

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 7 • Number 2 • SPRING 1998

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY : A SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

C. B. Holdsworth

We need to vary our prayers to the living God and even to be willing on occasion to address God by metaphors that have biblical support—such as Rock, Fortress, Sun, Light and Fire. But in our prayer life we must finally return to the name by which God discloses himself to us in his revelation—Father, Son and Spirit. Our invocations and benedictions should always include this name . . .

DONALD G. BLOESCH

The Christian community knows God as Father, but not by forgetting the name of Jesus. It knows Him as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

CARL F. H. HENRY

The honor and awesome responsibility of formulating the doctrine of the Trinity is shared by few men: R. A. Finlayson cites Irenaeus and Origen as well as Tertullian, and declares that, "Under the leadership of Athanasius the doctrine was proclaimed as the faith of the church at the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), and at the hand of Augustine a century later it received a formulation, enshrined in the so-called Athanasian Creed." It was down to Calvin to give it "a further elucidation" before it passed into the body of the Reformed faith.¹

B. B. Warfield sees Calvin's contribution as being distinctly Augustinian rather than Athanasian: "That is to say, the principle of his construction of the Trinitarian distinctions is equalization rather than subordination . . . simplification, clarification, equalization—these three terms are the notes of Calvin's conception of the Trinity."² Warfield also speaks of "the very great service to Christian theology which Calvin rendered when he firmly asserted for the second and third persons of the Trinity their *autothotes*."³

What Calvin did do was to bring the doctrine right into his own age and situation, and the second part of the chapter on the Trinity in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is mainly polemical, addressing itself to the particular heresies of his day.⁴ This explains some of the caution which he had concerning the terminology of the creeds. We shall have occasion to notice his justification of the use of the

word "person,"⁵ his criticism of the repetitiveness of the clause, "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God" in the Nicene Creed,⁶ and his hesitancy to enter into speculation on the subject of the eternal generation of the Son.⁷

We begin, though, not with the *Institutes*, but with Calvin's *Commentary on Genesis*, to give us a sense of the integrity of the man. In commenting on the use of the plural *Elohim* in the opening verse of Genesis 1, he refers to those who infer that the three persons of the Godhead are thus indicated. Such he cautions, as they are likely to slip into Sabellianism while asserting the deity of the Son and of the Spirit against the Arians.⁸ R. L. Dabney surrenders the argument from the plural form on these grounds.⁹

And so we come to the *Institutes*, in which the first part of the chapter on the Trinity (chapter 13, sections 1-20) consists in a deliverance of the orthodox doctrine on the subject. After a transitional paragraph in which the spirituality, unity and immensity of God are underlined, and in which we are warned that anthropomorphisms are but God "lispering with us as nurses are wont to do with little children"¹⁰ ("the artless art of nurses as they speak to little children"¹¹), we are brought at last to "another special mark" of God, the divine tripersonality.¹² Sections 2-6 thereafter deal with the question of this particular terminology, the word "person" and its meaning.

In the first place, the Son of God is called in Hebrews 1:3 "the exact representation of His nature," and Calvin infers from this that the Father does have some subsistence in which He differs from the Son. "The same holds for the Holy Spirit," but we are not burdened with further Scripture references at this point. "It follows that there are three persons (hypostases) in God."

B. B. Warfield here declares, "It is not likely that this piece of exegesis will commend itself to us," but he goes on to observe two facts which Calvin's exegetical argument

brings before us: first, that the doctrine of the Trinity lay so firmly entrenched in his mind that he makes it the major premise of his argument; and second, that he not only used the term "persons," but held that it had biblical warrant.¹³

Says Calvin, the Greeks use *upostasis*, the Latins *Persona*, but "it betrays excessive fastidiousness and even perverseness to quarrel with the term." These terms, of course, are not scriptural terms, but are terms, however, which are "kept in reverent and faithful subordination to Scripture truth." "Such novelty . . . becomes most requisite, when the truth is to be maintained against calumniators who evade it by quibbling." "But I was long ago made aware . . . that those who contend pertinaciously about words are tainted with some hidden poison."¹⁴

There is no doubt that some of the Fathers indulged in "unwarrantable and presumptuous speculations about the relations in the Godhead; and this was carried to a far greater excess, and exhibited much more offensively, by the schoolmen." Calvin, says William Cunningham, was disgusted with "the presumptuous speculations" of these schoolmen, and having also to compete with Sabellian and Tritheistic heresies, he did express a wish that the names usually employed in discussing this subject were buried, "and that men would be contented with believing and professing that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one God, and yet that the Son is not the Father, or the Spirit the Son, but that they are distinguished from each other by their personal properties."¹⁵

In Calvin's own words, "each has his peculiar subsistence." And he goes on, "By person, then, I mean a subsistence in the divine essence,—a subsistence which, while related to the other two, is distinguished from them by incommunicable properties."¹⁶

Louis Berkhof develops this thought:

But in God there are no three individuals alongside of, and separate from, one another, but only personal self-distinctions within the Divine essence, which is not only generically, but also numerically, one. Consequently, many preferred to speak of three hypostases in God, three different modes, not of manifestation, as Sabellius taught, *but of existence or subsistence*.¹⁷

We should not "lose sight of the fact that the self-distinctions in the Divine Being imply an 'I' and 'Thou' and 'He,' in the Being of God, which assume personal relations to one another."¹⁸

Calvin, himself, has no objection to adopting the definition of Tertullian, properly understood, "that there is in God a certain arrangement or economy, which makes no change on the unity of essence."¹⁹

Calvin next sets out to prove the deity of the Son, and as Warfield declares, "The proof of the deity of the Son is very comprehensive and detailed, and is drawn from each Testament alike."²⁰ First Peter 1:11 indicates that the ancient prophets spoke by the Spirit of Christ, just as did the apostles. Hence, argues Calvin, we must conclude that the Word was begotten of the Father before all ages, and if the Spirit belongs to the Word, then the Word is truly God. Hebrews 1:2 teaches us, furthermore, that the worlds were created by the Son, that same wisdom (Son) who presided over creation in Proverbs 8:22. But supremely it is John who explains this doctrine, "for he both attributes a substantial and permanent essence to the Word, assigning to it a certain peculiarity, and distinctly showing how God spoke the world into being."²¹

There were in Calvin's day "certain men" who denied the eternity of the Son. These seem to have believed that the *logos* came into being only when the creating God spoke. But Calvin drew a very different conclusion, summed

up in the words of John 17:5: ". . . the glory which I had with Thee before the world was."²² Thus, "the whole scheme of temporal prolation as applied to the Son is sharply assaulted."²³

Psalms 45, furthermore, enthrones Elohim, which, says Calvin, only serves to assert the divinity of Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, names which pertain to the eternal Father are applied to Christ.²⁴ "And then the phenomena connected with the manifestations of the angel of Jehovah are adduced in corroboration."²⁵ In this context, too, Servetus is refuted: "The orthodox doctors of the church have correctly and wisely expounded, that the Word of God was the supreme angel, who then began, as it were by anticipation, to perform the office of Mediator."²⁶ This angel-mediator, significantly, is worshipped by the patriarchs to whom he appeared.

In his confrontation with Caroli, then, it is surprising that Calvin would not endorse the creeds of the church. But Caroli insisted that the very words of the creeds were the only fit way to express faith in the Trinity, despite his own inability to recite the Athanasian Creed. Calvin thought this quite ridiculous.



Turning to the New Testament, Warfield separates Calvin's evidence under two headings: first, that the divine names were applied to Christ by the New Testament writers (section 2), and second, that divine works and functions are assigned to him (sections 12-13).²⁷ The Lord "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped" (Phil. 2:6). He is God "who was revealed in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16). He is God who purchased the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28). To Thomas, He is "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28).²⁸

Further, He is the Creator and Preserver of the world, who is able to penetrate the secrets of the heart. He is able also to forgive sins, as attested in the healing of a paralytic man (Matt. 9:6). There is the testimony of miracles; the presentation of Christ as the proper object of saving faith; and the prerogative of having prayer especially addressed to Him, which all contribute to the New Testament picture of Christ as God. And Paul prays for the same blessings from the Son as from the Father.²⁹ Christ is God.

In his confrontation with Caroli, then, it is surprising that Calvin would not endorse the creeds of the church. But Caroli insisted that the very words of the creeds were the only fit way to express faith in the Trinity, despite his own inability to recite the Athanasian Creed. Calvin thought this quite ridiculous. The anathemas of the Athanasian symbol he saw as "unjust and uncharitable," while the repetitiveness of "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God" within the Nicene Creed he saw as completely unnecessary.³⁰ Despite all this, his writings were to display the fact that he could quite happily have signed these creeds, but his pride would not allow him to do so simply because of the pressure brought to bear by Caroli. After all, it would give the creeds an almost canonical status.

At first glance, too, it is surprising that Calvin offers no discussion of the "filioque" clause regarding the Holy Spir-

it. He fell in line with the Latin church, one imagines, and the reintroduction of this matter would not have served his immediate polemical purposes. Perhaps if he had had contact with the Greek churches we would have received some satisfaction on this matter.

The deity of the Spirit is proved, as with the deity of the Son, from the Scriptures. He, too, is the Creator and Preserver of the world, shown to be equal with God the Father: "And now the Lord God has sent Me, and His Spirit" (Isa. 48:16). All the offices of deity are ascribed also to Him.³¹

And He is called God. We are the temple of God just because the Spirit of God dwells in us (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). As Augustine says, "Were we ordered to make a temple of wood and stone to the Spirit, inasmuch as such worship is due to God alone, it would be a clear proof of the Spirit's divinity; how much clearer a proof in that we are not to make a temple to Him, but to be ourselves that temple."³²

Finally, says Calvin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not forgiven: "that majesty must certainly be divine which it is an inexpiable crime to offend or impair."³³ As to why this should be so of the Spirit while not of the Son, he does not enter into here.

So what are we to believe concerning the Trinity? First, Calvin cites Ephesians 4:5: there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." In the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) the nations are to be taught and baptized "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"—one name, one God.³⁴ But this unity of three Persons in the one God also implies distinctions. Says Gregory Nazianzen, "I cannot think of the unity without being irradiated by the Trinity. I cannot distinguish between the Trinity without being carried up to the unity."³⁵

There is distinction, not division, within the Triune God. To the Father is attributed the beginning of action, as

the fountain and source of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel and arrangement of the things to be done; to the Spirit the energy and efficacy of action.³⁶ The Father is the source, the Son is the director, and the Spirit is the executor of all the divine activities.³⁷ The distinction in no way impedes the absolute simple unity of God. And when we profess to believe in one God, it is in God as three persons within the one simple essence.³⁸

The second part of Calvin's discussion centers on the refutation of particular heresies: Arian, Macedonian, and Antitrinitarian—and especially Servetus. One particular argument is outstanding, because it serves to challenge any form of subordination: that is Calvin's expression of the thought contained in the Nicene Creed that "the Son is begotten of the Father . . . God of God, Light of Light." Says Calvin, "the Son, regarded as God, and without reference to person, is also of Himself; though we also say that, regarded as Son, He is of the Father. Thus His essence is without beginning, while His person has its beginning in God."³⁹

Warfield disapproves of these words, but points us back to John 5:26 and Proverbs 8:24, both of which emphasize the begottenness of the Son. Nevertheless, as we have already noted, he considers it a great service on the part of Calvin that he emphasized for the second and third persons of the Trinity their *autotheotes*. "It has never since been possible for men to escape facing the question whether they really do justice to the true and complete deity of the Son and Spirit in their thought of the Trinitarian distinctions."⁴⁰

Having settled several matters in and from the fathers, Calvin concludes his discussion by dismissing vain speculations, with a sideswipe at Lombard, who discusses at length whether or not the Father always generates. "This idea of continual generation becomes an absurd fiction

from the moment it is seen, that from eternity there were three persons in one God."⁴¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states simply that "the Son is eternally begotten of the Father,"⁴² which is taken to mean "that it is impossible to conceive of Him as not generating."⁴³ However, if Calvin errs, it is on the side of caution.

Author

Christopher B. Holdsworth is a lay preacher who lives on the Isle of Skye (Scotland). He contributed the article "The Eschatology of Jonathan Edwards" to *Reformation & Revival Journal*, Volume 5, Number 3, 1996.

Notes

1. R. A. Finlayson, "Trinity," *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1962), 1298-1300.
2. B. B. Warfield, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), 229-30.
3. *Ibid.*, 273.
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979), I:13:21-29.
5. *Ibid.*, I:13:2-6.
6. *Calvin and Augustine*, 210.
7. *Institutes*, I:13:29.
8. John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984), 70-71.
9. R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 182.
10. *Institutes*, I:13:1.
11. *Calvin and Augustine*, 190.
12. *Institutes*, I:13:2.
13. *Calvin and Augustine*, 214-15.
14. *Institutes*, I:13:2-5.
15. William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (Edinburgh, Scotland: 1864), I:297-98.
16. *Institutes*, I:13:5-6.
17. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1953), 87.

18. *Ibid.*, 88.
19. Tertullian, *Lib. Contra Praxeam*, cited in *Institutes*, I:13:6.
20. *Calvin and Augustine*, 226.
21. *Institutes*, I:13:7.
22. *Ibid.*, I:13:8.
23. *Calvin and Augustine*, 226.
24. *Institutes*, I:13:9.
25. *Calvin and Augustine*, 226-27.
26. *Institutes*, I:13:10.
27. *Calvin and Augustine*, 227.
28. *Institutes*, I:13:11.
29. *Ibid.*, I:13:12-13.
30. *Calvin and Augustine*, 207-11.
31. *Institutes*, I:13:14.
32. Augustine, *Ad Maximinum*, Ep. 66, cited in *Institutes*, I:13:15.
33. *Institutes*, I:13:15.
34. *Ibid.*, I:13:16.
35. Greg Nanzianzen in *Serm de Sacro Baptis*, cited in *Institutes*, I:13:17.
36. *Institutes*, I:13:17-18.
37. *Calvin and Augustine*, 229.
38. *Institutes*, I:13:19.
39. *Ibid.*, I:13:25.
40. *Calvin and Augustine*, 261-73.
41. *Institutes*, I:13:29.
42. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Free Presbyterian Publications, 1976), II:3.
43. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 93.