HYMNS OF THE STATUS QUO: CHARLES WESLEY ON THE TRINITY

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Countless essays and articles have been written about Charles Wesley's hymns. Invariably, the question of influence is raised but never seems to be adequately resolved. Who influenced whom? Did John's sermons merely reflect the theological content of Charles' hymns, or was Charles simply setting John's sermons to music? Should John or Charles be considered the founder of the Methodist movement? The Wesleyan scholarly community seems divided between those who champion John's leadership and those who sing the praises of Charles.

In his essay, "Charles Wesley as Theologian," Thomas Langford summarized the arguments of those scholars who see Charles as the leader of Methodism, but he himself concluded that Charles was more artist than theologian. He wrote:

Charles is not a theologian in the sense of one who explores new interpretation, who adds fresh ways of understanding the gospel or who cuts new paths of theological explication. Rather, Charles Wesley is a conservator and conveyor of doctrine, he is not a creator of theological interpretation. His role as a conveyor is itself a creative achievement — and a very distinctive one to be praised and honored — but it is the achievement of an artist, not that of a thinker.

Langford did not consider Charles an original thinker but instead categorized him as a preserver of other people's thoughts. The tradition he thought Charles' hymns conveyed was that of the Evangelical Revival. Langford did praise Charles' ability to weave common revival themes into his hymns. However, he did not credit Charles with the creation of these themes. He only applauded Wesley's creative way of expressing them.

Langford argued that John was the leading theologian of the Methodist movement and Charles merely played a "supportive, encouraging, and propagandizing role to and for John." In this supportive role, Langford saw Charles setting to music the themes of John's revival sermons and writing hymns primarily focused on a Christocentric religious experience.

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2 Langford, 100-102.
3 Langford, 100.
This theme can indeed be found in many of Charles Wesley's hymns. Here is one example:

Depth of mercy! Can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God his wrath forbear,
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?

I my Master have denied;
I afresh have crucified,
Oft profaned his hallowed name,
Put him to an open shame.

Now incline me to repent;
Let me now my sins lament;
Now my foul revolt deplore,
Weep, believe, and sin no more.

There for me the Savior stands,
Holding forth his wounded hands;
God is love! I know, I feel,
Jesus weeps and loves me still. 4

This hymn covers the full gamut of the experience of justification. It begins with a feeling of prevenient grace, a mercy active in the individual's life before conversion which enables personal faith. The next two stanzas deal with a feeling of conviction that leads the sinner to repent of sin and believe in Christ. In the last stanza the sinner is justified and assured of salvation.

There is no doubt that soteriology was a major theme in Wesley's hymns and in John's revival sermons. Nevertheless, Langford's emphasis on this theme obscures one area where Charles did demonstrate his theological independence from his brother and the Methodist Revival. Charles' hymns on the Trinity is one subject where his work is not overshadowed by that of his more dominant brother. According to Wilma Quantrille, the Trinity was not a theme John devoted much space to in his theological writings. 5 Nor was the Trinity a topic focused on in the Revival. The 18th century trinitarian controversy was a concern for the Anglican church, but the intensity of that debate was not matched in the Methodist movement.

In the introduction to a reprint of Charles' work, Hymns on the Trinity, Quantrille points out Wesley's dependence on William Jones' book, The Catholic Doctrine of A Trinity, published in 1756. 6 This book by an Anglican priest, rather than one of John's writings, was the inspiration for Charles'
1767 collection of hymns and poems about the Trinity. Wesley closely followed the structure of Jones' book, i.e., scriptural quotation followed by commentary, to defend the doctrine of the Trinity and to correct erroneous teachings that were at the time prevalent in Britain. Jones and Wesley were particularly concerned with refuting the teachings of "Arians" and "Socinians."

J. C. D. Clark's book, *English Society 1688-1832*, gives a helpful overview of the historical context in which Charles Wesley wrote his trinitarian hymns. According to Clark, "Arianism held that the Son, though divine, was not a co-equal person of the Deity but was created by the Father, and thus a subordinate, not an eternal, being." This meant Jesus Christ was considered divine and the incarnation of God, but he was not viewed as a god with a status equal to that of the Father.

In addition to the Arians, Jones was also concerned with Socinianism in the Church of England. Socinians were Protestants who believed Scripture alone was "the rule of faith." However, unlike other Protestants, Socinians taught that human reason, rather than the Holy Spirit, should guide the interpretation of Scripture. If there were differing interpretations of a passage of Scripture then reason, rather than the clergy or church dogma, would determine which interpretation was correct.

The Socinians rejected the doctrine of Christ's divinity on the grounds that is was unreasonable. Scripture passages like 1 Timothy 2.5 ("For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.") were used to support the Socinian position that Jesus was only a human being. Any biblical interpretation that contradicted the Socinian was dismissed as contrary to human reason. In their opinion it was irrational to believe Jesus could have been "both mortal and immortal, to have a beginning and to be eternal, to be both mutable and immutable." Instead of seeing Jesus as divine, Socinians pointed to Jesus as an example of a morally superior human being whose exemplary life should be emulated.

Now the argument comes into clearer focus. More than just the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity was at stake in this debate. We have here a clash between two very different world views. On the one hand we have Jones

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7 Quantrille identifies Jones' opponents as "Tritheist" and "Modalist," but I think the terminology employed by Jones and Wesley is preferable. I find the term "Tritheist" problematic because it was actually Jones who was given this label by one of his Arian opponents and not the other way around. See Jones, 110, 111.


11 Wojcik, 53, 54, n. 31.

12 Clark, 281.
who represents a pre-scientific understanding of life. On the other side we find Christians who are influenced by Enlightenment, thinkers like Isaac Newton, who tried to reconcile religion with human reason.

This is more than a theological debate. It is a power struggle. Clark’s book on the English society emphasized the wider scope of the trinitarian controversy. He states the doctrine of the Trinity was used as “the intellectual underpinning of Church, King and Parliament.”

Radicals who wished to move England toward a more democratic form of government had to contend first with a belief system that saw Britain’s system of government as divinely ordained.

Consequently, one rarely encountered a radical reformer with orthodox trinitarian beliefs. Most of them were Deists, Arians, or Socinians. Clark explains that these heterodox beliefs had political implications:

A consequence of a denial that Christ exercised divine authority was that He could not institute a priesthood descending by apostolic succession and exercising its mediatory powers by virtue of that divine right: the Anglican clergy were thus on par, in point of authority, with Dissenting clergy (or even with the private individual). If even the Church could not claim divine institution, the State was still more obviously secular. ‘No bishop, no king’ was once more a relevant challenge, if mankind was free to amend or reject its ecclesiastical and political hierarchy in the name of reason, conscience or utility.

More than just the divinity of Christ was being challenged in these debates. The authority of the church and its clergy, and the state and its King were being called into question. The reasoning ability of every individual was seen as the basis of moral government and a source for authority rather than the church and the state’s claim of Divine Providence.

Orthodox responses to such radical assertions had to address both the theological and the political implications of the heterodox arguments. Clark identifies William Jones as one of the most active defenders of the status quo. Jones’ writings included not only the defense of orthodox trinitarianism already mentioned, but also included works that defended the powers of the Anglican Church and the legitimacy of the monarchy.

This brief historical overview helps us see Charles Wesley’s Hymns of the Trinity from a new perspective. Consider the following hymns:

What nation is so high
As we that Christ hath known,
And in Jehovah glorify
Th’eternal Three in One? 11

13Clark, 277.
14Clark, p. 318, note 174.
15Clark, 281.
16Clark, 247, 248.
Dan. v. 18. The most high God gave to Nebuchadnezzar a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honour. v. 20. And they took his glory from him.
His kingdom was the gift of God,
His glory the Most high bestow'd;
And the proud Monarch to rebuke,
They, they from him the glory took.
The Three inexplicably One
Concur'd to cast him from his throne.\(^{18}\)

The last hymn reflects a political theology grounded in the conviction that God sets kings upon thrones and can cast down those who are unworthy. Therefore the masses do not have to rise up against an unjust ruler. Rather, they should accept the will of God and trust there is a reason why God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, would empower such a person. The first hymn suggests that a nation’s greatness is tied to its belief in the Triune God.

Ministerial authority is also defended in Wesley’s trinitarian hymns:

Call’d by the Holy Ghost alone
The labourers are called by God,
One with the Father and the Son
The Spirit hath their grace bestow’d,
Their ministerial honour given,
And sent the messengers of heaven.\(^{19}\)

The Father and the Son,
And Spirit are but One.
Essence One in Persons Three,
God appoints his servants here,
Gives us our sufficiency,
Makes the able minister.\(^{20}\)

God made known the mystery,
The gospel of his grace,
Call’d the messenger to see
His God in Jesus’ face:
God by revelation gave
The power to preach a dying God,
Ministerial power to save
Believers in his blood.\(^{21}\)

In these three hymns Charles made clear his conviction that ministers are called by the Triune God and exercise their authority to preach and mediate power to save by divine right. Therefore to challenge the ministry is to challenge the authority of God.

\(^{18}\)Wesley, pp. 64, 65, Hymn C, st. 1.
\(^{19}\)Wesley, p. 40, Hymn LIX, st. 1.
\(^{20}\)Wesley, p. 85, Hymn CXXXIV, st. 1.
\(^{21}\)Wesley, p. 32, Hymn XLVIII, st. 1.
The full significance of Charles Wesley's admiration and reliance upon Jones is now evident. While Langford concluded Charles was merely the hymn writer for the Revival, the hymns cited above show Charles used his talent to address concerns beyond those of the Revival. In aligning himself with Jones, Wesley clearly signaled his support for the orthodox Anglicanism which Jones championed.

While his brother's commitment to the Church of England was equivocal, Charles' was not. During this period of church history, the defense of the Trinity should be seen as the defense of both the Established Church and the state government. Within such a context Charles can be viewed as a social conservative who would not have favored the kind of dissenting church his brother seemed to be creating and from which Charles increasingly distanced himself.

In the article "Trinity and Hymnody: the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Hymns of Charles Wesley," Barry Bryant primarily analyzes the themes in Charles' hymns from the perspective of the Revival. He writes of the Wesley brothers' conviction that the Trinity was more than "a speculative doctrine" and that anti-trinitarianism "threatened the very foundations of the Church." However, Bryant seems to imply these beliefs were original to the Wesleys and that they alone saw the practical implications of the Trinity. As Clark makes clear, that was not the case. Many orthodox and radical churchmen knew what was at stake in the trinitarian controversy and saw how the social order would be changed if the anti-trinitarian side prevailed.

Rather than the social implications Clark explores, Bryant only focuses on the practical implication of Trinitarian theology for the individual. In the section "An Image of a Triune God," Bryant describes Wesley's trinitarian anthropology and its implication for soteriology. Humanity's flesh, spirit, and soul are the "triune character of the image of God." This character was corrupted in Adam's Fall and has become sin sick. Bryant concludes, "As we were created by the Trinity, in the image of the Trinity, only the Trinity can therapeutically restore the image lost by Adam and Eve and heal sin infected humanity."

Bryant believes Charles was "largely concerned with the Trinity's role in salvation," although he does deal with two other trinitarian themes in Charles' hymns. Besides soteriology, Bryant also discusses Wesley's belief in the unity of the Trinity and argues that the Trinity was the object of Wesleyan worship. Once again these themes concentrate on the individual's religious experience. It is the individual's worship of all three Persons of the

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23 Bryant, 69.
24 Bryant, 69.
25 Bryant, 69.
Trinity that Bryant praises as a more balanced approach to worship as opposed to simply focusing on either Christ or the Spirit.26

Bryant identifies the unity of the Trinity as “the most pronounced doctrine” in Charles’ trinitarian writings.27 There is one hymn which is an excellent illustration of this point and which shows the influence of Jones, but Bryant does not mention the hymn. It is based on Mt. 11.10, (“Behold I send my messenger before THY face, to prepare THY way before THEE.”), and Mal. 3.1, (“Behold, I send MY messenger, to prepare the way before ME.”):

A PERSONAL distinction see
Betwixt the Father and the Son!
Yet is the Filial Deity
With the Paternal Godhead One:
A different Person we confess
Jesus whom all his saints admire,
Whom all his host celestial praise,
One and the same with God the sire.

The Persons unconfus’d abide,
The Godhead undivided lives:
The wisdom hid from learned pride
To babes and little ones He gives;
Jehovah who in Jesus dwells
His whole Divinity imparts,
To souls prepar’d his Son reveals,
And sends his Spirit into our hearts.28

In William Jones’ commentary on these scripture passages he stated, “with the evangelist, [Matthew], the Persons are not confounded; with the prophet, [Malachi], the Godhead is not divided,” and he also used the phrase “personal distinction” just as Wesley did.29 Wesley, following Jones, wove these images of unconfused Persons and an undivided Godhead into his hymn. It is the Persons who are distinct but not the Deity or the Divine essence.

Bryant’s assertion that the themes of salvation, worship, and unity are evident in Charles Wesley’s Hymns on the Trinity is beyond dispute. However, a strictly individualistic interpretation solely focused on the individual’s religious experience obscures the full meaning and importance of this hymn collection. In publishing a tract so dependent upon the work of William Jones, Charles was signaling where his loyalties lay in the trinitarian controversy. If this is missed, then Wesleyan scholars overlook an impor-

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26Bryant, 72. It is important to note that Bryant’s depiction of Wesleyan worship as trinitarian in focus differs with Langford’s claim that it was Christocentric.
27Bryant, 66.
28Wesley, p. 8, Hymn IX.
29Jones, 13.
tant clue to Charles’ theological concerns. They also fail to see Charles in his own light, independent of his brother.

Undoubtedly, John was the theologian for the Methodists, but it may be argued that if Charles saw himself as a theologian it would have been as an Anglican rather than Methodist theologian. Charles was much more than the Revival’s hymn writer and John’s supporter, encourager, and propagandizer, as Langford suggested. Charles was also an advocate for the Anglican church and he used this collection of hymns on the Trinity to support the traditions that church stood for.