

The Trinity: Persons and Nature

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The modern theological student is becoming increasingly aware, both in theory and in practice, of the importance of the Trinity for Christian doctrine. Not so long ago it would have been relegated by most people, even sincere believers, to a relatively minor place. It never disappeared from view altogether of course, but apart from ritual statements at moments like baptism, it was seldom mentioned in practice. Theologians took pot shots at it, calling it both irrational and a hangover from a long-discredited form of Neoplatonism, whilst ordinary people could never quite manage to fit three into one, and seldom tried. The Holy Spirit, who in classical Western trinitarianism was the bond of unity among the Three was almost ignored, and at most there was a kind of uneasy binitarianism, with Jesus somehow managing to be God alongside the Father, and the Holy Spirit being little more than a divine power of something less than personal dimensions.

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Today all that has changed beyond recognition. Binitarianism can still be found in some quarters, as can unitarianism, but there is undoubtedly a new emphasis on the Trinity which would have seemed surprising even a generation ago. At the dogmatic level, the massive contribution of Karl Barth brought the doctrine back into the forefront of Christian theology, though admittedly with a Christological slant which differed from the classical tradition. Barth has been followed by Jürgen Moltmann, and in a very different way, by Eberhard Jüngel, both of whom have made the Trinity an essential element in their thought about God. In Roman Catholic circles there has been a similar upsurge of interest, with everybody from Karl Rahner to Bernard Lonergan seeking to fathom the mystery. Even in the Eastern Orthodox Church there has been fresh work on the subject, notably that of Vladimir Lossky and Dumitru Staniloae, which has recently been made available to English readers. On a very different level, the growth of the charismatic renewal movement has brought with it a new emphasis on the Holy Spirit, which inevitably raises important questions about his person and work in relation to those of the Father and the Son.

To understand the Trinity we must begin, as do the Scriptures, with God. There has been much speculation over the centuries about whether the Old Testament contains any indication of plurality within the Godhead, and in their debates with the Jews, Christians were frequently in the habit of claiming that it did. To be fair, the first person to suggest that Yahweh might somehow be three persons was himself a Jew – Philo of Alexandria. Philo believed that the appearance of the three men in Genesis 18, whom Abraham apparently addressed in the singular as Lord, indicated a triad of some kind within God. More important even than this was the assertion that the use of the plural Elohim complete with plural pronouns and verbs (e.g., Let us make man in our image, Genesis 1:26) indicated that the Old Testament contained a revelation of a plural Godhead. To this was added the argument that the Hebrew Scriptures not infrequently spoke of the Word of the Lord or of the Spirit of God in fundamentally personal terms, which it was quite

In this issue we print the first of two articles on the great doctrine of the Trinity which will conclude Gerald Bray's stimulating series.



natural to assume formed the basis of the New Testament thinking.

Against that view is the well-known fact that Judaism has always rejected any such notion, and the general consensus of Old Testament scholars that most traditional Christian apologetic of this type relied on allegory or some other tendentious interpretation which at best could be regarded as no more than one possible interpretation of the facts. There *might* be some such idea in the Old Testament, but there is certainly nothing definite enough to form the basis of a doctrine of the Trinity. From the purely dogmatic standpoint this might appear to be a bit of a disappointment, and there is no doubt that many Christians have looked at the matter in this way. In fact, however, there is a very good reason for denying a revelation of the Trinity in the Old Testament, as we shall see.

What was the Jewish conception of God? Here we must be very careful, since what is revealed in the Old Testament is by no means necessarily the same as what most people thought. Had the average Israelite had the same view of God as that given in the Law of Moses, the rest of the Old Testament would quite possibly never have been written. At least it would hardly have taken the form it did, with constant warnings against the dangers of idolatry. Yet when all is said and done it seems clear that Old Testament religion generally looked at God from the outside. Israel has a relationship to him, of course, but it was one of servant to master, as Paul makes plain in his epistles. The Israelites knew that God dwelt among them in the temple, but they could not penetrate the Holy of Holies – only the High Priest could do that, and then only once a year to make atonement on behalf of the people.

A religion which saw God from the outside was bound to develop a high consciousness of the importance of externals in worship, and this is what we find. The relationship between God and Israel was determined in terms of law, and in the hands of Jewish theologians – who properly speaking were lawyers – it became increasingly more complex and refined.

The coming of Christ put an end to the Jewish system of worship, not by shifting the allegiance of the people to another, higher God (as Marcion tried to maintain) but by stepping inside the Godhead. This was symbolized by the rending of the veil in the temple; the One who made the final High Priestly sacrifice by offering himself also opened the way for us to enter into the presence of God. But when this happened, the believer's perception of God changed, because what he had previously seen on the outside as one, he now saw on the inside as three. The same God revealed

himself in Christ in a deeper and more satisfying way than he had revealed himself to the prophets of the Old Testament.

In theological terms this distinction between the oneness of God and his threeness is made by calling the first his *nature* and distinguishing the second as his *persons*. These terms have had a complex history in theology which we cannot go into here, but certain basic ideas must be retained.

The first is that Christians are monotheists, and therefore have a strong interest in preserving the Unity of God. In confessing the Trinity we are not abolishing or dividing the divine Unity, which we believe is equally important. But just because this is so, many Christians are tempted to think of God primarily as a nature, as divine substance which may be personal in an attributive sense (just as it is omnipresent, impossible and so on), but which is not really a Person. Or conversely, God may be thought of as a single Person, from which the other two derive. Jesus and the Spirit may be thought of as parts of God, as children of God, as divine beings somewhat like angels – on a lower level than God. Such beliefs may not be expressed very coherently, but they are common in people who want to believe that God is a Person, but who also want to preserve monotheism.

The Christian answer is that the Unity of God, though real, is not personal. The Persons of God, though three in number, are not merely parts or aspects of his being. Each of them partakes fully of the divine nature in its entirety, and what is more, each fully reveals the others. This is the meaning of John 14:9-11, and also of John 14:23, where Jesus says that both he and the Father will come to dwell in the believer's heart by faith, even though the immediate context is one of teaching about the Holy Spirit, who will do this.

The Persons of the Godhead are three, but each one by himself is fully God, and manifests the fulness of God's nature in power and glory. They are not however to be thought of simply as different names for the same thing. It is tempting to think of the Father as God the Creator, the Son as God the Redeemer and the Holy Spirit as God the Sanctifier, but although these distinctions may have some value at the level of *work*, they are meaningless at the level of *nature*. All three Persons are engaged as individuals in each of these works; they have not been parcelled out in some division of the Godhead. John I:1-3 and Colossians I:16-17 speak of the Son's role in creation, and Jesus makes it quite clear in John 14-16 that the Holy Spirit will come to reinforce his own testimony.

But if the Persons cannot simply be equated with each other, and if the divine nature cannot be divided, how can we hold the Trinity and the Unity together in one God? One answer is to make one of the Persons the principle of unity for the three. According to this idea, one Person contains or *hypostatizes* the divine nature more explicitly than the other two. He then becomes the focus of unity binding the others together. In Eastern Orthodox theology this is the role of the Father, who is the source of both the Son's and the Spirit's divinity. In western theology it is the role usually assigned to the holy Spirit, who as the bond of love unites the relationship of opposition implied in the contrast of Father and Son. In the Eastern view, God is basically one Person who has multiplied himself; in the Western view he is a personified nature (the Holy Spirit) who has revealed the constituent parts of his make-up, which are also personal in character.

To express the matter in this way is inevitably to simplify, but it does bring out the continuing difficulty which Christian theology has experienced in trying to keep the Persons and the Nature separate. To say, for example, as Jüngel does, that God made a primordial decision to be a Trinity does not

solve the problem; we merely want to know *who* took the decision. It is impossible to go behind the threeness to a primordial unity, just as it is impossible to merge the three into one. The two numbers reflect equally objective, equally eternal realities – on different *levels*. It is this which the distinction between the Persons and the Nature seeks to preserve.

Furthermore, within this distinction, we can know God only at the personal level. His nature remains for ever concealed from us. This is an important point because it explains how God can be known yet unknowable at the same time. He reveals himself to us in his Persons, and we perceive his unity in their mutual harmony, but we never penetrate to the essence of the divine. It must be said that there are branches of the Christian Church which do not accept the unknowability of God's nature; on the contrary, they insist that it is the goal of the Christian life to be transformed into the likeness of uncreated divinity! This view, which has reached its highest form of perfection in the mystical theology of the Eastern Church, must be rejected, because in spite of its claims to the contrary, it puts our relationship to God on a level which is not personal. We can never become like God by nature; we can only enter into fellowship with him as persons. We are back in fact, by another route, to the difference between imparted and imputed righteousness – in the former case, we must become like God ourselves; in the latter, we rely entirely on his merit and grace towards us.

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At the same time we must recognize that the Persons of the Godhead share attributes *as Persons*, in addition to having attributes which distinguish them from each other. These attributes are those which in Reformed theology are known as *communicable*. They can be shared with other beings who are likewise persons. Foremost among these attributes is divine *holiness*. Holiness is not a characteristic of the divine nature despite popular misconceptions to that effect, but rather a shared property of each of the Persons. If it were not so, we would not be able to be, or to become, holy ourselves, without being transformed into God.

Nevertheless it is also true that Christians are called to be "partakers of the divine nature" (II Peter I:4) and this verse can easily lead to great confusion if it is not properly understood. The context, which speaks of escaping corruption, might easily suggest a change of state which would give support to the idea that we do in fact become like God, and of course the verse has often been used in that way. But if we look more closely we find that what Peter is talking about is not *state* but *power, strength* and the divine *promises*. It is the mystery of the Christian faith that we hold this treasure in earthen vessels. The pots do not change their texture as a result of the divine infilling; on the contrary the miracle is that the power of God is at work even though the instruments which he chooses to use are less than worthy of him! It is because we have a personal relationship with him that he can reveal himself to us in the reality of his nature. We have no claim on God, no reason to believe that we have somehow drawn nearer to him in a way which gives us some claim on his mercy. To the end we remain dependent on his grace, freely offered to us in the context of personal faith. It is thus that we know God, and see him at work within us.