Of God, and of the Holy Trinity: A Response to Dr. Beckwith

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Although it may be claimed that the doctrine of the Trinity is present in an anticipatory form in the Old Testament, all that we know of the Trinity in its developed form comes to us from the New Testament, where the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in our salvation is revealed, most notably in the Gospel of John. We learn there that he who was in the beginning with God and who was God became flesh for our salvation (John 1:14), and that he (and the Father) have sent the Spirit, another Comforter, to dwell with the church (John 14:26, 15:26). The doctrine of the Trinity as it is to be found in the credal and conciliar statements of the church is a set of inferences drawn from such data the basic purpose of which is not to reveal God as he is in himself but which record how he is revealed to us in the economy of salvation.

The Nicene formulation of the Trinity (A.D. 325) states that the Son of God is eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, and confesses belief in the Holy Spirit. The Athanasian Creed (*c.* A.D. 500) (never formally adopted) refers to the Holy Ghost's proceeding from the Father and the Son. The Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 381) refers to the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father. So the classical conciliar Trinitarian position is that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and that the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and (perhaps) from the Son.

The Begottenness of the Son

However mysterious this begetting – for those who drew up the credal and conciliar formulae held that it is a timelessly eternal, completed act of the Father, not an act in time – if the word 'begotten' is to retain any meaning then it must carry the implication that the Father caused the Son to be. Thus an asymmetry between the being and agency of the Father (who begets) and the being and agency of the Son (who is begotten) is implied, and in some undeniable sense the Son is subordinate to the Father. But how could the Son of God, who is fully God, be caused to be? How could the Son be begotten and nevertheless be unqualifiedly divine?

There is no question but those who formulated the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of the begetting of the Son and the processing of the Spirit were influenced by Neoplatonism, particularly by the idea that from the One emanated Mind and Soul (corresponding to the begottenness and procession of the Son and the Spirit), with the important difference that in the Trinity, Son and Spirit are hypostases in their own right, forming (with the Father) a Tri-unity.[1]

A closer look at the Nicene and Constantinopolitan formulations shows that there is, in fact, a tension within them between a hierarchical view of the Son's existence, being begotten from the Father, in which the Son is caused to be, and a more egalitarian view, in which the equality and consubstantiality of the persons is stressed.[2] The (so-called) Athanasian Creed emphasises the equality of the persons as well as the begottenness of the Son. We find that the idea of the equality of the persons is recognised by some of the Greek Fathers. Thus Gregory Nazianzen's statement that the Son's relation to the Father is without origin or cause[3] surely carries the implication that the Son and the Father are equal, the Son being unbegotten. For it would be hard to maintain that the Son was both begotten and yet not caused to be, if the word 'begotten' is to carry any meaning at all.

The begetting of the Son is, of course, not a creating of the Son: otherwise the Son would be a creature. The nature of the begetting on the traditional subordinationist understanding must be something like the following: there is no state of the Father that is not a begetting of the Son, and no state of the Son which is not a being begotten by the Father and necessarily there is no time when the Father had not begotten the Son, and no time when the Son had not been begotten by the Father. One cannot sensibly state that if the Father had not begotten the Son the Son would not have existed, because the antecedent is necessarily false. There is no possibility of the Father existing and the Son not existing. But do these claims not take us far from the New Testament, and give rise to unnecessary speculation?

It is an intense dislike of the idea of the divinity of the Son being

1 On the influence of neo-Platonism see the helpful summaries in G. Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, (London: IVP, 1993), pp. 146-7 and elsewhere.
2 These tensions are briefly discussed in G. Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 156f.
3 *Theological Oration* 3:2-3, 16; 4; 11, 19ff.; 5:9, 16.

compromised by his being said to be begotten by the Father, that led John Calvin and later theologians such as B.B. Warfield[4] and in our own day such as John Murray,[5] Robert Reymond,[6] and Millard Erickson,[7] to modify or abandon the idea of begottenness in expounding the Trinity, and to favour a view of the three divine persons as co-equal, equal in every respect as regards their divine nature. In terms of the historic creeds, they favour those expressions in them which stress the equality of the persons, and avoid those which favour a hierarchical view. They do this in the interests of expressing in a completely unqualified way the full deity of the Son. Whether or not this position is accurately described as 'The Calvinist Doctrine of the Trinity', it is clearly not a novelty.

The Procession of the Spirit

What of the procession of the Holy Spirit? What is the biblical evidence for this doctrine? Those in search of such evidence usually point to John 14:26 and 15:26. But of course these verses refer to the role of the Holy Spirit *in the economy of salvation*; they say nothing about the eternal relationship of the Father and the Son to the Spirit as it is in itself.

Further, it may be asked, does the Spirit proceed from the Father alone, or from the Father and the Son? And if the procession of the Spirit is from the Father and the Son, is it from the Father through the Son? Or is it from the Father and Son conjointly? Here we witness the ludicrous and painful

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4 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity' reprinted in *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), and in *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1956). 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity' in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929) in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1952) and in *Biblical Foundations* (with an Introduction by Rev. Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones) (London: The Tyndale Press, 1958.)

5 *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982) 4, *Studies in Theology*, pp. 67-8.

6 Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998). See the criticism of Reymond's interpretation of Calvin by Paul Owen, 'Calvin and Catholic Trinitarianism' (*Calvin Theoloical Journal*, November, 2000).

7 'I would propose that there are no references to the Father begetting the Son or the Father (and the Son) sending the Spirit that cannot be understood in terms of the temporal role assumed by the second and third persons of the Trinity respectively. They do not indicate any intrinsic relationships among the three', *God in Three Persons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), p. 309.

spectacle of the Western and Eastern churches splitting over the issue of whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone (the East) or from the Father and the Son (the West), the notorious *filioque* clause. This split, which has had the most serious ecclesiastical and political consequences is, in fact, over differences about one or two verses of the New Testament which it is highly likely have been misinterpreted from the outset! Failing appeal to these texts, from where else in the New Testament might one derive the doctrine of the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father or (alternatively) from the Father and the Son together? It is not at all clear.

The supposed procession of the Spirit gives rise to another set of speculative questions. For example, the Son is allegedly *begotten* by the Father, while the Spirit *proceeds from* the Father (and possibly from the Son). What is the difference between these two expressions? Who could possibly know or tell? What is the value of maintaining that there is a difference between them but that we cannot begin to explain what it is, but only speculate? And does not the raising of such questions as these take us far from the context of John 14:26, 15:26?

It might be said, both with respect to the begottenness of the Son, and the procession of the Spirit, that our reasoning about such matters should be based upon the following principle: *that God reveals himself to us as he is in himself.* (Let us call this Principle A). We should not, it may be said, put a wedge between God as God and God as he is revealed to us, otherwise God as God becomes a hidden God whose nature and activities are totally arbitrary and inscrutable and who may, in fact, bear no relation to the God revealed in Jesus. Adopting Principle A, it is said, we must conclude that the temporal missions of the Father, Son and Spirit will and must reflect their eternal relations in the godhead. That if God reveals himself to us as the Father who sends the Son, and as the Father and the Son who send the Spirit, then this must correspond to how things are in the godhead. So the Son must be eternally begotten, and the Spirit must eternally process.

It would certainly be difficult to deny Principle A, for it is implausible to suppose that God reveals his part in the economy of redemption in a way that *contradicts* how he is in himself, or that in his revelation he is manifestly *misleading* as to his real nature, or that he reveals himself in a way that is *irrelevant* to how he is in himself. And this is because immutability, wisdom

and faithfulness are among God's essential attributes or perfections, as we know from Scripture quite apart from any considerations concerning the Trinity. It is undoubtedly true that, in Scripture, God reveals to us something of what he is in himself even though we cannot fully comprehend how God is in himself. (As Calvin says, God reveals his essence sparingly.)[8] How God is in himself is never represented to us in Scripture as a black hole, as it is in Kantian and post-Kantian theologies. In view of the fact that God reveals himself to us as one who is in himself a loving, just and faithful God, we can be assured that God's revelation of himself and of the economy of redemption is not arbitrary, but fully reflects this divine character.

So Principle A is certainly plausible. However, it would be easy to show that Principle A can be applied with such stringency as to reduce it to absurdity. Thus, in the economy of redemption, the Son is revealed as utterly submissive to his Father's good pleasure. Does it follow that in his eternal relation the Son is utterly submissive to the Father? Does it not rather follow that there is something in the eternal relations of the Trinity that make the incarnation of the Word an appropriate and faithful expression of the divine nature?[9]

According to the New Testament the Son is the form, image, word of God. These are highly mysterious, indeed unfathomable expressions. Who can say what they mean? Don't they reinforce the basic biblical affirmation that we cannot, and cannot expect to, get our minds around the nature and the operations of God himself? Their meaning only becomes focused and clarified, as far as human understanding is concerned, as God is pleased to reveal himself in the economy of redemption. The mysterious terms 'form', 'image', 'word' are personalised for us in the coming of the Word of God in the Incarnation, in the Word becoming flesh, and in the person and work of Jesus Christ and the new relationships formed by him. The terms come into focus in the same way that a blurred image may become bright and sharp by an adjustment of a lens, or an enigmatic form may become clearly that of a

8 *Institutes* 1.13.1.

9 'The use of temporal manifestations of God as models from which to draw analogies of the eternal nature of the trinitarian relationships, while it doubtless was a move in the right direction, had serious drawbacks of its own which Origen did not fully appreciate. In his earthly life and work, the Son had obviously been in submission to the Father. It followed therefore that submission was a basic ingredient of his divine personhood – hence the Son was eternally subordinate to the Father', G. Bray in Peter Toon and James Spiceland (eds.), *One God in Trinity* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott 1980), p. 55.

person when it speaks.

It might be argued that the Son is the Son of the Father without being begotten by him, the Spirit the Spirit of the Father and (possibly) of the Son without processing from one or both of them. But then words start to lose their meaning. For how could the Son be the Son without being begotten, or the Spirit the Spirit without processing? What, under this proposal, do the words 'Son' and 'Spirit' come to mean? Is it not more in keeping with the New Testament revelation to reserve the concepts of divine Sonship and Spirithood to the economy of redemption?

Dr. Beckwith's claims

In common with a number of other people I have been surprised by the amount of attention that Roger Beckwith has chosen to give to part of an audio tape of a seminar, the purpose of which was to provoke theological reflection, in an informal setting, on the mystery of the Holy Trinity. It may be that the ideas expressed in that part of the seminar which Dr. Beckwith identifies in his printed lecture (now reprinted in this issue of *Churchman*) will prove to be untenable. But if so, this will not be for any of the reasons which Roger Beckwith adduces, as I will (briefly) attempt to show.

Roger provides three arguments against the view which I advanced. First, he claims that on the proposal I canvassed, namely that a large element in the doctrine of the Trinity in its Nicene formulation is owing to a reading back into the eternal, immanent Trinity of those inter-trinitarian relations known to us from the economy of redemption, it is hard to avoid Sabellianism, the view that God is eternally one but not eternally three.

I am not sure why this is. Dr. Beckwith does not tell us. The Trinity without the relations of eternal begetting and eternal procession would nevertheless remain a Trinity. The language of the New Testament about our redemption is the language of three distinct (yet fully co-operating and coinhering) divine centres of agency and activity. After all, it is only by reference to this language of the New Testament that any of us knows anything about the triune nature of God (in any developed form) in the first place. In this connection it is interesting to note how in the New Testament, particularly in Paul, there is a great variety of ways in which

the trinitarian character of God is expressed. Sometimes it is expressed as a relation between Father, Son and Spirit; at other times as between Father, Spirit and Son, at other times as between Son, Spirit and Father, and once as between Spirit, Father and Son. This suggests that the Apostle's approach to the Trinity was more flexible than that imposed by the later rigidities of begottenness and procession.[10]

Second, Dr. Beckwith's piece, in effect, implies that the proposal of Calvin and (following him) of B.B. Warfield that our thinking about the Trinity as such should be freed from every kind of subordinationism does not do justice to the full range of biblical data. Readers must judge for themselves how convincing this claim is. He then argues that the further suggestion, namely that Principle A may be applied in such a way that the ideas of the Fatherhood, the Sonship and the Spirithood of the three persons of the Trinity ought not to be carried back into the Trinity as it is in itself, is 'radical'.[11] In effect, he claims that if Warfield's approach fails, this further suggestion must certainly fail.[12] But as we have seen Warfield's approach has much to commend it. And Dr. Beckwith has very little to say by way of direct criticism of the further suggestion. Let us look at what he does say.

First, he claims that if what I have just said was correct, we know nothing about the eternal relationships of the three Persons, but only about their activities within the world. This takes us back to the point discussed earlier, the question of how closely the activities of Father, Son and Spirit in creation and redemption mirror the trinitarian godhead. Dr. Beckwith clearly implies, without giving any argument, that the mirroring must be extremely close. But how close?

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10 On this point, see both Bray, *The Doctrine of God* pp. 146-7 and Warfield, 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity'.

11 How far Warfield himself was attracted to endorsing such a further proposal is an interesting question. In his article 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity' he raises the question whether (given their equality in respect of deity) the Father, Son and Spirit are descriptions of the persons of the trinity as they are in themselves, and gives a firm, positive answer. Yet in a piece which provides detailed biblical support for the various other positions he defends, he offers no biblical support for this view.

12 Some may think that this view carries the consequence that it is possible that some other person than the Word could have become incarnate. But it is not clear that it does. And in any case those whose thinking about the Trinity is of a more traditional hue have speculated on this point. So the traditional view itself does not positively exclude such speculation. (*e.g.*, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIIa. 3. 5).

Dr Beckwith also says that if the very name of the 'Spirit' means being breathed out, then the idea of proceeding from God is essential to the Spirit's nature. That is, that person who is the Spirit could not but be breathed out, processing from Father and (in the case of what the Western churches have traditionally taught) also from the Son. But this argument seems to prove too much, since God himself is 'spirit' (John 4:24), yet God himself can hardly be said to be breathed out. From whom or what could God himself have been breathed out?

As for the verses regarding the relationship between Father and Son which Dr. Beckwith alludes to, such as John 17:5, I believe that they may all be understood, without exception, in the references they make to 'Father' and 'Son', as reading back into the eternal relationships of the godhead what became true at the Incarnation. At the Incarnation he who was in the form of God, who was God, took on the role of Sonship (with the subordination and submission that this implies) by uniting to human nature and, as the God-man, obtained eternal redemption for us, calling God his Father. So (to take Paul's teaching in Colossians 1), the world was created and is sustained by that divine person, the image of the invisible God, who was to become united to human nature for our redemption, becoming subordinate to God his Father in doing so. In fact, is this not what Paul says? God has translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son, in whom we have redemption...who is the image of the invisible God...by him were all things created...he is the head of the body, the church (Col. 1:13-18). In Paul's reasoning, the phrase 'Son of God' gets its meaning from the condescension and obedience of the one who is the image of the invisible God.

Finally, it may seem ironic that both the original lecture which called forth Dr. Beckwith's response, and this response to him, is from a philosopher who is making a plea for the removal from our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity of certain concepts which derive not from the New Testament but from pagan philosophy, from Neoplatonism. The plea is made in order that our understanding of the Trinity may be more faithful to Scripture, and less open to speculative distraction.

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