

And Did the Father Die? The Perennial Threat of Modalism.

Professor Michael A. G. Haykin of Central Baptist Seminary and Bible College, Toronto, reminds us of the need to apply our theological understanding in our prayers and worship.

It was only after a protracted struggle which took the better part of two centuries that the early Church arrived at what it rightly considered to be a good summary of the New Testament witness to the nature of the Godhead: namely, that within the Godhead there are three co-equal Persons, who share a common being. The key text in this regard is probably the credal statement issued in the summer of 381 A.D. by the Council of Constantinople. For this document declared that Jesus Christ is truly God, 'One in being with the Father', and that the Holy Spirit is to be 'adored and glorified together with the Father and the Son'. The latter confession about the Holy Spirit unequivocally implies that the Spirit, like the Son, must be regarded as One in being with the Father. For he can only be worthy of worship if he is fully divine. As Basil of Caesarea (c. 330-379), whose doctrine of the Spirit did much to shape this creed, pointed out:¹

We glorify the Holy Spirit together with the Father and the Son, in the conviction that the Spirit is not separate from the divine nature. For that which is different by nature should not share in the same honours.

To the early Christians who resisted this modalist conception of the Godhead, the issue was certainly not a marginal one but one which touched upon every aspect of the Christian life.

Now, among the trinitarian models which had been tried up to this point in time and found wanting was that of modalism. Modalism, first making its appearance in the last decade of the second century A.D., essentially suggested that the different members of the Godhead were actually masks put on successively by one and the same Person during the various stages of divine activity: creation, salvation and sanctification. The titles of Father, Son and Spirit were thus regarded as mere labels. The logical conclusion of this way of thinking is well put by Tertullian (died c. 225), who wrote an important refutation of this heresy. If the Son be identical at every point to the Father, then one must admit that it was the Father who died on the cross, that it was the Father who was crucified.² To the early Christians who resisted this modalist conception of the Godhead, the issue was certainly not a marginal one but one which touched upon every aspect of the Christian life. For instance, for Basil a refusal to recognize the distinct personality of the Spirit meant a refusal to be submissive to the clear teaching of the Scriptures. Basil pointed to passages like 2 Cor. 13:14 (the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you' [NKJV]) which, by its use of the conjunction 'and' puts all the members of the Trinity on an

equal footing. Basil rightly saw that this verse testified to a real distinction between the Persons of the Godhead as well as to their essential and indissoluble unity.³ Other consequences which flow out from a modalist understanding of the Godhead Basil detailed as follows:⁴

The person who says that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one entity which takes various forms, . . . what else does he do but deny the eternal existence of the One who is Only-Begotten? He denies too the Lord's sojourn with men in the Incarnation, his descent into Hades, his resurrection, the judgement which he must give. Moreover, he also denies the activities proper to the Spirit.

For Basil, a rejection of the fact that there are three different members in the Godhead was fraught with soteriological problems. Take, for instance, the work of the Spirit. The burden of the New Testament teaching in this regard is that God the Father relates to men *through* Christ and *in* the Spirit. For instance, all that the Father accomplished through Christ on the cross is made available to human lives by the Spirit (*e.g.*, consider Jn. 15:26; 16:7-15; 1 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 2:18). If the distinct Personhood of the Spirit is denied, the Father's saving work in Christ will fall short of fulfillment.

Although modalism was effectively overcome at a theological level by such early Christian authors as Basil, it has never been completely eradicated from the life and thought of the Church. In fact, Robert W. Jenson has recently asserted that since its appearance in the late second century, modalism has been the standard trinitarian belief of most Christian congregations.⁵ This popular understanding of God is best seen in the common tendency in prayer to overlook the 'threeness' of God. How often does one hear the Father being thanked for dying for the Church! Or how frequently does one notice a believer in vocal prayer switching back and forth in his address to the different persons of the Godhead without betraying any awareness that the One to whom he is speaking is also Three. Now, when modalism was being resisted in the early centuries, Christian authors such as Basil turned to Scriptural texts which aptly displayed the triune nature of God. For instance, there is the Pauline benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14, mentioned above, or the baptismal scene at the river Jordan, where the Father speaks to the Son and the Spirit descends upon him (Mt. 3:16-17; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 3:21-22). Surely, one of the most instructive Scriptural texts in this regard has to be Hebrews 9:13-14. For there, we read:

For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (NKJV)

The writer to the Hebrews affirms that it was not the Father nor the Spirit but the incarnate Son who died on the cross and shed his blood for our sins. Not that the Father and the Spirit were mere onlookers or bystanders. The Father had sent the Son into the world for this very act and the Son's sacrifice in turn was offered to the Father. In the past there has been a tendency to overlook this basic aspect of the atonement. As Gerald Bray writes:⁶

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.

Moreover, the Son made this sacrifice of himself in the power of the eternal Spirit of God. Although some scholars see the mention of the Spirit in this verse as a reference to the human spirit of Christ, it probably should be taken as an allusion to the Holy Spirit. Abraham Kuyper, in arguing for the latter interpretation, frames a portion of his argument thus:⁷

If the Mediator as man showed in His human nature such zeal for God and such pity for sinners that He willingly gave Himself in self-sacrifice unto death, then it is evident that his human nature could not exercise such consecration without the inworking of the Holy Spirit; and again that the Holy Spirit could not have effected such inworking unless the Son willed and desired it. . . . The Son was willing so to empty Himself that it would be possible for His human nature to pass through eternal death; and to this end He let it be filled with all the mightiness of the Spirit of God. Thus the Son offered Himself 'through the Eternal Spirit that we might serve the living God'.

The Father and the Spirit were thus vitally involved in the Son's sacrifice. The distinctive roles played by each of the members of the Godhead are thus quite apparent and the text provides an excellent display of the triune nature of God.

The implications of this text for prayer and praise are thus profound. When thanks is offered to God for his gift of salvation we must never forget which Person offered himself on the cross. We do not offer our thanks to the Father for shedding his blood, for he didn't. Rather, we give thanks to the Father for the gift of his own dear Son and we thank the Son for what he personally did for us at the cross. And we can render thanks to the Spirit for enabling our hearts to appropriate personally the redemption accomplished by the Son. God has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and each of the three Persons has a distinct, though intimately related, role in the divine economy of salvation. To confuse them in our prayer is, at best, to act as if our doctrine has no relationship to our worship, and, at worst, it shows rudeness to our God – Father, Son Spirit, all of whom share one eternal and indivisible nature, 'God blessed forever'.

Notes

1. *Letter 159.2.*
2. *Against Praxeas 1, 28-29.*
3. *On the Holy Spirit 25.59.* See also the comments in this regard made by J. J. Verhees, 'Mitteilbarkeit Gottes in der Dynamik von Sein und Wirken nach der Trinitätstheologie des Basilius des Grossen', *Ostkirchliche Studien*, 27 (1978), 10-12.
4. *Letter 210. 3.*
5. 'The Triune God' in his and Carl E. Braaten, eds., *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1:119. See also the similar statement made by Tertullian, *Against Praxeas 3.*
6. 'The Trinity: Persons and Work', *Evangel*, 4, No. 2 (Summer 1986), 6.
7. *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri de Vries (1900 ed. repr. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1956), p. 105. For other arguments in support of this interpretation, see Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Ingram Cobbin (London/Edinburgh: Gall & Inglis, n.d.), p. 244-245; Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publ., 1983), p. 117, 120; George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), p. 132-133.

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