



## Trinitarian Theology and the Triune God

Although the doctrine of the Trinity is affirmed in ecumenical Christian tradition, there are at least two problems with it which beset “theology for Christian ministry” today.

First, the doctrine of God as triune is difficult to maintain in a time of selective emphases on certain persons of the Trinity. In spite of the fact that people continue to recite the ecumenical creeds at worship in major denominations, there are tendencies in the common religious life to focus on Jesus (not, “the Son,” but Jesus uncrucified and unresurrected) or the Spirit. In the first instance one can cite the “Jesus movements” which have come and gone, some forms of “Jesus talk” so common today, and certain forms of liberation theology. Furthermore, a “Christology from below” has become popular in theological discourse. For all its positive elements, its emphasis on the humanity of Jesus as the Christ, and the view in some circles that the assertion of Christ’s pre-existence was an afterthought and a mythological construct of the early church, runs the danger of allowing no place for the Son in the essential being and nature of God from eternity. Then, again, in other quarters the emphasis on the Spirit—in its more extreme forms today—tends to resist an understanding of God as triune as soon as it relegates the work of the Father and the Son to the past and—in line with such temporal thinking—assigns to the Spirit the only on-going divine activity in the world today, certified by experience.

The second problem which besets “theology for Christian ministry” concerning the doctrine of the Trinity is the explication of it in the church. The received formulations, we must admit, are difficult to present in proclamation and teaching. We are tempted to say that the language and concepts were clear once, but not today. Yet it will become evident in the articles which follow that Christians have always struggled hard to formulate trinitarian language and models for understanding. It is not adequate to assume that Christian doctrines spoke clearly and simply to persons at the time of their formulation in the past, and that therefore we ought to speak clearly and simply by ridding ourselves of out-dated language and concepts, and go on to say only those things about God which anyone can relate to who believes in God and admires Jesus. We can hardly fail to be

impressed by the hard intellectual effort and careful catechesis of the past when we read the literature concerning the Trinity. It follows that we hardly serve Christian ministry today if we do not join the efforts of the past in both hard thinking and careful catechesis.

The articles in this issue deal with historical, exegetical, theological, and pastoral issues concerning the triune God. *Lee Snook* illustrates how the doctrine of the Trinity keeps our thinking (theology) and living (ethics) Christian. *Robert Wilken* takes us back to early times to show how Christian thinkers struggled with the concept of the oneness of God (inherited from

Jewish monotheism), and he shows how the liturgy of the Eucharist and mysticism aided the formulation and expression of trinitarian doctrine. The article by *Reginald Fuller* takes us back one step further. The doctrine of the Trinity requires a pre-existence Christology. But is such a Christology tenable in light of historical research concerning Jesus and the history of Christology evident in the New Testament? He shows that a pre-existence Christology was both a legitimate and necessary development, even an enrichment (not abandonment) of Jewish monotheism, and that it remains the foundation of the Christian understanding of God. *Robert Jenson*—through both exegetical and constructive work—asserts that creation is a triune act. God creates by commanding (Genesis), and he commands/calls us to himself into his own, essentially eschatological, reality. Creation, preservation, and new creation are not three acts; they are trinitarian identities of one act. In this way the Christian doctrine of creation differs from origin-stories in other religious traditions. *William Narum* stresses that the doctrine of the Trinity is a summary of the gospel and the Christian experience of God. But experiences can lead to distorted views, so he goes on to show how both classical and modern writers have charted correctives. *Lorraine Grislis* reviews some of the problems of teaching the doctrine in the parish setting. She insists that one cannot flee from the difficulties, reviews several considerations which can be helpful in our struggles (and here she provides models of presentations from past efforts), and treats contemporary concerns for inclusive concepts of God with sensitivity and insight.

Our Resources section contains three articles. *Timothy Lull* introduces us to current theological literature on the Trinity, providing both survey and comment. *Ronald Marshall* surveys thirteen facets relating to God in contemporary philosophy. An issue of this journal devoted to God, we thought, ought to provide some awareness of God-talk within the larger setting which philosophy provides. Finally, the article by *Roland Martinson* treats recent studies in family issues. Such an article goes beyond the theme of this issue, but frequently we shall offer articles in the Resources section which bring valuable information and comment to our readers, regardless of the theme.

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