‘BEGOTTEN FROM EVERLASTING OF THE FATHER’: INADVERTENT OMISSION OR SABELLIAN TRAJECTORY IN EARLY METHODISM?

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It is well-known that the American Methodist Twenty-Five Articles of Religion are an abridgment of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England. Recently, while comparing the American Methodist article on the person of Christ (article II) in the current Book of Discipline (2004) with the same article in the Thirty-Nine Articles (also article II), I discovered that the phrase ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father’ had been omitted. Curious to see whether this clause had been omitted from the beginning, I checked the earliest published versions of the American Methodist Articles, namely, the versions published in Britain and in America in 1785 as an appendix to the Sunday Service and the Minutes from the Christmas Conference of 1784.1 Much to my surprise, the clause in question was included in every edition of the original version of the American Methodist Articles. Here is the original 1784-1785 version of the second article:

The Son, who is the word of the Father, begotten from everlasting of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man’s nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin: so that the two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one Person, never to be divided, whereof is one Christ, very God, and very man, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of men.2

Examining versions of the Articles published in 1786, I discovered the omission. Indeed, I did not find the clause in any version of the Articles published after 1785. Immediately, I became interested in what happened to the clause and why. In an effort to find an answer, I decided to check the history of scholarship on the Articles, beginning with the most contemporary works. To my surprise, recent commentators, despite calling attention to

1I am indebted to Sam Hammonds and Elizabeth Dunn in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University for helping me to locate and check all of the extant versions of the articles published in 1785. I am also indebted to Richard P. Heitzenrater and the participants in the Wesley Summer Seminar for help during the research stage of this project, as well as to Randy Maddox for suggestions on an early draft of this manuscript.
2The Prayer Book, Select Psalms, Ordination of Ministers, Articles of Religion, and Minutes of the Conference in Baltimore, Dec. 27th, 1784, And Form of Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America (Philadelphia: 1785), 306 (emphasis added).
other less theologically significant omissions, did not even notice the omission of the clause 'begotten from everlasting of the Father.'

Recently, Scott J. Jones stressed the continuity between the second article and the Nicene Creed, saying, "The similarities of language with the Nicene Creed, especially the key phrase 'one substance with the Father,' are clear." Unfortunately, Jones does not pick up on the dissimilarity created by the crucial omission of 'begotten from everlasting of the Father.' Without this clause, the second American Methodist article of religion loses the delicate balance struck by the Nicene fathers concerning Christ's relationship with the Father. On the one hand, the fathers insisted that Christ was 'of one being with the Father.' On the other hand, they maintained that Christ was 'eternally begotten of the Father.' The first clause stresses the unity of the Godhead; the second the nature of the relationship between the first and second persons of the Godhead. The first clause prohibits the heresy of subordinationism; the second prohibits the heresies of Sabellianism and tri-theism. The Son is 'of one being with the Father,' but the Son is not the Father. We will say more about this in the final section below. The crucial thing to notice at this stage is that contemporary historians of Methodist doctrine and Methodist theologians fail even to notice that the clause that stipulates the nature of the relationship between the Son and the Father is missing.

I

Next, I turned to commentaries on the Articles published in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the older commentaries, Methodist theologians and historians of doctrine adopt various methods for indicating the places where Wesley purportedly made changes to the original. For example, many scholars bracket the materials that Wesley purportedly omitted or otherwise changed. Other scholars illustrate the differences between Wesley's version of the Articles and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England by locating the two versions in parallel columns for comparison.

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The older commentators can be divided into two groups, namely, those who notice the omission and those who, like the more recent commentators, do not. Interestingly, there is a major discrepancy even among the commentators who fail to notice the omission. On the one hand, some commentators present versions of the Articles purportedly adopted by the Christmas Conference of 1784-1785 in which the clause ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father’ is already omitted. On the other hand, some commentators present versions reportedly adopted by the Christmas Conference in which the clause is not yet omitted. Clearly, the former group of commentators worked from later editions of the Articles, assuming that these later editions were identical with the original 1784-1785 version.

The 19th and early to mid-20th-century commentators who notice the omission also fall into two groups based on their explanations for the omission. First, some commentators attribute the omission directly to Wesley himself. For example, Nolan B. Harmon and John W. Bardsley claim that their version of the Articles reveals “exactly what John Wesley did in 1784.” Harmon and Bardsley then proceed to leave a blank to indicate Wesley’s omissions, declaring, “Every change represents a positive action by John Wesley. An omission is not to be regarded as something Wesley forgot about ... it represented a positive stroke of John Wesley’s pen.” In Harmon and Bardsley’s version of “Wesley’s Articles,” the clause “begotten from everlasting of the Father” is replaced with a blank, indicating that Wesley himself omitted it.

What are we to make of this explanation? In the absence of an autograph copy of Wesley’s version of the Articles, how are we to determine whether Wesley himself made a particular change? Put simply, we must make probability judgments on the basis of circumstantial evidence. Initially, two crucial pieces of circumstantial evidence must be taken into consideration with regard to the clause under consideration. First, it must be acknowledged that the clause was not omitted from the earliest versions of the Articles that were published in both Britain and America. Harmon and Bardsley show no awareness of the 1784-1785 version of the Articles. To be sure, this does not eliminate Wesley from consideration. It is possible that the earliest printers overlooked Wesley’s strike through the clause and that Wesley himself ordered the correction in the 1786 version. However, a second piece of cir-

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1For example, See Nathan Bangs, A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church. 2 vols. (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1838) 1:167.
2Sherman, 101-102.
3Harmon and Bardsley, 280.
4Harmon and Bardsley, 281 (emphasis original).
5Harmon and Bardsley, 282.
6I am indebted to Randy Maddox for this observation. In a private conversation, Professor Maddox noted that there are known instances in which printers published a line or more that Wesley had originally crossed through, leading Wesley to request a correction in subsequent versions. See Wesley’s own comment concerning this problem in relation to the Christian Library in The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 10:382.
cumstantial evidence makes this scenario less likely, namely, Wesley’s comments concerning the doctrine of the eternal sonship of Christ in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* to which we now turn.

In the *Explanatory Notes* Wesley incorporated the following comments concerning the phrase, “Thou art my Son, this day I have begotten thee,” as it appears in Heb. 1:5 and 5:5 respectively. Commenting on Heb. 1:5, Wesley said that the phrase refers to Christ’s “natural Sonship, by an eternal inconceivable generation.”13 Similarly, commenting on Heb. 5:5, Wesley wrote, “Not, indeed, at the same time; for his generation was from eternity.”14 Furthermore, it is worth noting that, some years later, when the eternal sonship of God controversy in British Methodism had reached a boiling point, the above comments in Wesley’s Notes were, “by the celebrated Test Act, made at the Conference held in Manchester in 1827 ... the standard of orthodoxy upon this subject.”15 These comments, together with the inclusion of the clause in the first published versions of the Articles, provide significant circumstantial evidence that Wesley did not omit the clause ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father’ from the second American Methodist Article of Religion.

The second type of explanation concerning the omission is more prominent and, as we will see, more accurate. Commentators in this group note correctly that the omission did not occur until 1786. However, without exception, these commentators either attribute the omission to a printer’s error or simply say that it is impossible to know what happened to the clause. For example, H. M. Du Bose developed a system in which he indicates Wesley’s omissions as follows: [W: the relevant omission]. Du Bose placed “subsequent omissions,” including the clause in question here, in brackets without a W. However, Du Bose offered no explanation for the “subsequent omissions.”16 Wheeler notes that the omission took place in 1786, but remains agnostic concerning the circumstances behind the omission. Wheeler said, “As prepared by Wesley, the Article contained the words, ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father.’ In 1786 they were omitted, whether by accident or design may never be known.”17 Finally, Robert Emory, like Wheeler, noted that the omission occurred in 1786. However, Emory claimed that the omission is one of many “typographical errors.”18

What should we make of these explanatory possibilities? Suffice it to say that the agnostic route is not particularly helpful. As for appeals to a

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14*Explanatory Notes*, 2:310.
16Du Bose, Appendix I.
17Wheeler, 68.
18Emory, 109.
typographical or printer’s error, there is one small problem. If the omission was a typographical or printer’s error, it was never corrected. The clause is omitted in every subsequent Book of Discipline to the present day. To be sure, this does not eliminate the typographical explanation from consideration. It could be that the clause was inadvertently omitted and that no one noticed or cared. However, the plausibility of this explanation can only be assessed when we have considered other explanations. If there is evidence to support an intentional omission of the clause, then the appeal to a typographical or printer’s error is significantly weakened.

II

It is somewhat surprising that, in the history of scholarship on the Articles of Religion, no one has considered whether Thomas Coke might have been responsible for omitting the clause, ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father,’ from the second Article of Religion. There is, as will be shown, a significant amount of circumstantial evidence to suggest that Coke might have omitted the clause. To begin with, there is evidence that Coke made alterations to the Sunday Service that Wesley sent over with the Articles.¹⁹ Indeed, Wesley himself called attention to Coke’s changes to his abridged version of the Prayer Book, saying:

Dr. Coke made two or three little alterations in the Prayer-Book without my knowl edge. I took particular care throughout to alter nothing merely for altering’ sake. In religion I am for as few innovations as possible. I love the old wine best. And if it were only on this account, I prefer ‘which’ before ‘who’ art in heaven.²⁰

It is reasonable to think that, if Coke made alterations to the Prayer Book without Wesley’s knowledge, he might have felt free to do the same with the Articles. For example, Wesley’s comment above suggests that Coke replaced ‘which’ with ‘who’ in the Prayer Book. This raises the succinct possibility that it was Coke who replaced ‘which’ with ‘who’ in the second article of religion.²¹ Furthermore, Wesley himself stated above that he preferred “‘which’ before ‘who.’” To be sure, there is no direct evidence that Coke made this change to the second Article of Religion. Nor is there any direct evidence that points to Wesley in this case and the circumstantial evidence here appears to commend Coke. Clearly, the shift from ‘which’ to ‘who’ is a minor change, but if Coke was the one to alter this aspect of the second

²¹Virtually all of the commentators attribute this change to Wesley without giving any supporting evidence for doing so.
Article of Religion, then there is at least some reason to think that he might also have made other alterations while he was at it. Thus, we need to consider the circumstantial evidence to support the thesis that Coke omitted the clause ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father.’

The circumstantial evidence to suggest that Coke, and not Wesley, omitted the clause pertaining to the eternal sonship of Christ, is two-fold. First, in his *Commentary on the New Testament*, Coke was careful to note that, as it occurs in Luke 1:35, the word *begotten* “denotes the human nature of Christ derived from his virgin mother.” Unlike Adam Clarke, whose almost identical remark on the very same passage was considered heretical in Britain by Richard Watson, Coke did not go on positively to exclude the attribution of generation to Christ’s divine nature. Nevertheless, Coke’s restriction of the term *begotten* to the human nature may imply a reluctance to apply the term to Christ’s divine nature. Incidentally, it is precisely this sort of limiting of the application of attributes to either the human or the divine natures in Christ that the early church Fathers rejected at Chalcedon in 451.

The second and more significant piece of circumstantial evidence is found in Coke’s, *The Substance of a Sermon on the Godhead of Christ, Preached at Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on the 26th Day of December, 1784 before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. In this work, Coke’s main aim was to secure the divinity of Christ. However, as will be suggested in the concluding section below, it is possible to believe in the divinity of Christ while denying that Christ is ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father.’ Unfortunately, it is difficult to see how one could do so without falling into either Sabellianism or tri-theism. Indeed, Coke appeared to be on the verge of just such a view in this sermon. Thus he remarked:

> And now, having such a flood of divine testimonies for the establishment of the important doctrine of Christ’s Supreme Godhead, well may we confess with St. John, that, “the Word was God” – God, not by office only, but by nature, not figuratively, but properly, not made or created, or (as some of the subtle Arians say) derived, but co-eternally existing with the Father.”

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Here we find Coke denying that Christ is ‘derived’ from the Father, referring to such teaching as a subtle form of Arianism. The question at this stage is clear. To what degree is the term ‘derived’ synonymous with the term ‘begotten?’ Once again, we must make probability judgments based on circumstantial evidence, as Coke does not directly answer the question. We are left to rely strictly on circumstantial evidence. Put simply, Coke did not himself answer the question. At best, we can only point out that Adam Clarke used these terms interchangeably in a work titled, *Love of God to a Lost World, Demonstrated by the Incarnation and Death of Christ: A Discourse.* Similarly, in the mid-19th century, Bishop David Wasgatt Clark (1812-1871) openly rejected the doctrine of Christ’s eternal sonship, saying, “Now, *self-existence and independence* are essential elements of divinity; but *derivation,* whether by generation, procession, or emanation, implies *dependence.*” Indeed, the wider context makes it clear that, for Bishop Clark, ‘begotten’ is a synonym for ‘derived.’

The time has come to evaluate the circumstantial evidence for saying that Coke personally omitted the clause ‘begotten from everlasting from the Father’ and to compare that evidence with the evidence for the other proposed explanations, namely, that Wesley omitted the clause or that the omission was a typographical error. First and foremost, it must be admitted that the evidence for Coke is hardly conclusive. However, given that Methodist theologians and bishops living either at the same time as Coke or within fifty years of Coke’s death used ‘derived’ and ‘begotten’ interchangeably when rejecting the eternal sonship of Christ, it is not too great a stretch to reason that, if Coke found troubling the teaching that Christ is ‘derived’ from the Father, he might also have had difficulties with the doctrine that Christ was ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father.’ Coke’s comment on Luke 1:35, the fact that Coke appears to have made changes to the *Sunday Service,* and Coke’s rejection of what he called “subtle Arianism,” when viewed together, make it at least plausible that Coke was behind the omission of the clause concerning Christ’s eternal sonship. Further, when one adds the circumstantial evidence concerning Wesley’s views on the eternal generation of the Son, it seems more likely that Coke, and not Wesley, omitted the clause. The evidence points away from Wesley, so that the two most likely explanations for the omission are either a deliberate action by Coke or an inadvertent action by a typesetter.

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It is also important to say something about the theological significance of the omission of the clause ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father.’ The first thing to note in this connection is that, as standards of doctrine, the Articles of Religion function as negative regulators of belief in the life of the church. Otherwise put, the Articles of Religion set the limits concerning what, from the standpoint of Methodism, it is unacceptable to deny or to disbelieve. Conversely, where the Articles are silent, persons are free, as Wesley says, “to think and let think.”

Given the Articles’ function as negative regulators of belief in the life of the church, the omission of the clause ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father’ makes for dangerous theological possibilities. As we have already seen, the omission left the door open for Nathan Bangs and John Emory to publish a treatise by Adam Clarke in which Clarke vociferously denied that Christ is eternally begotten of the Father. In that work, Clarke said:

... for as to [Christ’s] Divine nature, that being properly and essentially God, cannot be either begotten or produced; much less eternally begotten, which, however explained, is in perfect opposition to reason and common sense; and, as far as a sentiment can be so, is destructive of the eternal and essential Deity of Jesus.

Similarly, the omission made it possible for Bishop David Wasgatt Clark openly to reject the doctrine of Christ’s eternal Sonship. Indeed, Bishop Clark sought to eliminate “the figment of ‘eternal generation,’ which has long puzzled without satisfying the spirit of inquiry.” By contrast, the use of Wesley’s Notes as a doctrinal standard made rejection of the doctrine of Christ’s eternal sonship unacceptable in British Methodism.

To be sure, there is no shortage of sermons and other publications in early American Methodism that set out to defend the deity of Christ. Thomas Coke’s sermon at the Christmas Conference is exhibit A in this regard. Indeed, one is hard pressed to find early American Methodists openly denying the deity of Christ. Nor would one expect to find open denials of Christ’s divinity, as the Articles of Religion prohibited such denials. The problem lay elsewhere. With the omission of the clause ‘begotten from everlasting of the Father,’ American Methodists lost the delicate balance struck by the Nicene Fathers concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son. As noted above, the Nicene Fathers sought to secure the fullness of Christ’s divinity against the Arians while at the same time securing the nature of

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28 Clark, 16-17.
29 Clark, 124.
30 Clark, 118.
Christ's relationship to the Father against both Sabellianism and tri-theism. Similarly, in declaring that Christ is 'of one substance with the Father,' the Methodist Articles of Religion secure the fullness of Christ's divinity against Arianism and other forms of subordinationism. By contrast, the omission of the clause 'begotten from everlasting of the Father' in 1786 paved the way for subtle and not so subtle versions of Sabellianism to emerge within American Methodism. Indeed, Bishop Clark made the point only too clear when he asked rhetorically, "How should the Arian shoals be escaped but by steering close to the Sabellian rock?"30

In 1873, growing concern over emerging forms of Sabellianism within Methodism led Miner Raymond (1811-1897) to address the matter in an article titled, "The Sonship of Christ."31 At the outset, Raymond rightly noted that the issue is not whether Christ could be referred to as the Son of God. Rather, the issue is "the precise import of this term, Son of God." Otherwise put, Raymond's essay is an attempt to answer the question, "What is that relation between God and Christ which is indicated by this term?"32

Raymond's response to the question concerning Christ's relationship to the Father unfolds in three parts. First, Raymond eliminated the idea that the term 'Son of God' should be restricted to the human birth of the Logos. Thus he wrote:

The relation of Sonship is not founded in any event of Christ's human history, or any characteristic of his human nature, but is founded in his divine nature, and is a relation subsisting in the distinction of personality which the Scriptures teach belong to the essential nature of the divine essence. The eternal Logos is in some sense God's Son.33

In pursuit of this point, Raymond acknowledged that some teach that 'Son of God' refers exclusively to "the miraculous conception," while others maintain that "Christ's resurrection was the basis of his Sonship."34 Raymond responded to these claims by showing that the referent of the term 'Son of God' is by no means limited to the miraculous conception or the resurrection. Raymond then concluded the opening section by arguing that the term 'Son of God' functions in scripture to distinguish Christ from the Father. He claimed:

... [Christ's] Sonship pertains not to his human nature, but to his divine nature; filiation in some sense pertains to Deity. The distinction of persons in the Godhead is founded on something. "The Word was with God." A relation subsists of some kind indicated by the term "with," but relation requires plurality, and plurality necessitates characteristics by which one is distinguished from the other.35

33Raymond, 563.
34Raymond, 563.
35Raymond, 563-564.
36Raymond, 567-568.
Second, Raymond addressed directly the concern registered initially in American Methodism by Coke and expressed most fully by Bishop David Clark, namely, that the use of the term ‘Son of God’ to distinguish Christ’s divinity from the Father’s divinity constitutes a subtle form of Arianism. Raymond declared:

Jesus Christ is not called the Son of God because he is the first created being, nor because he is the greatest being in the universe next to God; or, in other words, the Scripture testimony concerning Christ’s sonship is not satisfactorily interpreted by either the Arian or semi-Arian theories.36

By contrast, said Raymond, “fecundity is as essential to Deity as omnipotence,” adding that, “God has a son by necessity of his nature; that the Father is a father by an eternal begetting, and the Son is a son by an eternal generation.” This teaching, urged Raymond, is simply not a subtle form of Arianism. Moreover, even if the doctrine of Christ’s eternal generation presents, as some maintain, “a mystery more inscrutable, or difficulties more numerous and insurmountable, than does the affirmation of a created creator, or a subordinate Deity,” this was not, in Raymond’s view, grounds for rejecting the doctrine. Rather, he argued:

The whole question of Christology – indeed, the entire doctrine of the Trinity – is confessedly beyond and above the range of rational thought. Every proper investigation of these topics is, by necessity, purely exegetical. The only appropriate question is, What say the Scriptures? What testimony has God given respecting himself in his word.37

This brings us to Raymond’s third and final section, which he began with the following questions, “Do the symbols of the Church rightly interpret the Scriptures testimony respecting the divine Sonship? Is the Nicene doctrine of the ‘eternal generation’ taught in the word of God?”38 On purely exegetical grounds, Raymond insisted that the Nicene formulas are reflective of the contents of scripture. This, however, turns out to be beside the point, as the objections to the acceptability of the Nicene doctrine are not really exegetical objections at all. Rather, the objections reflect a misunderstanding of the very purpose of the ancient creeds. The ancient creeds, argued Raymond, “originated mostly in efforts for defense against heresy; they therefore make known the truth more by informing us of what it is not, than by direct statement of what it is.” Raymond then illustrated the misunderstanding, saying:

36Raymond, 568.
37Raymond, 568-569.
38Raymond, 572.
It is frequently asked, and the question insisted upon as if vital to truth, What do you mean by the generation of a personal distinction in the Deity or divine Essence? Manifestly no direct and positive answer can be given; but to the inquirer it might be said, You are not a good theologian to ask the question. The terms “Trinity,” Three Persons in one God,” present to thought that which has no analogy in the whole compass of human knowledge; and manifestly whatever be the immanent and ineffable activities by which personal distinctions have existence, herein more than anywhere else lies the heart of the Trinitarian mystery.39

Clearly, Miner Raymond was deeply troubled by the frequency with which questions were being raised concerning the eternal generation of the Son. In the end, Raymond sought to put an end to the questions by appealing to mystery. This is not the place to evaluate the theological legitimacy of that appeal. Rather, for the purposes of this essay, Raymond’s essay on the eternal sonship of Christ suggests that, in the latter half of the 19th century, the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son was increasingly called into question or denied within American Methodism, opening the way for more or less covert forms of Sabellianism and tri-theism in American Methodist theology.

IV

Whether Coke, a typesetter, or someone else altogether was responsible for the omission of the relevant clause from the Articles of Religion is difficult to say. What is clear is that the omission made it possible for persons to question and even to reject the doctrine of Christ’s eternal sonship, thereby threatening to undermine the delicate balance concerning the relationship of Christ to the Father so eloquently captured by the Nicene Creed and preserved in the Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. In the absence of a firm commitment to the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, it is difficult to see how Methodist theologians then and now can affirm the deity of Christ without embracing, implicitly or explicitly, either Sabellianism or tri-theism.

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3Raymond, 573-574.