



Ware, Bruce A.

Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance

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Developed from a series of talks he gave at the annual meeting of the Conservative Baptist Northwest in Sun River, Oregon in 2004, Bruce Ware has produced a slim volume in which he seeks to examine the relationships between the persons of the Trinity, their respective roles within these relationships, and their relevance for us as believers.

Ware begins in chapter 1 "Beholding the Wonder of Our Triune God: Importance of This Doctrine" by outlining ten reasons to focus on the wonder of the Trinity. Briefly summarized these reasons are:

1. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important distinguishing doctrines of the Christian faith. (15-16)
2. The doctrine of the Trinity is both central and necessary for the Christian faith to be what it is. (16-17)
3. Worship of the true and living God consciously acknowledges the relationship and roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (17-18)
4. The Christian's life of prayer must rightly acknowledge the roles of Father, Son, and Spirit as we pray to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit. (18)
5. The Christian's growth in sanctification is rightly understood and enriched when seen as the work of the triune God. (19)
6. The triune relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cause us to marvel at the unity of the triune God. (19-20)
7. The triune relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cause us to marvel at the diversity within the triune God. (20)
8. The triune relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cause us to wonder at the social relationality of the triune God. (20-21)

9. The triune relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cause us to marvel at the authority-submission structure that exists eternally in the three Persons in the Godhead. (21)
10. The doctrine of the Trinity--one God existing in three Persons in the ways we have described--provides one of the most important and neglected patterns for how human life and human relationships are to be conducted. (21-22)

It is numbers 9-10 that occupy the majority of this book. Ware is a complementarian who seeks to support his position on male-female roles in the home and church by appealing to the Trinity as the basis for which we are to relate to one another.

In the second chapter "Beholding the Wonder of Our Triune God: Historical Overview" Ware seeks to briefly sketch out why and how Christians came to accept the doctrine of the Trinity. The usual suspects make an appearance when Ware shows monotheism from the Old and New Testaments and then the manner in which Christians identified Jesus and the Holy Spirit with God. Ware does well to say that:

Identity and distinction, equivalency and difference--this is the reality the early Christians faced as they pondered carefully and seriously what the New Testament taught them about Jesus and his relation to the Father. (31)

These were indeed leading questions in the formation of what we now consider orthodox Trinitarian dogma. Ware only gives these questions a brief treatment in looking at a few passages (e.g., John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1:1-12; 1Corinthians 8:6, et al) in which he does an adequate job of showing the deity of Christ. But he says:

My main point in all of this is not, in itself and alone, to demonstrate the deity of Christ. While this is gloriously true, the main purpose has been to demonstrate the tension faced by the early church fathers in endeavoring to understand who Jesus truly is in relation to the Father (God), and in light of the Bible's clear teaching that there is only one God. (35)

A few passages are set forth to prove the Spirit's deity (e.g., Acts 5:3-4; 1Corinthians 2:10-11; 3:16; Hebrews 9:14) before moving onto certain verses that show triadic formulas, namely the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 and Paul's benediction in 2Corinthians 13:14. All in all Ware does a sufficient job of sketching out some basics of the doctrine. There's nothing really earth shattering or innovative about the content of this chapter.

In chapter 3 "Beholding the Wonder of the Father" Ware's seemingly sole purpose seems to be to set forth the eternal authority of the Father in his relation to the Son and the Spirit. Ware is quite correct to note that "*[w]e cannot look at aspects of the nature of God as that which distinguishes the Father from the Son or Spirit; rather we have to look at the roles and relationships.*" (45) Ware is unwavering in affirming the consubstantiality

of the three Persons as is seen especially in the redundant (and annoying to my mind) phrase "identically same nature" that is pervasive throughout the book.

In this chapter Ware has a penchant for calling the Father "*supreme among the Persons of the Godhead*" (46-47, 50, 55, et al.) which in my opinion is unfortunate since supremacy language usually carries a connotation of better-ness. It doesn't seem at all to be Ware's intention to assert that the Father is better than the Son or Spirit but it's hard to shake that picture when we read of the supremacy of the Father. And to my disagreement Ware asserts more than once that prayer is to be directed only to the Father but doesn't acknowledge certain passages such as John 14:14 where Jesus tells the disciples that if they ask him anything in his name he will do it. No mention is made to the common Christian custom of calling on the name of Jesus in prayer as is seen in 1Corinthians 1:2.

These criticisms aside I think Ware shows sufficiently that the Father works through the Son and the Spirit regarding various tasks such as creation and salvation. But I was perplexed by the statement that "*[i]t is not as though the Father is unable to work unilaterally, but rather, he chooses to involve the Son and the Spirit.*" (57) He doesn't develop or defend this statement, rather, all he does is assert it and give examples of the Father not working unilaterally. But if we have no examples of the Father working unilaterally on what basis does Ware even make the assertion that it's possible? We are never told.

Ware on more than one occasion equates a rejection of male headship in church and home with a rejection of all authority to include that which exists within the Trinity. In reference to radical feminists he says that: "*[s]inful resistance to authority in general and to the authority of husbands and elders (both male) in particular leads to a desire to undermine the language used of God as Father.*" (63) While this may be true so far as it goes, Ware doesn't make enough of a distinction between radical feminists and egalitarians to know that there is a difference. In his judgment, to assert an equality of men and women in the church and home is "sinful" because it undermines who God is but he doesn't connect the dots as I will point out later.

Chapter 4 "Beholding the Wonder of the Son" is without a doubt the best written chapter in the entire book, which funnily enough seems to be the case with most books that address the doctrine of the Trinity. He begins by noting the general agreement between egalitarians and complementarians that the Son submitted to the Father while incarnate but then he goes on to make an argument for eternal submission on the part of the Son. This is where Ware is at his best as he makes his case for the Son's obedience in eternity past based largely on the sending language of John's Gospel. My own research has yielded similar results. But from these results he forms a dubious conclusion. Ware says:

It is not difficult to see why some find the Son's eternal submission to the Father an objectionable concept. For if the Son eternally submits to the Father, this would indicate that authority and submission are eternal realities. (76)

So far so good; this is a logical conclusion. He continues:

And if so, would it not stand to reason that when God creates the world he would fashion it in a way that reflects these eternal structures? (76-77)

Again, nothing too objectionable with this statement; but he continues:

And would it not make sense, then, that the authority-submission structures in marriage and church leadership are meant to be reflections of the authority and submission in the relations of the Persons of the Godhead? (77)

No, it would not make sense specifically because the analogy doesn't match up. One can see how the Father-Son relationship is analogous of parenting, sure. But how the Father-Son relationship is analogous of the marriage relationship is forced and unnatural, not to mention that the Holy Spirit is never given adequate attention in such analogies.

Also doubtful is Ware's assertion that Jesus submitted to the Holy Spirit while incarnate. He bases this belief off of Jesus being filled with the Spirit and empowered by the Spirit to perform the work of his ministry (88-91). I was at a loss to see how he made this connection since it was never clear. But this idea seems to undermine his position somewhat in the arguments he makes in support of it. For example he says:

As a man, Jesus *submitted fully to the Spirit*, even though in terms of rank, within the Trinity, Jesus has *authority over the Spirit*. For the sake of his mission, he humbled himself. In taking on our human nature, he submitted to the very one over whom he has rightful authority. (91)

But this is very close to the argument that he rejects concerning a mere incarnational obedience on the part of the Son to the Father. It is also unfortunate that Ware thinks of the Trinity in terms of rank. He regularly employs the term *taxis* in the sense of *rank* or *ordered rank* instead of its general patristic use of a simple order. He rounds the chapter out by showing the Son's authority over the Spirit in sending the Spirit into the world along with the Father and then tells the reader that they are to revel in the Son's obedience and submission to the Father (for eternity) and Spirit (while incarnate), as well as to marvel at the unity and harmony within the "*triune relationships worked out in an authority-submission structure*" (99). He closes by saying that the authority-submission structure is the very picture of love and bases this on John 14:31 where Jesus says: "*I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.*" (100-01)

In chapter 5 "Beholding the Wonder of the Holy Spirit" Ware says that the Holy Spirit is in the "background position" (104) which is true enough since it is the Spirit's mission to bear witness to and glorify the Son. But ironically enough, the Spirit also plays the background position in this chapter! He notes the Spirit's role in the inspiration of Scripture but then asks another question that just doesn't make much sense. He says:

Now, we must ask a question about the primary content and theme of the Bible. Since the Spirit moved the minds and hearts of the biblical writers to write what was also the Word of God, wouldn't it be natural to expect that the result would be a book primarily about the Spirit? That is, since it is true that the Spirit inspired the Scriptures, is it not also true that they primarily are about the one who authored them? Surely, the Spirit who inspired the Scriptures would put himself at center stage, right? (110)

Now I understand that he is seeking to show the Spirit's willingness to glorify the Son, the entire next section is about this very fact, but the manner he goes about it seems silly. Would he ask this question about a biographer or novelist? Of course not, because there is nothing that would dictate that someone who authors a written work would place himself at the center of it. This may not seem a big deal to the reader but I think it speaks to Ware's inability to draw adequate analogies (which consequently I don't believe exist for the Trinity).

Toward the end of the chapter we are treated (or rather force fed) Ware's Calvinistic understanding of regeneration preceding faith. This he brings up to show the Spirit's role in giving life to the dead so that they can respond with faith to the Gospel. Since obviously Ware's focus in this work is not salvation or Calvinism I will leave my disagreement to the side and move on. He makes note of the Spirit's submission to the Father and Son in the age to come and closes the chapter by asking if marriages can be like the Spirit-Father-Son relationship, with wives playing the background like the Spirit for the betterment of the home, and women submitting to male leadership in the church for the betterment of the congregation. But he makes sure to note the essential equality of men and women in asking these questions.

In the closing chapter "Beholding the Wonder of the Triune Persons in Relational Community," Ware makes his final argument for complementarianism. His entire argument hinges on a debatable interpretation of Genesis 1:26 and what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God. He believes that being created in the image and likeness of God has to do with *"liv[ing] our lives as God's representatives, carrying out his will and 'ruling' on his behalf."* (133) This in a nutshell is Ware's core message, rulership, of men over women. He again says: *"if we are to model our lives after the nature of God, we must learn joyfully to embrace both rightful authority and rightful submission."* (138) To this I couldn't agree more, I only challenge that Ware has made a case for male authority over women in church and home based on the Trinitarian relationships as that which is "right."

In conclusion Ware says:

While we profess to believe that God is one, and that each of the Persons of the Godhead is fully divine, yet we have missed out on so much. We have not been reading out Bibles--particularly our New Testaments--sufficiently through "trinitarian glasses," and we have not devoted

ourselves to the meditation and study required to understand better just what the revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit means. (156-57)

I think the problem here is not so much not reading the NT through "trinitarian glasses" but rather Ware (and other complementarians) reading the Trinity through "complementarian glasses." While there is certainly an order in the Trinity and a picture of command and obedience which I believe to be eternal, I don't see the leap to applying this to male-female relationships in the church and home. As I've stated before, I believe that both groups in this debate are wrongly forcing their views on the Trinity and to this Ware is no exception. While Ware gets much right concerning the Trinity his application is forced and unwarranted. This book would better suit the reader interested in the gender debate than it would the reader interested in the Trinity.