception of God, in its distinctive Wesleyan form, was developed out of the debates with the Calvinists. As such, it was an important and perhaps even necessary development.

But American Protestantism in general has long since been Arminianized, in practice if not in doctrine. It has been a long time since human freedom was threatened by theological principles. The original situation that called forth the personalistic conception of God has passed away. Yet this conception has continued to reign in American Wesleyan thought. Its mid-nineteenth century

beginning was augmented by a new generation of theologians and philosophers, such as Borden Parker Bowne, who traveled to Germany for their theological education and returned with the theology of the Ritschlian school. These Wesleyan theologians found the Ritschlian theology congenial because it represented God in personalistic terms in response to philosophical materialism and pantheism in just the way that American Wesleyans had represented God as a person in response to the deterministic and pantheistic system of Calvinism. Not surprisingly, this generation of American Wesleyans, studying in Germany, found great affinity between their own tradition and the Ritschlian theology.

For this reason, personalistic thought, which arose in response to a specific historical debate in the early to mid-nineteenth century, attained a longer shelf-life in Wesleyanism than might have been expected. Instead of a being a brief detour, after which Wesleyan theology would have joined in the revival of Trinitarian thought taking place in the 20th century, Personalism became a cul-de-sac. Wesleyans have consequently spent the entire 20th century thinking about God in terms derived from a minor episode in Christian history, an episode of limited importance. We have failed to participate in the rise of a powerful new tradition of Trinitarian thought and have watched its major expositors pass us by as we circle around and around aimlessly in this personalistic cul-de-sac.

But why has Personalism had this deleterious effect on our theology? Why has personalistic thinking excluded Trinitarian thinking? The answer is that if God is conceived as a single personality, then the conception of a Trinity of persons becomes quite problematic. This is because the notion of personhood has received a modern connotation that turns the ancient doctrine of the Trinity into gibberish. When the modern concept of personality is joined to the ancient doctrine, there is a natural temptation to represent God as three personalities; however, it does not take much astuteness to see that this amounts to tri-theism. As Richard Watson put it, 'person' "signifies in ordinary language an individual substance of a rational or intelligent nature. . . . If the term person

were so applied to the Trinity in the Godhead, a plurality of Gods would follow."[8] Watson was clearly nervous about applying this definition of 'person' to God. Yet, toward the end of the nineteenth century, Wesleyans in fact understood 'person' in just this sense--as an individual personality. Not willing to alter their understanding of 'person' and being unwilling to become confessed tritheists, Wesleyans instead have taken what I call the heirloom approach to the doctrine of the Trinity--they have treated the doctrine of the Trinity like an expensive but useless heirloom. They honor and affirm it, but can find no use for it. It is consigned to the basement of mystery, where we store other things that we do not wish to discard but for which we can find no use. Whereas the idea of God's personhood solves all the problems that we find important, the doctrine of the Trinity does not solve any such problems and it may create some problems for us. Admittedly, the doctrine of the Trinity does help with such *traditional* problems as the incarnation and the atonement, but it does not address any *contemporary* issues that Wesleyans find urgent and problematic. As a result, it has been put on the shelf to be admired, but its utility index is zero.

The question before us is whether this state of affairs is a comment on the shortcomings of the doctrine of the Trinity or instead on the misdirection of the Wesleyan tradition. Is the doctrine of the Trinity simply a solution to problems that are no longer pressing? Or has the Wesleyan tradition chosen the wrong path and thus impoverished its theology? The first part of this essay has sought to show my dissatisfaction with the customary Wesleyan view of God. In the next part I will offer some preliminary thoughts about the doctrine of the Trinity in the hope of showing that it can once again be for us an important doctrine--in fact, the doctrine of all doctrines.

## A Johannine Meditation on the Doctrine of the Trinity

---

[8]Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes, Or, a View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity*, 13th ed., 2 vols. (NY: Phillips & Hunt, n.d.), 1:449.

The premise of the personalistic conception of God is that we know God by analogy. In this view, both God and humans are persons. Personhood functions as a genus. The specific difference of humanity is finitude; God's specific difference is infinitude. In spite of this considerable difference, there is a fundamental similarity between God and humanity, by virtue of their both being subsumed under the category of person.

One problem with this personalistic conception has already been expounded--the difficulties it creates for the doctrine of the Trinity. Besides this awkwardness there is another reason to question the conception of God as person. By the use of analogical knowledge, this conception implies that our knowledge of God is categorical--that we know God because and insofar as God falls under a category of thought with which we are familiar. In this case that category is personality. However, I believe that we must admit the force of Kant's critique of categorical thinking. We should acknowledge that God cannot be known by means of categories. Even if we qualify God's personality by confessing God to be infinite, we have not thereby escaped categorical thinking. To attach 'infinite' to 'personality' does not in fact increase our knowledge. This addition is merely a short-hand way of asserting God's incomprehensibility, of God's transcendence of the category of personality. So 'infinite personality' in truth does two contradictory things simultaneously. By asserting God's personality we affirm our similarity with God; by adding 'infinite' we deny or at least qualify that similarity. The notion of 'infinite personality' can be only as comprehensible as is the notion of 'personality'. Adding the epithet 'infinite' does not increase our comprehension. For these reasons, the concept of personality with the categorical thought in which it is embedded is a poor premise for Christian theology.

So let us take a different and, I think, more Biblical approach. If we begin with the confession that Jesus Christ is God, as the New Testament in some sense wants to do, then we will not begin with the premise that God is like us and that we know God by analogy with human

personality. Of course, we may be tempted to adopt this premise because of the following logic: if Jesus Christ is human and also God, then there is intrinsically some similarity between God and humanity. However, this logic puts the emphasis on the wrong point. It asks, How is it that God and humanity are similar? Inevitably, this will lead to the further question, What is there about humanity that is similar to God? With this question, we are once again led into a personalistic direction along the analogical path.

But if Jesus Christ is God, then God's being must be of an unusual sort, for God is able to be not only Father but also Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. God's being must be such that God is not limited to just one *kind* of being. Such a kind of being is surely not a part of our mundane experience. In the world, things do have just one kind of being--at least one kind at a time. This thing may now be a branch and then a stick and then firewood, but it takes up these kinds of being sequentially. Not so with God, who is simultaneously Father, Son and Spirit. At any rate, God's being must be of an unusual sort.

What does it mean to say that God is the Trinity? It means that God, without loss of unity, somehow is simultaneously Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Father. It means, further, that these are the ways in which God is. To be the Father is not to be the Son; to be the Son is not to be the Spirit. The persons are not three forms of the same thing--three members of the same species. They do not share in some genus, even 'divinity', with merely incidental differentiating features. The persons are instead three truly distinct modes of being, somehow united. Their unity is not the abstract unity of nature or genus, but a different sort of unity.

The fact that God's unity differs from customary sorts raises distinct problems for us. How do we know this Trinity of persons? If we knew by analogy, then we would first know the divine person and then descend to the particularities of the Father, Son and Spirit. As argued previously, I think there are substantial problems with the analogical approach. But if not by analogy, then how

do we know God?

A way toward a satisfactory answer is given in the Johannine literature. John 1:18 emphatically declares that "no one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son . . . who has made him known." The dialogue with Philip (14:8-14) follows up on this:

> Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him . . . "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

From these verses we can see that in the Johannine literature, the knowledge of God is in the first instance Christocentric. But we must inquire into this Christocentricity. What is it about Jesus Christ that makes him the revealer? The dialogue with Philip suggests that Jesus is the revealer because God is "in" Jesus and Jesus is "in" the Father. The character of this "in" is far from clear. What is clear is that Jesus, in the Johannine conception, does not reveal the Father by providing otherwise difficult to obtain information. No. Revelation means that to see Jesus is to see the Father because Jesus' works are the works of the Father. We should not understand this matter metaphorically, as though Jesus' works are *like* the Father's works. Instead we are to understand that there is such identity between Jesus and the Father that their works are one and the same. This identity explains an earlier episode in the Gospel: "Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working. . . . Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise" (5:17, 19).

This highly suggestive account takes on added significance when we read that "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these" (14:12). How is such a thing possible? How can the disciple do the works of Jesus and greater, when those works are the works of the Father? The answer is that, just as the Father was in Jesus, so Jesus and the Father will come to be in the disciples: "Those who love me will keep my word; and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (14:23). Or, as the

Fourth Gospel states elsewhere, the disciples will enter into the relation between the Father and the Son: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us. . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one" (17:21, 23). Jesus here promises that the disciples will soon enter into the Trinitarian fellowship between Father and Son. Entering into this fellowship, in turn, is possible through the Holy Spirit: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. . . . You know him, because he abides with you and he will be in you" (14:16-17). The Spirit is a second advocate--a second Jesus--because like Jesus the Spirit's works are those of the Father: "He will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears. . . . He will take what is mine and declare it to you" (16:13-14). The Holy Spirit reveals Jesus to us just as Jesus reveals the Father.

In summary, our knowledge of God, according to the Gospel of John, is grounded in the Trinitarian unity of Father and Son. We know the Father through the Son and the works of the Son. But this knowledge is mediated by the Holy Spirit, for it depends on our entering into the unity of the Father and Son.

This interpretation of the character of our knowledge of God is reinforced by the First Epistle. Like the Gospel, it reminds us that "no one has ever seen God." It goes on to note that "If we love one another, God lives in us" (4:12). Since God is love (4:8) "Everyone who loves . . . knows God" (4:7). As in the Gospel, our knowledge of God is related to the indwelling of God and to the manifestation of that indwelling in works of love. To know God is to live in God and to have God live us. But this mutual dwelling has a Trinitarian basis, for it is the Father and the Son who dwell in us and in whom we dwell through the Holy Spirit.

This Johannine material suggests that the knowledge of God is not analogical, but of a different sort. Let us call it participatory. Rather than thinking of God as a being that fits under the category of person, we should instead represent God as a reality in which we may participate and

that dwells in us. Further, God is not a solitary entity--not a 'person'. The Gospel of John makes it clear that it is the Father *and* Jesus that live within the disciples through the Holy Spirit. By the Holy Spirit, disciples enter into the Trinitarian unity of Father and Son. The Gospel is not interested in any sort of participation in a divine person. Instead it calls us to the fellowship of love between Father and Son.

Let it further be noted that this participation in the Trinitarian life of God is not the *means* of knowing God. It *is* knowing God. This is the message of the First Epistle. It is those who love that know God, for God is love and God lives in them. Since God is love, the only meaningful sense in which we can be said to know God consists in our own love--our participation in the love that God is.

The purpose of this section has been to indicate how we know the Trinity and what it means to say that God is a Trinity. I conclude with a few remarks. Our knowledge of the Trinity is not like other kinds of knowledge. Much of our knowledge is scientific. Here we search out, we dissect, we classify, we infer. Other knowledge is interpersonal. We know and feel the thoughts and moods of those whom we love. There are in addition other sorts of knowledge. But the knowledge of God is distinct, perhaps unique, for it is a matter of participation. God dwells in us and we dwell in God. But this is possible only if God is a Trinity. This is because this participation is not my relating to a person, but rather my being drawn into the love between the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit. If my knowledge of God were a matter of having a relation with a person, even an infinite person, it would fall far short of what the Gospel of John envisions when it declares that the disciples will do even greater works than Jesus does. Doing such works is possible only if the Father and Son dwell in the disciples and the disciples dwell in the Father and Son. Only then will our works be the works of God.

## Implications of a Trinitarian Conception of God for the Christian Life

If the preceding considerations have any merit, then one thing is evident. It is that the character of our knowledge of God has implications for our understanding and conduct of the Christian life. The reason for this is, as noted previously, that our knowledge of God is identical with a certain kind of doing, namely love.

We are accustomed to thinking of knowledge as one thing and acting as another. For much of our life, this is a sensible distinction. We know many things without their having an impact on our doing. We can act without much knowledge. Yet with the knowledge of God this distinction is not sensible. We embrace the assertion that claiming to know God while continuing in sin is a contradiction. But why is it a contradiction?

It is a contradiction because in the case of God, this distinction between knowing and doing is not valid. The knowledge of God is not different from love. The first letter of John makes this point poignantly: "Whoever does not love does not know God" (4:8). But even with this assertion we may still imagine that love and the knowledge of God were distinct, even if inseparable. However, John's next words eliminate this possibility: "God is love" (4:8). If God is love, then the knowledge of God is not only inseparable from our love, it is in fact identical with our love. If God were merely an personality, then we could have knowledge of this person without acting on this knowledge. Knowledge of an infinite person might morally imply action, but the action would always be added to the knowledge. But if God is love, the love between Father and Son, then it is one and the same thing to know God, to participate in the love between the Father and the Son, and to love.

This is why those who do not love do not know God. It is not that they really know God

but fail to act on that knowledge appropriately. Rather, they really do not know God.[9]

Of course, we must not hastily identify the knowledge of God with love in any arbitrary sense of the word. The first letter of John gives concreteness to the meaning of love by associating it with works of mercy (3:16-17) and by tying it to our obedience of God's commands (5:2-3). The love in question has a very specific meaning. Accordingly, the only way to obey the first great commandment is to obey the second great commandment. A life of love toward the neighbor is the only authentic form of the knowledge of God. But, to repeat my thesis, this love and knowledge is not something that we do in order to relate properly to God. It is in fact our participation in the Trinitarian life and love of God.

Wesleyan instincts about the primacy of love are correct. Love is the key to knowing God and to living the Christian life. However, our instincts are often better than our conceptions. The conception of God as person does not arise out of or promote the Christian life. It is instead a conception of limited usefulness, designed to answer questions of small importance. Only a doctrine of the Trinity makes sense of the Biblical assertions that God is love and that only those who love God know God. Consequently, the Wesleyan doctrine of God must be a Trinitarian doctrine of God.

---

[9]This does not mean that we cannot make a meaningful distinction between love and knowledge for analytical purposes. We may wish to use the language of knowledge in order to preserve a sense of realism in theology--to avoid reducing Christianity to love in some banal or merely subjective sense.