

The Trinity: Persons and Work

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In the first part of our discussion of the Trinity we discussed the doctrine in the light of wider conceptions of God. In closing this we examined the classical distinction between *person* and *nature* which is fundamental to understanding the formation of orthodox doctrine. Yet there is no disputing the fact that this distinction is widely disregarded today. It is not that it is held to be false; rather it is thought to be outmoded, a doctrine couched in philosophical language which is not Biblical and which has now been generally discredited. In its place, there is an increasing concentration on the Persons and *Work* of the members of the Trinity, so much so that a functional emphasis now appears to be in danger of swallowing the former concept in the latter.

Many factors have been at work in this, from a renewal of Calvin's insistence that the nature of God is unknowable and not revealed to us to the belief that words like *nature* are static in their emphasis and ignore the fact that God, being alive, is a dynamic power. It is felt that an emphasis on *work* conveys this sense of energy much better, as well as being more relevant to the concerns of soteriology, which have dominated so much recent thought. Nevertheless it must be emphasized that the modern distinction between *person* and *work* would not have been possible if the more fundamental distinction between *person* and *nature* had never been made. In the earliest Christian theology there was the constant danger that *person* would somehow be swallowed up by *nature*, which remained the basic category for thinking about God. A residue of this can be seen even in the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century, who explained the work of the Trinity as undivided outside itself. In other words we are not to ask whether it was the Father, the Son or the Spirit who created the world, since the creation, being external to God, was a work of the undivided Trinity. This is unexceptional but in the context of Cappadocian thought we are entitled to ask whether this in fact means that creation was somehow the work of the divine *nature*, perhaps even the nature hypostatized *as* (not *in*) the Person of the Father.

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This appears nowadays to be rather obscure theological debate, but it comes home to us when we reflect that in modern discussion the *work* is seen as the function of each *person*, not of the Godhead as such. The result is that we tend inevitably to fall into just the trap the Cappadocians were trying to avoid. We think almost instinctively of the Father as Creator, the Son as Redeemer and the Holy Spirit as Sanctifier, though as soon as we say it we realize that we have been too neat in our analysis. The Son too is Creator, as is the Spirit; the Father is also the Redeemer, and all three persons take part in the work of sanctification. In distinguishing between them we must be very careful not to apportion their work in watertight compartments, as if God's activity were delegated out among a small committee which reported back only at intervals!

This second article on the Trinity concludes Dr Gerald Bray's much-appreciated series on basic Christian doctrines.



This is a crude conception of course, but it is very common in practice among Christians. It was John Wesley who said that he took himself to Christ for sanctification as well as for justification, but many modern Christians would find that a little surprising – is it not the Holy Spirit, they would say, who sanctifies us, not the Son? If we are to hope to be able to elucidate the issues which are raised by this kind of question we must begin by considering what the relationship of the Persons of the Trinity to each other is.

This question is a very ancient one and it has been answered in different ways. If we follow the Eastern pattern, the basic reality is one of *dependence* on the Father. A relation which does not involve that – viz. the relationship between the Spirit and the Son – is left undecided. If on the other hand, we follow the Western pattern, we find that the basic concept is one of *complementarity* (or as some theologians, rather unhelpfully, express it, *opposition*). According to this picture, the Father would not be the person he is without the Son and vice versa, therefore each is equally necessary to the other. The Holy Spirit does not share this necessity in the same way, but is rather the common expression of the other two Persons, and as such the living witness of the fundamental Unity of God.

Each view has its strengths and its weaknesses. In the former model, every divine work proceeds ultimately from the Father's will, but may be delegated to one of the other persons. There is no doubt that passages in the New Testament can be cited in support of this opinion, as for instance 1 Corinthians 15:28, and the numerous passages in which Jesus says that he is only the agent of the one who has sent him. On the other hand, it suffers from a latent subordination which, although it is rigorously denied, is intrinsic to the overall pattern. However one looks at the matter, in the end the Son owes his divinity to the Father, and we must then ask ourselves whether he is really God at all.

According to the second view, Father and Son are equals in every sense of the word, an affirmation which does full justice to the high view of Christ found in John 1, Philippians 2:5-11 and elsewhere. At the same time it tends to submerge the Holy Spirit, who appears more as a kind of impersonal force emanating from the intimate union of the other two persons. Once again, this charge is always denied, but the suspicion persists and it would appear that here again there is a basic fault in the model. To solve the problem we must go back to the beginning and consider the meaning of the co-eternity of the Persons. If all three exist in eternity, then it does not make sense to speak of generation (of the Son) or procession (of the Spirit) if by these we imply some kind of temporal origin.

Generation and procession cannot refer to events in the past; their only possible meaning is in the context of relations in eternity. Furthermore, these relations are not the product of some inner necessity in God; they are freely entered into by each of the Persons. This is a very important point, because it touches directly on our salvation. When the Father sent the Son to redeem mankind, could the Son have refused? If his Sonship was the gift of the Father, i.e., if he depended for his being on the Father's pleasure, clearly he would have had no choice. But in that case our salvation would not be freedom, but slavery! God has not called us to be servants, who simply do his bidding without question or consent, but to be sons, sharing with him in his rule of the universe. For this, only freedom will do – the divine freedom of the Son of God who chose, and was not forced, to become man.

We are not told specifically that the same is true of the Holy Spirit, but it is worth remembering that Jesus himself promises that when the Spirit comes he will do greater things in and through the disciples than what Jesus himself had done. Clearly whatever the relationship between them is, it must allow for this to happen without an inner-trinitarian contradiction. It is certainly true that the Spirit who dwells in our hearts takes the initiative in giving us the freedom to cry Abba, Father, and it is hard to imagine how he could do this if he were not himself free! The Spirit of Liberty must surely be able to act according to his professed attribute, or else it would have no meaning at all!

Just as in the Old Testament the sacrifice of atonement was made inside the Holy of Holies, so in the New Testament the work of Christ takes place inside the Trinity.

This is most important because of the great work of the Trinity, in the end, is to integrate us into the personal fellowship which reaches its perfection there. It will never be possible in this world to reconcile the rival claims of unity and diversity, as the history of the Church shows all too well. Co-operation between Christians remains a halting affair which seldom takes a fixed form for long. Even within a recognized fellowship there are often more problems than between people or groups which have agreed to live apart. Yet in God the claims of unity are realized without sacrificing the personal freedom which all must enjoy if they are to exercise their full potential. God demonstrates as no human institution can, what the reconciliation of differences can, and must mean.

What is more, we who believe in him are called to share in this deeper unity, called to sit in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). There the dream of harmony will finally come true, in a way which will give full reign to the individuality of each one, because that individuality will be able to do no more than express, in perfect freedom, the underlying unity of all.

The work of the persons of the Trinity can be examined in exhaustive detail, and frequently it has been, but in the end all these investigations return to the point of departure. For in the process of analysis we discover the underlying synthesis; in examining the distinctions we find the harmony.

This is the God we worship – Three Persons in One Nature, each with his one work which testifies ever more clearly of the single purpose of the will of God at work in our lives.

We are therefore left to conclude that the three Persons co-operate at the most fundamental level in God. This is not surprising, because although they are free they share a common *will*. The will of God belongs to his nature, not to the persons, which explains why it is both open to us to know in part (as the persons reveal it) yet remains fundamentally hidden from our eyes. Because their will is one, the Persons of the Trinity cannot act in a way which goes against each other; they are in fundamental harmony because of their common nature.

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This becomes a matter of the greatest importance when we come to consider the *work of atonement*. It is the traditional view that this is pre-eminently the work of the Son, though in recent years Moltmann and others have tried to put the suffering and death of Christ in a trinitarian context. Unfortunately this has been done by looking at the Trinity in Jesus, rather than the other way round. The result has been a lapse into a concept of divine suffering which is scarcely different from the ancient heresy of patripassianism. Yet if we are able to look at the question the other way round, we can avoid that and still see the Trinity at work in the atoning death of Christ.

Just as in the Old Testament the sacrifice of atonement was made inside the Holy of Holies, so in the New Testament the work of Christ takes place inside the Trinity. On the cross, the Son offered himself *to the Father* as payment for the sins of men. We have inherited the fashion of seeing the death of Christ primarily as a manward act, either in terms of an example for us to imitate, or as the means whereby Christ has shown us the supreme form of love, which then draws us to himself. Each of these views is attractive in its own way, but neither does justice to the notion of atonement. That is an act which takes place inside the Godhead, so that we can say with John (Revelation 13:8) that the Lamb was slain from before the foundation of the world.

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is not alien to this work of atonement, since it is he who seals it in our hearts by the faith which he implants in us. It is he who intercedes for us with groanings that cannot be uttered, yet his intercession is no different from that of the Son. Once again we find the same work being carried out by the Persons together, not independently. So true is this in fact, that some New Testament scholars insist that Christ and the Spirit are not always clearly distinguished in the Scriptures! That is surely going too far, but it is understandable if all the emphasis is placed on the *work* and little or none on the *persons*. Here too we must find a balance, and learn to relate to God in his trinitarian fullness.