



Chester, Tim.

Delighting in the Trinity: Just Why Are Father, Son, and Spirit Such Good News?

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Delighting in the Trinity is an introduction to Trinitarian theology that pretty much anyone can read without difficulty. There were many parts of this short book that reminded me very much of my own teaching and writing on the Trinity, but then there were some parts that couldn't be farther from my Trinitarianism. Before getting into my review I can say that I would recommend this title to any beginning student with just a few caveats that will become known as the review progresses.

Tim Chester begins by stating the circumstances that brought this work about. He had met with Muslim friends weekly to read and discuss the Bible and when they began asking questions about the Trinity he was originally embarrassed. After some thought he realized that there was no reason to be embarrassed but every reason to be informed. He opens with an astute observation saying:

The study of the doctrine of the Trinity readily tips over into worship. We are left with a profound sense of awe as we gaze upon our great God. And such worship leads on to godly living. (12)

He goes on to share just how essential the Trinity is to the believer noting that it's not an irrelevant doctrine akin to the human appendix that we don't really know what it does and can live without it. On the contrary, he notes that:

The Trinity is the language in which Christian truth is spoken. It gives shape to the truth. The Trinity is not peripheral, let alone optional. It is the marvelous, wonderful heart of our faith. (17)

When assessing the Biblical foundations for the doctrine of the Trinity Chester begins with the Shema but argues that the Shema is asserting a numerical oneness over and above the uniqueness of God. He says:

As we have seen, the LORD alone is God — there is no other (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39). But the words “alone” and “one” are not the same in Hebrew, and in the Shema Moses uses the word for “one”. Moses is affirming the singularity of Yahweh. Yahweh is not only unique — he is also one. (25)

I have to strongly disagree with this assessment of the Shema. Chester’s first mistake is committing the etymological fallacy. Simply because there are other Hebrew words better rendered as ‘alone’ in English does not mean that יהוה in this context cannot be rendered as such. His second mistake is in reading this verse with an idea in mind that its original audience would not have had, i.e., the ontological being of God. Ancient Israelites weren’t concerned with such notions.

Contra Chester’s analysis I agree with what Herbert Wolf says in his article on יהוה in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*:

The option “the LORD is our God, the LORD alone” has in its favor the both the broad context of the book and the immediate context. Deuteronomy 6:4 serves as an introduction to motivate Israel to keep the command to “love (the LORD)” (v. 5). The notion that the LORD is Israel’s only God suits the command admirably . . . Moreover, these two notions, the LORD’s unique relation to Israel and Israel’s obligation to love him, are central to the concern of Moses’ addresses in the book... (TWOT, 30)

From here he goes on to note the parallels between the Shema and 1Corinthians 8:6 drawing from N.T. Wright and Richard Bauckham in noticing the manner in which Paul has reworked this creed. Various connections are made from Jesus’ “I am” statements to Exodus 3:14 but I have to be honest in saying that I think Chester overstates his case with these. He also notes the Isaianic references which I believe show the better connection with the Johannine material in question.

When coming to Jesus’ cry of dereliction on the cross I think Chester is at his weakest. Affirming the penal payment theory of atonement (see esp. pp. 145-57) Chester argues that on the cross God forsook God using separation language that describes a Trinitarian rift which quite honestly can lead to nothing other than bi- (or tri-) theism. I will quote Chester at length:

The Father and the Son love one another with a perfect love throughout eternity. To see Jesus is to know the Father. But now they are torn apart. The divine community is broken. The Father and the Son who mutually indwell one another are separated. The Father experiences the loss of his Son. The endures the judicial abandonment of his Father. Jesus dies bearing the full effects of sin and the full force of God’s wrath. He is alone and abandoned. The distinction of the divine persons is expressed in the most extreme way: God is divided from God.

That God should be divided from God only makes sense if God is a trinitarian community. Only if there is some distinction within God could it ever be possible for God to be forsaken by God. (61)

The problems with such a position are legion but can easily be done away with with another (indeed, probably *any* other) view of atonement. Chester's trinitarian community here is tri-theistic without doubt. To speak of mutual indwelling in the same breath as separation is to speak in conundrums and contradictions. This view doesn't take full account of 2Corinthians 5:19 which Chester does note, but he prefers the to translate as: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" rather than "*God was in Christ* reconciling the world unto himself." He continues by blatantly contradicting his previous statements when he says:

Their unity at the cross is more than a unity of wills. It remains a unity of being. The God of the cross is the God of the Shema — one, single, undivided (Deuteronomy 6:4). The experience of the cross does not happen to another. God is not forsaking another. He is not judging another. God is forsaking himself. He is judging himself. (64)

In his section on the historical development of the Trinity, Chester takes a brief survey of some important theologians from Tertullian to Calvin to Barth to LaCugna briefly summarizing their views and the roles they have played in Trinitarian theology. I thought that this was probably the book's strongest section. Here Chester is at his best being both informative and concise. I was reminded very much of Robert Letham's *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* when reading this section as most of the same theologians were discussed, albeit with much more brevity. Like Letham he seems to favor Calvin as making the greatest advances in Trinitarian theology. For Chester, Calvin is the perfect blend of East and West eliminating the heretical tendencies of subordinationism and modalism on each side.

The final section of this book deals with the practicality of the Trinity. The Trinity is not simply some doctrine to be learned or meditated upon during times of prayer or study, no, the Trinity is God's self-revelation to humanity. The Trinity is our means of salvation. The Trinity is our model for relationships within the community. The Trinity is the good news.

Something in Chester's book that I have yet to see in any other book on the Trinity is attention given to various views of the atonement. In discussing the Trinity in salvation he surveys some of the various models, i.e., the "dramatic view" (142-45), the "exemplary view" (149), and the "satisfaction or substitutionary view" (145-49). As I stated earlier he holds to the penal substitution theory. Again, I was disappointed by his treatment of the issue and especially the language he used. On this point he can't seem to string together a coherent argument, but he's certainly not alone in this respect.

When discussing the Trinity as good news he addresses how the Trinity is good news over and above the messages of Islam or postmodernism. I was again reminded of Letham's work here. He says:

The God of Islam is remote, but the triune God both rules the universe and dwells within us through faith. [. . .] The God of Islam does not have relationships with people. But we can have a relationship with the triune God because he is himself a relational being. He has existed in trinitarian community throughout eternity. God can love us because the Father has loved the Son and the Son has loved the Father. God made us in the image of the relational God to enjoy a relationship with him. (180)

Of postmodernism he says:

[B]elief in a triune God means the one and the many are equally ultimate. We can express universal truth without oppressing diversity. Unity and diversity can co-exist. Postmodernism believes all truth claims are inherently coercive; that ultimate truth oppresses diversity. But personhood, as we have seen, is not found in asserting our differences, but in relationship. In the claim of Jesus to be the truth, God is not asserting his identity against ours, but inviting us to share his community; to be truly human; to find true identity. (183)

Chester closes on the same note he opened, talking about his Muslim friends. When asking the question about how to talk about the Trinity with them he answers it by saying that he'd first take them to the Scriptures but then introduce them to the Christian community. He says:

I would want them to see a supernatural community that reflects the sending by the Father or the Son in the power of the Spirit and the glorification by the Spirit through the Son of the Father. (186)

And to that I say amen!

Missing from this book is a topical and a scripture index, as well as a full bibliography, although there is a select bibliography and a 'books for further reading' list. I also commend the use of footnotes as opposed to end notes. Chester writes clearly and will definitely reach his intended audience with this book, but I feel that his views on the atonement result in an outright heretical (at worst) or contradictory (at best) view of the triune God, and that is not something that I feel the uninformed will benefit from.