

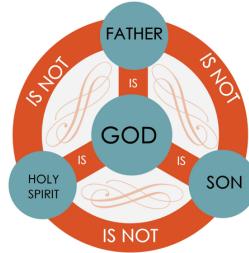


Studying Together

The Trinity in Charles Wesley's Hymns

INTRODUCTION

The word Trinity does not appear in the Bible, nor in the Nicene or Apostles' Creeds. Yet, it is a central defining belief of the Christian faith. This term, as well as the term 'Triune' (3 in 1), refers to the three persons of the 'Godhead': God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. The diagram below seeks to explain how each person of the Trinity is separate and distinctive, and yet is also fully God.



One could say that the formation of this belief followed the human experience of God. In effect 'Trinity' is our word for what we know to be true but can't fully explain.

Countless hymns of Charles Wesley (CW) express faith in, and praise for, the Triune God. In 1767 CW and John Wesley (JW) published a collection entitled "Hymns of the Trinity", which included 188 hymns of the Triune God. The church's traditional doctrine of the Trinity had been challenged over the centuries and was vigorously disputed in CW's time by the Unitarian movement – they rejected a trinitarian view of God, and do not believe in the divinity of Christ. Likewise, today, the Jehovah's Witnesses describe themselves as 'anti-trinitarian', claiming that a trinitarian understanding of God is not found in the Bible.

THEME HYMN: Father (Maker) in Whom We Live (1747)

1. Father, in whom we live, in whom we are and move,
the glory, power, and praise receive for thy creating love.
Let all the angel throng give thanks to God on high,
while earth repeats the joyful song and echoes to the sky.

2. Incarnate Deity, let all the ransomed race
render in thanks their lives to thee for thy redeeming grace.
The grace to sinners showed ye heavenly choirs proclaim,
and cry, "Salvation to our God, salvation to the Lamb!"
3. Spirit of Holiness, let all thy saints adore
thy sacred energy, and bless thine heart-renewing power.
No angel tongues can tell thy love's ecstatic height,
the glorious joy unspeakable, the beatific sight.
4. Eternal, Triune God, let all the hosts above,
let all on earth below record and dwell upon thy love.
When heaven and earth are fled before thy glorious face,
sing all the saints thy love hath made thine everlasting praise.

GOD THE FATHER

Each of the first three verses offers praise to one of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. CW feels that there is ample biblical evidence that the proper designation of the First Person is Father.

- Deut. 32:6. God is called the parent of the Hebrew people
- Mark 11:25. Our "Father" in heaven forgives
- Luke 15:11-32. The Parable of the prodigal son and his brother
- Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:22. The model prayer begins with "Father".

It is important to note that although the term "Father" is used, God is neither masculine nor feminine. God is personal and desires a personal relationship with us. Using a term such as *father* protects belief in a personal God.

In "Hymns on the Trinity" #39 and #110 respectively CW wrote:

*Father, and Son, and Spirit join'd
In the creating plan,
Each in the Maker of mankind,
And doth his work sustain.*

*The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
God in Three Persons One,
Created that celestial host,
And made our earth alone.*

In the hymn, and in scripture, we are reminded that we cannot give God glory or power, because they already belong to God. We can, however, acknowledge God's glory and power in worship and remember that we are living in God's presence.

The first verse closes with a call to the heavenly company of angels and those on earth to unite in recognizing the majesty and power of God's creating love. CW was persuaded that there was an 'angel throng'. (Angel = messenger of God).

JESUS, GOD INCARNATE

Verse two extols the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ - God incarnate. Our attention is focused especially on the role of Jesus, whose atoning death opens the way to our salvation. Again, we should recognize that the whole Trinity, one God, is the author of our salvation.

Jesus is addressed as the one whose “*redeeming grace*” has liberated “*all the ransomed race*.” Redemption is seen here as release from the domination and oppression of sin. It is also deliverance from the consequences of sin, from guilt and divine judgment. Grace releases us from sin’s grip.

As the “*ransomed race*” CW bids us to offer thanks. To ransom someone is to free them from captivity. In the OT in Psalm 49:15, God is the one who ransoms the souls of people. In Isaiah 35:10 people are ransomed from sin and foreign powers. In the NT, God ransoms us through Jesus’ death. (Mark 10:45). The earliest Christians understood themselves as people who had been ransomed by Jesus (1 Timothy 2:6). See also Revelation 5:9-10.

For the grace of God exhibited in the redeeming and ransoming work of Jesus, all on earth and in heaven are called upon to offer thanks and praise. The “*heavenly choir*” includes all those who have gone before us in the faith.

Jesus is described as the Lamb in many of CW’s hymns. The writers of the NT declared that old sacrificial system had been superseded by Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross.

GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Third Person of the Trinity is called “Spirit of Holiness”.

Jesus promised his followers that they would receive a fresh experience of God’s Spirit following the resurrection that would empower them for their lives and ministry. Before his ascension (Acts 1:8) he promised the disciples that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit. This was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). CW understood the significance of the Holy Spirit for Jesus’ followers.

In 1746 CW published a small hymnbook with 32 hymns entitled, “*Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father*”. In these hymns CW talks of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of grace, life and divine power. The Spirit fills our souls with God’s life and love.

The theme hymn refers to the Holy Spirit as “*sacred energy*” who possesses “*heart-renewing power*” and whose dynamic presence constantly assures us that we belong to God. We are the ‘saints’ – holy people of God’s grace. The Spirit directs and encourages us to be the people God intends, supports and emboldens in difficult

situations, and empowers us to perform routine as well as remarkable acts in Jesus’ name.

Although we offer praise for the overwhelming nature of God’s grace made real in and through the Holy Spirit, our language cannot adequately express our joyful thanksgiving. Even ‘*angel tongues*’ cannot summon sufficient jubilation to proclaim the ‘*ecstatic heights*’ of God’s marvellous love.

The Holy Spirit is a gift not only to individuals but also to the church. Christian faith is personal but never private. Persons of faith always stand within the fellowship of people of faith. The church receives the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s gifts for its instruction, nurture and mission.

ETERNAL, TRIUNE GOD

The final verse recognizes that these are Three Persons of one God – not three separate gods. They are completely one in purpose, and they act together in concert.

CW made no attempt to explain how God can exist in Three Persons. He simply accepted it as a fact of Scripture, the faith of the church, and a mystery that reason strives to understand.

*By the Father, and the Son,
And blessed Spirit made,
God in Persons Three we own,
And hang upon his aid:
Reason asks, how can it be?
But who by simple faith embrace,
We shall know the mystery,
And see Him face to face.*

Mystery has a prominent place in CW’s hymns. He spoke about the presence and working of God’s grace as mystery. Jesus’ death as a redeeming sacrifice is a mystery. Likewise, the triune nature of God is mysterious.

Our theme hymn closes with a recognition that “*all the hosts above*” and “*all the earth below*” acknowledge and dwell on the love of the Triune God for us and all creation; the love unmistakably exhibited and experienced in God’s creation, redemption and empowerment. In every circumstance, in heaven and on earth, all God’s saints, God’s holy people, sing everlasting praise for the demonstrated love of the Triune God.

