



George, Timothy, ed.

God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
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God the Holy Trinity is the second book in the Beeson Divinity Studies series, which the inside cover page describes as: “a series of volumes dedicated to the pastoral and theological renewal of the Church of Jesus Christ.” This particular volume boasts some big names such as J. I. Packer, Gerald Bray, Alistair McGrath, and Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., among others. The essays are as diverse as the authors but Timothy George notes a common theme that runs throughout the essays saying:

While not avoiding some of the sharp issues and debates, we were concerned that we not present the doctrine of the Trinity as a heady theological conundrum, a “problem” to be solved. We wanted to address a crucial question: How does the doctrine of the Trinity shape the ways of the Christian life, its worship and prayer, its service and mission? There is a pastoral theme in this book that highlights the trinitarian shape of spiritual formation. (13)

As always, in a book that is a collection of essays some stand out more than others. There were five essays in particular that I really enjoyed. They were:

1. Out of the Box: The Christian Experience of God in Trinity — Gerald Bray
2. The Trinity and Christian Unity — Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J.
3. The Old Testament Trinity — Frederica Mathewes-Green
4. The Trinity and the Challenge of Islam — Timothy George
5. The Soteriological Importance of the Divine Perfections — Ellen T. Charry

I’m going to focus on the first two essays listed above so as to keep this review manageable, but I will say that the way Mathewes-Green exegeted Andrei Rublev’s icon “The Old Testament Trinity” was wonderful and a genuine pleasure to read. I might also mention James Earl Massey’s essay “Faith and Christian Life in the African-American Spirituals,” which wasn’t one of my favorites, but was nonetheless informative and

interesting. The way he shows how the old “negro spirituals” were more than just songs, but were actually compact theological treatises was pretty neat (for lack of a better term). But onto the two essays I would like to talk about. In “Out of the Box: The Christian Experience of God in Trinity” Gerald Bray builds upon Paul’s words in Galatians 4:6, “Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying: ‘Abba! Father!’” (ESV) contending that the apostle:

[O]riginally wrote Galatians 4:6 in the heat of a controversy concerning the relationship of Jewish law to the Christian gospel... [and that] Paul had no desire to diminish the importance of the Old Testament, nor did he want to deny the special place that the Jewish people—his own nation—occupied in the cosmic plan of divine redemption.... But at the same time, Paul also insisted that people could not equate the Christian gospel with Judaism or subsume the gospel into Judaism. He was convinced that the coming of Christ had brought something new into the world, which traditional Judaism could not absorb. (38-39)

Bray says that this was not speculative theologizing, but rather Paul’s description of what he and his audience had already experienced in God. He says: “*From the beginning, the Christian knowledge of God in Trinity was first experiential and later theoretical, an order of things that has always characterized authentic Christian understanding and confession.*” (39) I quite agree with Bray on this point. I like to think of the great creeds and confessions of Christianity as an articulation of the Christian experience in God. According to Bray, the Christian experience of God in Christ and the subsequent sending of the Spirit was not something that Judaism could accommodate because it was regarded as “*incompatible with their belief in the undifferentiated One.*” (42) After looking at some familiar themes (i.e., the fatherhood of God, the sonship of Christ and their mutual dependence upon one another, as well as personality of the Spirit) Bray concludes the essay by noting that:

To confess God as a Trinity is to worship him in our hearts, as those hearts are stirred by the Spirit of the Son, crying, “Abba! Father!” (55)

My favorite essay in this volume came courtesy of Cardinal Dulles. In calling for a Trinitarian ecclesiology (as opposed to a ecclesiology that’s so Christocentric that it has been described as Christomonism) he turns to John 17:21, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” He describes this as “*participation in the divine communion*” (74) but is careful to point out that:

The fellowship of Christian cannot exactly replicate that of the divine persons. As human beings, we are distinct substances, and our relationships are, unlike those in the Godhead, accidents. We can acquire or lose those relationships without ceasing to be ourselves. Only in a metaphorical sense can we become, in the terminology of Acts 4:32, one heart and soul. We are, and shall eternally remain, distinct substances with

our own minds and wills. I therefore propose the unity of the divine persons as an ideal for us to approach from afar, the asymptotic goals of our hopes and endeavors. (75)

He does well to reflect on the order of the Trinity, noting the Father as the “*fontal source*,” the Son as “*God from God*” whose “*divinity and personal existence, is totally dependent on the Father, who communicates to him everything that he, the Son, is and has*,” and the Spirit as “*proceed[ing] from the Father, and according to the Western tradition, from the Son as well*.” (75-76) He rightly says that these relations of origin cannot be reversed.

Dulles points to some modern theologians (i.e., Moltmann & Volf) “*revisiting the doctrine of the Trinity in hopes of promoting a more democratic church order*” (77) while noting their appeal to perichoresis/circumincession to support this idea, but he notes that:

Circumincession is certainly a sound doctrine if it is taken to mean mutual indwelling of divine persons, a theme that surfaces more than once in the Gospel of John... But to take perichoresis as evidence that the order of processions is mutual or reversible is a misunderstanding. (77)

And with that I couldn't agree more! Dulles concludes his essay by saying that “*Christians who believe in, and are baptized in the name of, the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are conjoined in a deep supernatural union. But they still fall short of the full visible unity that Christ wills for his church*.” (82) In humbly approaching God and confessing our failures, Dulles believes that with his help we'll “*prefigure more perfectly the everlasting communion of the saints in heaven*.” (82)

This was a great book over all. I appreciated the diversity of contributors and their contributions as well as the succinctness of the essays (none ran longer than twenty pages). Unfortunately there were end notes which automatically annoys me. There's also no bibliography which means I have to dig through the end notes for bibliographic information on the works cited in the essays. Strike two. But there is a five page subject index which is always helpful. I think the essayists did a great job and I have no qualms about recommending this work to the beginning, intermediate, and advanced student alike; they'd certainly benefit from the writings contained in this slim volume.