

Chapter 2 – *Of God and of the Holy Trinity*

INTRODUCTION

Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives. ... The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God.¹

DIVINE ASEITY

- 2.1 ‘There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection ...’
- 2.2 ‘God hath all life, glory, goodness, and blessedness, in and of himself ...’
- ‘... the concept of aseity has two dimensions ...’
- ‘First, it indicates the glory and plenitude of the life of the Holy Trinity in its self-existence and self-moving originality, its underived fullness. In every respect, God is of himself God.’
- ‘Second, it indicates that God’s originality and fullness constitute the ground of his self-communication. He is one who, out of nothing other than his own self-sufficiency, brings creatures into being, sustains and reconciles them, and brings them to perfection in fellowship with himself.’²

DIVINE SIMPLICITY AND INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

- 2.1 ‘a most pure spirit ... incomprehensible...’

The recognition of the simplicity and incomprehensibility of God ranks among the fundamental elements of a Christian culture that respects the mystery of the Trinity.³

We speak much of God, can talk of him, his ways, his works, his counsel, all the day long; the truth is, we know very little of him. Our thoughts, our meditations, our expressions of him are low, many of them unworthy of his glory, none of them reaching his perfection ... The utmost of the best of our thoughts of the being of God is, that we can have no thoughts of it. Our knowledge of being is but low when it mounts no higher but only to know that we know it not.⁴

¹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (1973), 15.

² John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume I God and the Works of God* (Bloomsbury, 2016), 13.

³ Gilles Emery, *The Holy Trinity: An Introduction to the Catholic Doctrine of the Triune God* (Catholic University Press of America, 2011), 92.

⁴ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen: Volume 6 Sin and Temptation* (Edinburgh, 1967), 64, 66.

Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics ... This theory of the incomprehensibility of God and the unknowability of his essence also became the starting point and fundamental idea of Christian theology. Neither in creation nor in re-creation does God reveal himself exhaustively. He cannot fully impart himself to creatures. For that to be possible they themselves would have to be divine. There is no name that makes his essence know to us.⁵

WHY THE LENGTH & ORDER OF PARAGRAPHS?

In my judgement, Torrance is right that had the Confession begun with the Trinity it would have done more justice to God as a God of love. Instead it gives greatest prominence to God as omnipotent Creator and Judge, rather than as Father. Torrance comments that ‘the doctrine of the Trinity was tacked on to a doctrine of God’.⁶

One of the great errors of modern writers has been their claim that ... the Protestant scholastics devalued the doctrine of the Trinity because of an emphasis on the essence and attributes of God. The error arises out of two misapprehensions concerning the form and method of scholastic system. On the one hand, it assumes that the comparatively greater space allocated to the doctrine of the essence and attributes is a sign of its greater importance to the system. ... In the second place, it is the discussion of the work of the three persons, first in their relationships *ad intra* and then in their common works *ad extra*, that provides the point of transition from the doctrine of God to the rest of the system ...⁷

THE LOVE OF GOD

- ‘... the love of God is not mentioned in either the Larger Catechism or the Shorter Catechism. This is an astonishing omission. It can only be described as culpable. John makes an absolute statement about God in 1 John 4:8 – “God is love.”⁸
- ‘Among God’s ethical attributes first place is due to God’s goodness.’⁹

UNITY & PERSONS

In Christian dogmatics, such a materially rich notion of aseity cannot be articulated apart from the doctrine of the Trinity, for Trinitarian teaching offers a conceptual paraphrase of the life of God, both in his inner depth and in his gracious turn to that which is not God. It is as Father, Son, and Spirit that God is

⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation* (Baker, 2004), 2.29, 36

⁶ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 164.

⁷ Richard A. Muller, *Post Reformed Dogmatics* (2003), 4.144-7.

⁸ Letham, 162-3.

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume Two God and Creation* (Baker, 2004), 210. See also 215.

of himself, utterly free and full, in the self originate and perfect movement of his life; grounded in himself, he gives himself, the self-existent Lord of grace.¹⁰

It is much more fruitful to understand aseity in terms of fullness of personal relations. Aseity is *life*: God's life *from* and therefore *in* himself. This life is the relations of Father, Son, and Spirit.¹¹

WHY IS THIS SECTION SO SHORT?

- 2.3 'In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.'
- Only what is revealed can be confessed – God is simple & incomprehensible. This is not a realm for speculation but confession of divine revelation.
- 'Our reason for calling the Trinity simple is because it is what it has – with the exception of the real relations in which the Persons stand to each other.'¹²
- WLC 9 'How many persons are there in the Godhead?' There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties.'
- WLC 10 'What are the personal properties of the three persons in the Godhead? It is proper to the Father to beget the Son, and to the Son to be begotten of the Father, and to the Holy Ghost to proceed from the Father and the Son from all eternity.'
- DIVINE MISSIONS OF THE SON AND THE SPIRIT
 - Incarnation
 - Pentecost

The most holistic interpretive move in the history of biblical theology took place when the early church discerned that these missions reveal divine processions, and that in this way the identity of the triune God of the Gospel is made known.¹³

The judgement that these two missions are the manifestations of two eternal relations of origin is as central to Trinitarian doctrine as it is fundamental to Trinitarian exegesis. Without this judgement, the doctrine of the Trinity can

¹⁰ Webster, 18-19.

¹¹ Webster, 19.

¹² Augustine, *The City of God* cited in Emery, 91.

¹³ Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Zondervan, 2016), 113.

never be fully elaborated and can have only a brittle and abstract structure.¹⁴

The theological judgement that missions reveal processions is the proper dogmatic consequences of recognizing the incarnation and Pentecost as the actual points of divine self-revelation.¹⁵

- These relations of origin are defined by the way Scripture assigns ‘personal properties’ to the three
 - The personal property of the father is *Paternity* because he alone is Father to the Son.
 - The personal property of the Son is *Filiation* or *generation* – he alone is Son of the Father.
 - The personal property of the Spirit is *procession* because he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

THE ETERNAL GENERATION OF THE SON

- The creed confesses that the Son is ‘God of God, Light of Light, True God of true God, begotten not made’
- The doctrine of eternal regeneration is a critical aspect of Biblical Trinitarianism. It establishes the distinctions within the Godhead and enables the church to confess that the second person of the Trinity is both God and Son.
- Eternal Generation

Generation occurs also in the divine being. God’s fecundity is a beautiful theme, one that frequently occurs in the church fathers. God is no abstract, fixed, monadic, solitary substance, but a plentitude of life ... God is an infinite fullness of blessed life.¹⁶

In recent times, however, many evangelical theologians have doubted whether the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is indeed taught in Scripture. A principal source of doubt has been the 20th-century scholarly consensus that the Greek word *monogenēs* does not mean “only begotten.” Scholars have argued that the compound Greek adjective is not derived from *monos* (“only”) + *gennaō* (“beget”) but from *monos* (“only”) + *genos* (“kind”). Thus, they argue, the term shouldn’t be translated “only begotten” but “only one of his kind” or “unique.” Reflecting the scholarly

¹⁴ Sanders, 113.

¹⁵ Sanders, 118.

¹⁶ Bavinck, 2.308.

consensus, most modern English versions have adopted this new understanding and translate the five Johannine uses of *monogenēs* as “only” (CEV, ESV, NAB, NRSV, RSV) or “one and only” (HCSB/CSB, NIV, NLT). Only a few retain “only begotten” (NKJV, MEV, NASB). This shift in the scholarly understanding of the term effectively removed a crucial scriptural underpinning for the doctrine that the Son is begotten of the Father. In theory, other proof texts could still be appealed to, but once this brick was removed, for some it seemed the whole wall was ready to fall.¹⁷

Eternal generation is the personal and eternal act of God the Father whereby he is the origin of the personal subsistence of God the Son, so communicating to the Son the one undivided divine essence. Along with the breathing of the Holy Spirit, generation is one of the divine processions by which the triune persons are enacted and distinguished, and in which mutual relations are enacted.¹⁸

- *monogenēs*
- John 5:26
- Hebrews 1:3
- ‘Here we confront the limit of our thinking. In early theology it is said that the manner of generation is inexpressible to us.’¹⁹
- ‘Though he is begotten of the Father, yet he never had any beginning; he was begotten from eternity. There was never any particular time wherein it could be said that he was first begotten. He is begotten continually. He always is begotten. He always did proceed and always does proceed from the Father.’²⁰
- ‘The Son’s generation is eternal: not a ‘coming-to-be’ as the Father’s creature, but a relation which is constitutive of the divine essence and of the identity of the Father as well as of the Son. ... God is ... in the eternal fullness of the loving relations of Father, Son, and Spirit. From himself he has life in himself.’²¹

¹⁷ Charles Lee Irons in ‘Let’s Go Back to ‘Only Begotten’ at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lets-go-back-to-only-begotten>

¹⁸ John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume One: God and the Works of God* (T&T Clark, 2016), 30.

¹⁹ J. van Genderen & W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 155.

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, Sermon on Hebrews 1:3 ‘Jesus Christ is the Shining Forth of the Father’s Glory’ in Michael D. McMullen, ed., *The Glory and Honor of God: Volume 2 of the Previously Unpublished Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (B&H, 2004), 223-44, 229. This sermon from Edwards serves as a clear example of the classical doctrine of the Trinity and eternal generation appearing in the normal teaching ministry of the church.

²¹ Webster, 21, 23.

WHAT ARE 'PERSONS'?

- *tres nescio quid*²²
- Not social trinitarianism. Not self-conscious personality.
- Calvin, *subsistentia in Dei essential* (*Inst.*, 1.13.6)

The whole fifth book of Augustine *On the Trinity* is concerned with explaining this matter. Indeed, it is far safer to stop with that relation which Augustine sets forth than by too subtly penetrating into the sublime mystery to wander through many evanescent speculations (*Inst.*, 1.13.20).

In none of these usages does the term *persona* have the connotation of emotional individuality or unique consciousness that clearly belongs to the term in contemporary usage. It is quite certain that the Trinitarian usage of *persona* does not point to three wills, three emotionally unique beings, or, as several eighteenth-century authors influenced by Cartesianism argued, three centers of consciousness; such implications would be tritheistic. It is equally certain that contemporary theological statements to the effect that the God of the Bible is a "personal" God point not to the Trinity, but to the oneness of the divine will in loving relation to creatures. In other words, despite the variety of usages and implications we have noted, the patristic, medieval, Reformation, and Protestant scholastic definitions of the term *persona* are united in their distinction from modern colloquial usage.²³

CONCLUSION

Praise, blessing and sanctifying add nothing to God; they do not and cannot expand or enrich God's holiness, which is inexhaustibly and unassailably full and perfect. They are simply an acknowledgement and indication. And theology as holy reason finds its completion in such acknowledgement and indication.²⁴

- The goal of holy reason is the praise, blessing, and sanctifying of God's holy name.
- God is 'inexhaustibly and unassailably full and perfect'
- Acknowledgement and Indication.

²² Often attributed to Anselm of Canterbury the phrase means 'three something-or-other' or 'three I know not what.'

²³ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Baker, 1985), s.v. 'persona'. See especially Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Paternoster, 2012).

²⁴ John Webster, *Holiness* (SCM, 2003), 29-30.