

Reflections on the Trinity

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Trinitarianism and Non-Trinitarianism

The doctrine of the Trinity has, historically, been upheld as a fundamental tenet of Christian belief. As a general working definition of the Trinity we may describe it as the inner coherence and outward manifestation of God in three “Persons” — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A key aspect of the doctrine is therefore the divinity of Christ, the Son being “co-equal” with the Father. While such a description falls far short of encompassing all that must be said about this *mystery*, as it is often termed, let it suffice for the moment. A few of the nuances involved in a discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity will surface in what follows, which admittedly touches only a limited arc of its circumference.

While Trinitarianism is held by the majority of those who call themselves Christians to be one of the hallmarks of orthodoxy, it is by no means universally accepted as such. Among groups that consider themselves within the Christian orbit which reject the doctrine in its classical form we could mention the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Apostolic or “Jesus-only” Pentecostals, some offshoots of the Churches of Christ — and, of course, many theologians within the so-called “liberal” or “main line” denominations who have long since abandoned all pretense of holding to biblical Christianity or to orthodoxy as traditionally understood.

A common epithet for the non-Trinitarian theology is Arianism, after the priest Arius (ca. AD 250-336). The Arian thinkers, including also Eusebius of Nicomedia (died AD 341) and Asterius the Sophist (died AD 341), taught that the Son was not co-eternal with the Father, of the same “essence,” but was created, or begotten, at a certain instant in which the Creator (the “Unbegun”) therein became the Father. No intact works of the Arians have been preserved; their views are known only through quotations of their writings, often distorted, in the anti-Arian writings of Alexander, bishop of Alexandria (died AD 326 or 328) and his famous successor, Athanasius (ca. AD 296-373). Arius’s views were condemned by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, and Trinitarian “orthodoxy” was established in a statement that became, eventually, what we know as the Nicene Creed. However, the controversy within the church continued and an Arian form of Christianity encompassed large sectors of the then-Christian world, especially among Germanic peoples, until around the eighth century when it gave way to what we know as Nicene Christianity. Today, within evangelical Protestant circles as well as Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, any teaching suspected of Arianism, rightly or wrongly, becomes an object of suspicion and attack.

The problem posed by lingering “Arianism” is due to the fact that clear scriptural grounds are lacking for making an issue of the doctrine of the Trinity, *pro* or *con*. If one argues from chapter and verse, scriptural statements can be adduced to support both the Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian views, both the deity of Christ and the subordination of the Son to the Father. The Arians have often been accused of arguing their case in a philosophical vein, rather than from Scripture, but recent scholarship has shown that this is not the case.¹ Both the Arians and their opponents (later reckoned to be the “orthodox”) cited both the Old and New Testaments copiously. Today we would not consider their handling of Scripture to accord with the best principles of interpretation, for they frequently ignored (or were ignorant of) biblical literary genres or the context in which various passages were written. We forget that the early Christian theologians did not have such exegetical tools as *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance* or computer Bible-search programs, or even printed Bibles. They knew Scripture largely from memory, because that was how it was taught in the community, but did not have the kind of linguistic and historical aids to which we have access. Nevertheless, the arguments of both parties were bound to the text of Scripture and only tangentially derived from an alien philosophical point of view.

The label *Arian* is actually misleading as applied to those who currently propose a non-Trinitarian, subordinationist Christology. The concern of the Arians was not primarily to defend the oneness of God, but rather to outline a path toward salvation for His creatures.² In so doing, they understood that the Son was the primary created being. Through his progress in virtue, Jesus attained adoption as the Son and therefore provided a way, through Himself, for his fellow human beings to likewise become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). Arius acknowledged there was a kind of Trinity, but he divided it into

a Monad (the Father) and a Dyad (the Son and the Spirit). Modern “Arians”, in contrast, seem to think of a Dyad of Father and Spirit and a Monad of the Son.

In our view, the need to dispute matters such as the Trinity results largely from the transference of the framework of Christian thought from a Semitic, or biblical, perspective into a perspective based on Hellenistic philosophy and, later, Enlightenment rationalism. As long as Christian thinkers persist in imposing an alien grid upon the Scriptures and writing theology from dictionaries, the issue of the Trinity will never be resolved to the satisfaction of everyone. The vexing questions of the Trinitarian debate can be approached with some hope of resolution only when we abandon our fixation with finely honed definitions and nuanced distinctions and start looking into the great linking themes which unify the Word, such as the themes of *covenant* or *life*. If we will do this, we will find ourselves under reduced pressure to resolve seemingly conflicting statements within Scripture and therefore less pressure to vindicate either the orthodox or the Arian views.

Trinitarian Language in Worship

In the life of the church as a whole, Trinitarian language is used doxologically rather than ontologically. That is, it is used more *in worship* as an expression of praise and commitment, than in theological discourse as a statement about the being of God. Theologian Paul Tillich — hardly an “orthodox” thinker — once answered a question about the Trinity by saying that “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” is a great numinous formula; when we hear it used, it creates in us a sense of the presence of the Holy. In other words, Trinitarian language is one of the historic ways through which God’s people, assembling in their corporate gathering, become aware of His presence in their midst.

That was a useful insight, but unless one has been exposed to those branches of the Christian church that practice sacramental and festive worship he cannot appreciate how true it is. Many Christians come from an austere worship environment where even the central act of Christian worship, the Lord’s Supper, is treated in a perfunctory manner and is little more than a ritual. The major focus is on increasing each individual’s “head knowledge” of the Bible and getting one’s doctrinal ideas together. Other Christians are gravitating toward churches that highlight teaching on practical living, set into a contemporary entertainment-style format. In such environments there is little chance that the unbeliever Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 14:25 might enter the assembly and be so impressed by what was happening that he would “fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.”

But the solemn invocation of the Trinity is part of the type of worship that is today drawing thousands of evangelicals from the sterility of their auditorium- or theatre-churches into sanctuaries where the people of God kneel in awe — or sometimes raise their hands in abandon — before a Creator who dwells in the midst of His people and hosts them at the feast of the body and blood of His Son. We submit that this type of worship is more biblical in its spirit and effect than that practiced by many Christian groups which pride themselves on their faithfulness to the Word alone. It is more biblical because it places the covenant body as a family in the presence of the Lord and seeks to realize the vision of the Lord God and the Lamb dwelling in the midst of the holy city, which is the Bible’s concluding picture of the fulfillment of God’s purpose (Revelation 21–22).

The Deity of Christ

Turning now to the issue of the deity of Christ, what does deity really mean in a biblical sense? We do not use the concept of deity, or divinity, today in the same sense in which the scriptural authors use it. Instead, we use it as a philosophical abstraction which we overlay on scriptural language as a result of the church’s cultural transition from a Semitic to a Greek framework. To us, a “god” is a supreme spiritual force viewed in contrast to the material, and especially to the merely human. However, the term functions differently in the Bible. The Hebrew concept of *Elohim* fundamentally has to do with *strength* or *might*; therefore the term can be applied to angels (Psalm 8:5, possibly) and even to men (Psalm 82:6). In the covenantal faith of the Bible, Yahweh is worshiped not because He is *deity* but because He is *King*. This is what worship is: the offering of tribute or paying of homage to a Sovereign.

Belief, for the biblical worshiper, is not assent to ideas about God but public confession of one’s allegiance to Him, and to Him alone. In the First Epistle of John, for example, belief is the confession of allegiance to Jesus as Messiah, despite the opposition of the antichrists who deny that the Messiah has

come in the flesh (see, for example, 1 John 4:15-16). The famous *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 is probably better translated, “Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone!” (And, of course, *shema* does not just mean “hear,” but “obey,” that is, be faithful in covenant.) Paul states that “indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we [exist] for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we [exist] through him” (1 Corinthians 8:5-6). Far from intending to contrast Jesus with the Father as though the one were deity and not the other, Paul is here using the parallelism of ideas, a Hebraic stylistic feature, to *equate* the Father and the Son functionally in their creative activity and, above all, in our allegiance to them to the exclusion of other gods and lords.

Deity versus non-deity, as we understand these terms, is not the question here. At issue, as always in Scripture, is whether we commit to this Mighty One as our covenant overlord or to others who pretend to be “mighty ones” but actually are nothing, who “have mouths, but they cannot speak; . . . they have feet, but they do not go!” (Psalm 115:5). To use biblical statements to prove that the writers did not think of Jesus as God as we understand the term is to force them to answer questions they were not asking.

The Outcome of Non-Trinitarianism

So the Trinitarian-Arianism debate ranges wide of the major theological concern of Scripture. Nevertheless, the outcome of an Arian-type or subordinationist Christology is likely to be theological liberalism. Functionally, the main line denominations — although they may preserve Trinitarian language in worship or official creeds — do not really acknowledge the deity of Christ. (We do not need to rehearse here where these groups have been headed in recent decades.) “Arianism,” in this respect, is widespread today, but perhaps the best example of what happens to such movements is the history of Unitarianism in America. It began within the Congregational churches of Massachusetts as a de-emphasis of certain Calvinist doctrines, particularly issues related to predestination, depravity and atonement. But after the Unitarian churches became a separate entity — the split occurred in New England in the early 1800s — Unitarianism developed its own Christology. The watershed for this was William Ellery Channing’s *Baltimore Sermon* of 1819, which is a thorough statement of a subordinationist Christology, reasoned from Scripture and questioning in what sense Christ could be considered divine. From here the Unitarian movement continued to slide away from any recognition of the supremacy of Jesus Christ. Someone has observed that Unitarianism proceeded through a unitarianism of each of the three persons of the Trinity, beginning with a unitarianism of the Father, then through a unitarianism of the Son (in which it shared with liberal Protestants of the turn of the twentieth century an emphasis on the ethical teachings of Jesus), then through a unitarianism of the spirit (the hymnal before the present one, which was in use for several decades, was called *Hymns of the Spirit*). In this last case, however, the spirit was not the Holy Spirit but the human spirit, as the denomination moved into full-fledged humanism. Now the Unitarians, if they may be said to worship anything at all, are likely to worship or celebrate the “goddess” or the earth mother, having fully enthroned the left-wing feminist and environmentalist agendas of our culture.

And this is what may be expected to happen when a movement cuts loose from the anchor of Trinitarian expression. When either the Father, or the Spirit, or both, are regarded as God to the exclusion of the Son, the distinctive counter-cultural content of the Christian faith goes away. It is only when the Second Person of the Trinity (to use traditional terminology) remains at the center of theology and devotion that biblical faith maintains its integrity. Trinitarianism does this, even through such expressions as the Catholic devotion to the Virgin Mary, the *theotokos* or “God-bearer,” which at its heart is intended to uphold the focus on the centrality of God the Son. However repugnant to Bible-centered Protestants this devotion to church tradition may be, one cannot help but respect the fact that it has been the Catholic Church which has most effectively withstood the dehumanizing tendencies of world culture, especially on the issues of abortion and the integrity of marriage and the family.

The Unique Son

This term *theotokos* reminds us of the term *prototokos* applied to Christ in the New Testament (Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15, 18; Revelation 1:5). The term is usually translated “firstborn,” but by analogy with the terms *theotokos* and *christotokos* which were applied to Mary in the Christological debates of the early church, it seems that *prototokos*, as applied to Jesus, should be translated not as “firstborn” but as “first bearer” or “originator,” in harmony with the New Testament idea that it was

through the Son, or Logos, that God brought all things into existence. In other words, the term *prototokos* does not suggest anything about the origin of the Son — whether He was created or begotten — but rather reinforces the idea that the Son is God as He is active in creation.

Of course, “firstborn” is also used for the firstborn of human parents (and of animals), but we must remind ourselves that this designation was not simply an indication of precedence in birth order but also a title of honor. The Lord calls Israel (Jacob) His firstborn (Exodus 4:22), although Esau had been born before Jacob. And the designation “firstborn” carried with it the connotation of a special dedication to God: “All that opens the womb is mine” (Exodus 13:2). Another term that needs retranslation is *monogenes*, usually translated “only begotten”; it really means “one of a kind” or “unique.” According to the most ancient texts, John 1:18 reads *monogenes theos*, “only begotten God,” and not *monogenes huios*, “only begotten Son.” It might therefore be translated “the unique Mighty One who shares the most inward being of the Father.” It is incorrect, we believe, to dilute these concepts into a doctrine of the Son as the first created being or as one who was begotten by the Father as a subordinate entity and who does not share in the full might or “deity” of the Father. When we attempt to analyze such concepts as “firstborn” or “only begotten” according to our contemporary understanding of the use of such terminology, we mislead ourselves regarding the intent of the biblical writers.

Dynamic Trinitarianism in the New Testament

There are enough places in the New Testament where the term “God” is applied to Jesus, or where the qualities we associate with God are applied to Him, that it seems futile to explain them all away. And even though the term “Trinity” does not occur in Scripture, there is a kind of “dynamic Trinitarianism” in which the functions of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are associated in something like a Trinitarian formula. To illustrate this, let us quote several paragraphs we wrote for an entry in Volume I of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*:³

The Trinitarian formula, so familiar in Christian worship, is found in Scripture only in Matt. 28:19, where the risen Christ commissions the apostles to make disciples of all people, baptizing them “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” The use of the word “name” in the singular suggests that the unity of the three “Persons,” rather than their distinction, is in view, and in actual practice the early church usually baptized into Jesus Christ, or into His name (Acts 2:38, 8:12, 19:5; Rom. 6:3; 1 Cor. 1:13).

The Trinitarian formula is also implicit in certain expressions of the apostle Paul, although other words may be substituted for the classic terms “Father” and “Son.” Writing to the Corinthians, he mentions varieties of gifts (*charismata*) but the same Spirit, varieties of ministries or service (*diakonai*) but the same Lord, and varieties of effects or workings (*energēmata*) but the same God (1 Cor. 12:4-6). Again, his wording suggests a stress on the oneness of the Source of the church’s power. In Ephesians 4:4-6, Paul proclaims “one body and one Spirit,” the life or breath of the body; “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” into Jesus the Son; and “one God and Father of all.” The Trinitarian pattern is repeated within the clause applying to the Father, who is “over all and through all and in all.” Thinking in Trinitarian terms, God is *over* all as Creator King; *through* all in the pervasive life-giving presence of the Spirit; and *in* all as Christ in the corporate church (“the hope of glory,” Col. 1:27). Paul’s familiar benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14, often used in Christian worship, commends his readers to “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship (*koinōnia*, participation or communion) of the Holy Spirit.”

In these expressions we see, not the attempt to formulate a doctrine of God in three Persons—the need for that was perceived later in the church’s history—but the effort to convey, within the limitations of human language, something of the fullness of the workings of the Divine in relation to His worshipers. In the Spirit He offers His people life, gifts, communion; in the Son He quickens in them service, obedience and faith; in the Father He governs and provides for them in His authority, creative working, and steadfast love. In every way He moves toward them to dwell in their midst, the covenant Lord with His covenant people, that in the end “God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

Not included in the above quotation is another Trinitarian formula in the opening of the Revelation, where John pronounces upon his readers grace and peace “from him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:4-5). It is “the Lord God” who declares, in 1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” In chapter 21 it is not clear whether the one “who sits on the throne” is the Father or the Son

— or both together, “the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb” (21:22). But the same language is used: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (21:6). And the speaker adds, describing the one who overcomes, “I will be his God and he will be my son.” In chapter 22 the speaker is clearly Jesus, the one who is “coming quickly” (21:12), and He describes Himself with the identical words: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (22:13). *I am* statements of this sort are taken up also in John’s Gospel where they are several times placed on the lips of Jesus. They are based on Old Testament expressions by which Yahweh identifies Himself to His people (such as Exod. 3:14-15; 20:2; Pss. 50:7; 81:10; Isa. 43:3, 11-13). It seems clear that, for the apostle John at least, the differentiation between Father and Son is of little consequence when it comes to pledging one’s allegiance to God.

Some Philosophical Considerations

Permit us now to discuss the concept of the Trinity in a more philosophical vein, yet still consistent with the testimony of the Scriptures. The position of God as Father is clear in the teachings of Jesus, and implicit throughout the Bible. It seems evident, however, that God cannot be *one* (as we understand oneness) and still be the Father, since the Father cannot be Father apart from Him of whom He is Father — that is, the Son. As Augustine expressed it, “He is not called Father with reference to himself but only in relation to the Son; seen by himself he is simply God” (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 68). Therefore the First Person cannot be First Person alone; His function as First Person requires that there be a Second Person as well.

If one objects that *person* is not a scriptural term, this is correct. However, that which is implied in the concept of *person* (derived from Latin elements meaning “sounding through”) is everywhere ascribed to God in Scripture: the act of communicating and interacting with other speakers and actors on the plane of history. *Person* is created and defined by relationship; and wherever relatedness exists, *person* is present. A god who is *one*, in the sense of having no aspect of *person*, would be non-communicative and therefore not the God to whom Scripture bears witness. The doctrine of the Trinity intends to express the conviction that this quality of communicating/interacting is inherent in the very way God sees Himself. Within His own *being* (to use another non-Scriptural term) God communicates, apart from His communication with humankind or any other facet of His creation. Thus within His own being God must embrace differentiated “persons.” If this troubles us, as compromising the Scriptural testimony to the oneness of God, we remind ourselves again that the affirmation of His *oneness* is really a pledge of loyalty, not an accountant’s inventory of the warehouse of divinities. God, in His infinite greatness, stands above the differentiation between singular and plural; these categories cannot embrace His reality.⁴

The corollary to the preceding is the scriptural view of man as created in the image of God. As the image of God, mankind is His representative in the stewardship of the created order, the sign of God’s ownership of what He has made. More importantly, people are created in God’s image *male and female*, implying a process of complementary interaction in order to fulfill their destiny as a reflection of His being. Moreover, being created in the image of God we are also a trinity, able to communicate not only with others but also within ourselves: to stand back from ourselves, as it were, and to engage in an internal process of thought and reflection. It is this capability which separates us from animals, who can communicate to a degree (though without the extensive symbolization of language) but who rarely show evidence of what we might understand as reflection. The human trinity is sometimes expressed as “spirit and soul and body” (1 Thessalonians 5:23) and sometimes in other ways, but the point is that a genuine human life involves more than one dimension of being. If this is the case with those who have been fashioned in His image, what can we infer concerning the life of God?

Paul Tillich, in the discussion of the Trinity we referred to earlier, added that this doctrine expresses that God is not “dead identity with Himself.” Death is the state in which internal movement or communication no longer occurs, and no respiration. As the living God He communicates, breathing out as the Logos or Word and breathing in as the Spirit. Building upon this thought in a scriptural vein, we may understand that the Son is the expression of God’s purpose, the Spirit the movement of life in response. Both Son and Spirit, of course, are “breath” (Hebrew *ruah*, Greek *pneuma*); as Tillich pointed out, in early Christian theology the Logos and the Spirit are identified (2 Corinthians 3:17). Therefore, the number *three* is not important, except historically in terms of the formulation of Christian theology. One

might discuss the life of God in a binitarian mode, as long as the principle of internal life and communication is maintained.

Thinking Biblically

The point of all this is that we believe there are ways to explore issues of Christology in a manner consistent with the Bible, but which do not force one to accept an “Arian” or subordinationist view or to reject the doctrine of the Trinity out of hand. The biblical authors were neither Arian nor orthodox as we understand these positions today, and to revive the ancient Christological arguments is, in our opinion, a fruitless effort which will do a disservice to the cause of biblical truth. If we presume to think biblically, the Scriptures must not be reduced to a repository of handy quotations from which we hang our opinions derived from some other source. And it is not simply that the Bible supplies answers to our questions; rather, it defines the sort of questions we are to ask, and points to the issues that matter most of all. For the inspired writers the burning issue was not Christology but *idolatry*. Will we indeed be faithful to Him who has said, “You shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Jeremiah 30:22), or will we serve a lesser “god” — one of our own devising, under the influence of cultural trends? The biblical writers, then, do not debate Christology. Jesus simply is present, in His risen life, incorporating into Himself all who forsake the idolatries of the world, commit themselves to God’s covenant, and enter into His new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Jesus came, in other words, not to dispense doctrines but to bring people “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9) into His family, “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). Family members sometimes disagree on major issues, but this does not cancel their relationship. People remain brothers and sisters in a family regardless of their opinion, say, of the nature of their parents or older siblings. Whether we hold a classic Trinitarian or supposedly “Arian” Christology, or seek to penetrate beyond these positions to a more dynamic biblical perspective, we should all treat one another as cherished family members out of faithfulness to Christ.

¹See Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (1981).

²Ibid.

³Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1994.

⁴For a fuller discussion of some of the points in this paragraph see Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), *Introduction to Christianity* (1990), pp. 127-132.