

# REFLECTIONS ON THE TRINITY IN LIGHT OF 1 JOHN 4:8

*By David Abernathy*<sup>1</sup>

## **1 Introduction**

In the process of reading various resources on a related topic, a colleague and I came across a considerable amount of material concerning the Trinity written in the last two or three decades. One would think that the subject would have been exhausted after two millennia of comment and debate, but such is not the case. One of the conclusions my colleague came to was that this is a profoundly rich topic, and he called it “a doctrine that keeps on giving.” I would like to explore just a few aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity and its relevance to us. Primarily, I will make use of a single resource, which is the theology textbook recently published by my own professor of systematic theology, Dr. Douglas Kelly of Reformed Theological Seminary. Kelly’s work is a treasure trove of rich insights in that he reviews a very wide range of scholarly thought throughout the centuries from all branches of Christendom whether Protestant, Roman Catholic or Orthodox.

Roman Catholics and Orthodox theologians have traditionally given considerable attention to study and reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity, as have Protestants, though perhaps less so than the others. To whatever extent the doctrine is neglected, we can expect at least some degree of impoverishment in our worship and theological thought. We should also expect a similar impoverishment to result in our ministry to non-Christian peoples if we neglect or downplay the

---

<sup>1</sup> David Abernathy has an MA in Biblical Studies from Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC. He currently works in Biblical research in North Carolina, USA.

significance of this doctrine which, admittedly, is impossible to understand and consequently very difficult to communicate. However, despite the fact that it is a mystery, we must present the mystery in its fullness. For example, in ministry in the Muslim world there is the temptation to present the Trinity as less than it really is, either minimizing the full deity of the second and third persons of the Trinity, which leans toward Arianism, or minimizing their full personhood (at least prior to the incarnation of Christ), which is a modified form of modalism. Muslims deserve to know the richness of who God really is, just as we have been privileged to come to know him.

## 2 The origin of the doctrine

We should not think of the doctrine of the Trinity only as something that was elaborated by church councils after centuries of philosophical and theological reasoning, although that reasoning did happen. Rather, the very first believers reflected on their own encounters with the working in their lives by the three persons of the Trinity to bring about salvation. Lane comments:

In the New Testament the economic Trinity is primary. God is known to be three because of his action for our salvation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The immanent Trinity (God's eternal being) follows from this on the ground that God's revelation of himself is true to his real being. If we know the second person of the Trinity as the "Son" it is because Jesus as a man enjoyed the relation of Son to the Father. (Lane 1982: 275)

Orthodox theologian Aristeides Papadakis agrees:

God is a Trinity of persons who is first met in Scripture as three agents of salvation and only then acknowledged as one God...For it was in the coming and revelation by Christ of His own person, or hypostasis, that the other two hypostases in turn are revealed and manifested to us. As such, the *personal* revelation of God in Scripture is the point of departure for all Trinitarian theology. (cited in Kelly 2008: 522)

With this Torrance also concurs, saying, “The incarnational and saving self-revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit was traced back to what God is enhypostatically and coinherently in himself, in his own eternal being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Torrance 1991: 199). The gospel message, he says, that was passed on by the apostolic tradition is one in which each of the three persons of the Trinity is at the core of the Church’s essential faith and experience. The Nicene theologians picked up on this apostolic witness to the Triune God, with the result that their Trinitarian theology arose directly out of their exegesis of New Testament passages as well as from the evangelical experience and liturgical life of the Church (Torrance 1991:198-99).

Similar sentiment is expressed by the Orthodox theologian Staniloae:

The revelation of the Trinity, occasioned by the incarnation and earthly activity of the Son, has no other purpose than to draw us after grace, to draw us through the Holy Spirit into the filial relationship the Son has with the Father. The Trinitarian acts of revelation are acts that...raise us up into communion with the persons of the Holy Trinity... A unipersonal god would not have within himself that eternal love or communion into which he would wish to introduce us... An incarnated God who was not the Son of a Father would not remain as person through relationship with another person equal to himself. The humanity such a God had assumed would sink down within him as into some impersonal abyss and have no share in the love of the Son for the Father...”(cited in Kelly 2008: 261).

### **3 A loving community of persons**

I have often contemplated what it means for humans to be made in God’s image. In what specific human traits do we find the image of God, such that it sets us apart from the rest of creation? Various aspects of human personality such as creativity, communication, moral choice, and rational or abstract thought, are no doubt part of the an-

swer. But probably at the heart and core of it is the simple fact of our capacity to live in loving relationships. In fact, one of the harshest forms of legal punishment is solitary confinement, and one of the most difficult emotional conditions to bear is the feeling of having been abandoned. Augustine says in the first paragraph of his Confessions, “O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” This is certainly true; but it is also true that God has made us *like* himself as relational beings, and for that reason we cannot find rest until we find it in relationship with him, a relationship that naturally also involves relationships with others who are in communion with him as well.

Donald Fairbairn describes the heart of the Christian faith as a sharing in the eternal relationship between the persons of the Trinity, and particularly the eternal love between the Father and the Son. Human life, he says, was originally intended to be a sharing in the fellowship of the Trinity, drawing from and living out the relationship between the Father and the Son; it is that very relationship between the Father and the Son that links God’s life to our own (Fairbairn 2009: 37, 101). When the divine-human fellowship was breached by the fall, the mediatorial action of God’s eternal Son as a man brought believers back to God. This reversed the effects of the fall such that they could, through adoption, share once again in the eternal fellowship of love the Son had with the Father (Fairbairn 2009: 154, 136). Similarly, Peter Toon describes the communion that believers share with one another as flowing from “the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, the Trinity of Holy Love” (Toon 1996: 193).

1 John 4:8 says, “God is love.” At the very least this should be taken to mean that God is loving. But much more is needed than that; whom does God love – people only? When did God begin loving – when he created people to love? Staniloae points out that if God’s love were directed only toward created beings and not toward something eternal and infinite, his love would have had a beginning

and would therefore be contingent, thus causing an important change in God. That is, it would not be something essential to his being. But we can only explain the creation of beings that God loves on the basis of an eternal and infinite love, one that is bound up with God's eternal existence (Staniloae 1980: 79). That eternal love can only be the love between the eternal persons of the Trinity, loving and delighting in one another.

John Piper, following the thought of Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards, speaks often of how God delights in himself. To say this of a human would remind us of the Greek myth of Narcissus who fell in love with his own reflection. But when we talk about God delighting in himself we must remember that we are talking about what Douglas Kelly calls "a loving community of persons." If we can imagine the persons of the Trinity taking delight in one another, each loving the other in eternal relationship, the picture changes. God did not first begin to love only after he created people, which would be the case under a monistic or Unitarian view in which God is eternally alone prior to creation. As Toon comments, with reference to God, it is unthinkable to speak of an "I" without a "Thou" in God, for although God loves humanity with an everlasting love, humanity is not a proper *vis-à-vis* for God, the proper "Thou" for the "I" that God is. The "Thou" revealed in the New Testament is the Son of God. (Toon 1996: 111) If John's statement in 1 John 4:8 is taken to mean that God is eternally characterized by loving relations within a community of co-equal persons, then the statement means that love and relationship have always been at the heart and core of all that exists (Kelly 2008: 273).

Millard Erickson expresses agreement with this when he says that the Trinity must be considered as a society of persons, each bound so closely to the others in love that they are actually one. And this love is more than just an attribute, he notes, for as 1 John 4:8 tells us, love is a very basic characterization of who God is. It also means there has to be a multiplicity of persons, otherwise God could not have

been love prior to the creation of other subjects (Erickson 1995: 222-23). As John Frame has said, eternal love is a characteristic of God's Trinitarian being. Since God does not exist without the three persons, love is therefore necessary to his nature. But this divine self-love is in fact self-giving, each of the members of the Trinity embracing and glorifying the others (Frame 2002: 416).

Richard of St. Victor, a Scotsman who lived in twelfth century France, also observed that since love cannot be love unless it is directed toward another, charity cannot exist where a plurality of persons is lacking (*De Trinitate* 3.2). Elaborating on Richard's thought in the light of 1 John 4:8, Kelly says that since God is love, and "the nature of love is overflowing and outgoing, it requires more than one person for such love to be expressed and returned. Thus, the one God has always existed in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – One and Three; the ultimate community of love; the fount of life, light and blessing" (Kelly 2008:175). He further elaborates:

In the realm of persons, one does not have an 'I' without a 'Thou'. That is to say, personhood is inherently relational. A strictly solitary, individualistic 'person' has never existed and could never exist on its own. It is the infinite, Triune God, an undivided community of Persons within Himself, who reveals Himself in creation and conscience to finite persons, who derive their personhood from his image. (Kelly 2008:175)

In fact, it is the meaning of divine Trinitarian personhood that is the basis for our own created personhood, bestowing on us significance not only for earthly life but also for the life to come (Kelly 2008: 485).

What this means is that a purely monistic deity would have no basis within it for creating relational human beings, and human beings would have no solid basis for defining personhood other than their own finite experience, and certainly no transcendent basis for doing so. As relational beings, humans would be something that God is not, namely, persons, and they would experience something God

does not know apart from his creatures, namely, relationships. Again commenting on the thought of Richard of St. Victor, Kelly notes:

The true God has never existed as a single, solitary individual, 'cut-off' as it were, in lonely isolation within Himself. But rather, the inner being of the one true God has always consisted in a rich, personal diversity within that profound unit: for God 'to be' is 'to be in relationship' within Himself, an eternal relationship of three co-equal Persons within the one divine reality. (Kelly 2008: 274)

Torrance also reflects on how Richard of St. Victor understood the connection between Trinity and personality:

It was from a theological understanding of God's personal and personalizing self-communication, creating personal reciprocity between us and himself, that the Christian concept of the person arose, which is applicable in a creaturely way to persons in relation to one another, but which reflects the transcendent way in which the three divine Persons are inter-related in the Holy Trinity. (T..F. Torrance, 1982: 43-44)

Staniloae comments on the eternally perfect love that the divine persons have shared one to another such that the communion between them could not possibly be any greater:

Were this not the case, the origin of all things would have begun from utmost separation, from absence of love. Love, however, presupposes a common being in three persons, as Christian teaching tells us... This unperfected love [i.e., of humans] between us presupposes, however, the perfect love between divine persons with a common being. Our love finds its explanation in the fact that we are created in the image of the Holy Trinity, the origin of our love. (cited in Kelly 2008: 322)

So we see that there is a strong logical and theological justification for concluding that God exists in eternal relationship, which also means that in the divine unity there are persons. But could this not be seen as tritheism? If each of the persons is truly and fully personal, each having faculties of consciousness and communication, would that not mean that there are three gods? The answer to this challenge is found in the doctrine of perichoresis, also known as cir-

cumincession or coinherence, which states that the persons of the Trinity mutually indwell one another and coinhere in one another, as three distinct persons in full and complete harmony and unity. That is, there are three distinct centers of consciousness in one divine unity. Kelly comments on the preservation of individuality within the divine unity:

Although relationship with other persons is inherent in being a person, still there is something 'irreducible' or 'incommunicable' about oneself that is not dissolved, lost or merged in relationship with others. Hence, although Father, Son and Holy Spirit coinhere in one another, their distinct conscious subjectivity is not lost in one another or merged into an impersonal unity" (Kelly 2008: 494).

Kelly concludes that Christian monotheism does not require an understanding of God as a monad, an indissoluble single subject (Kelly 2008: 504). We may conclude with Staniloae that the most meaningful unity is a unity in love between persons who retain their own individual identities, which is what we find in the Trinity (Staniloae 1980: 76).

Another difference between understanding God as a monad and understanding him as a triune community of persons is that with the monistic view of Islam, God's sovereignty means that he can change his mind at any moment about anything he has previously said, whereas within the biblical and Trinitarian conception of God, he can make a covenant with people and keep it. To be unpredictable would not be surprising for a God who had eternally existed all alone prior to creating the world and its inhabitants. But to be a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God makes sense if we understand him to be an infinite-personal and triune God who has eternally been in relationship, three co-equal persons knowing and loving one another within the eternal divine unity. The triune God can make promises and covenants with his creatures and be counted on to keep them because loving relationship is the normal mode within which he has always existed, and when he created humanity an integral aspect

of the plan by which and for which he made them was to live in loving relationship with himself. Such a relationship inherently involves the making and keeping of commitments, and hence, predictability regarding his actions.

Some twentieth century theologians have tended to minimize the full personhood of the members of the Trinity. In this regard Kelly mentions Karl Barth, and also Karl Rahner, who denied any distinct center of consciousness and will in each of the divine Persons. Kelly comments that Rahner's reinterpretation of the Trinity as subsistences instead of objective persons weakens the Christian understanding of being in "direct communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as *real persons* whom we can know personally in the experience of salvation" (Kelly 2008: 506, emphasis in the original). Torrance likewise sees Rahner's conception of the Trinity as lacking. He argues that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share in common a consciousness of divinity that is proper to the divine nature, but with each of the divine persons sharing in that consciousness differently and distinctively such that, in constituting "one indivisible God, they do so as three conscious Subjects in mutual love and life and activity" (Torrance 1994: 97).

Even human enjoyment of aesthetic pleasures has its roots in the mutual love of the three persons of the Trinity (Kelly 2008: 332-33). The capacity to delight oneself in what is good ultimately comes from the ultimate good, which is the triune God. Prior to creation, God's eternal delight was in his own perfections, since nothing else existed, but that delight was a communally shared delight of mutual love between the persons of the Trinity. As Richard of St. Victor observed, because the sweetest delights are those drawn from the heart of another and not merely from one's own heart, supreme happiness therefore requires at least a pair of persons (*De Trinitate* 3.27). It would seem, then, that in creating human beings in his own image, the triune God was graciously extending to new beings the ability to delight in who he is and in what he has made and done. God was

under no obligation to create, and when he did create, he was under no obligation to fill this world with an abundance of beauty, along with the aesthetic sense in humankind that could appreciate and be thrilled by that beauty. But he did in fact do both of those things. And why? True to his eternal nature, God created because of love, just as he redeemed because of love. The result of his creating and redeeming work is the thrill of loving worship by his human creatures who can turn their thoughts gratefully toward God, not only when they reflect on the gift of salvation but also whenever a beautiful sunset or anything else of beauty is seen, for God is the author of it all.

So we see the logical necessity of the Trinity for our basic understanding of human beings as persons in relationship, since relationship is not only our origin – in the holy Trinity – but also our destiny as believers in Christ. It is also a doctrine that is central to the historic Christian faith. As Monsignor Michael Magee says, “A thoroughly relational understanding of the Trinity is nothing less than the specific difference that sets Christianity apart from all other religions as the one that uniquely invites human beings not simply to contemplate God’s life but to partake of it.”<sup>2</sup> As difficult as it is to communicate, it is important that in our outreach to non-Christian people we not diminish or water down the doctrine of the Trinity by communicating it in terms that would be understood modalistically or in an Arian sense by people with little or no background in Christian thought. We must communicate the mystery of the full divine personhood of all three members of the Trinity, the one true God. If we do not, we are undermining part of the foundation for the understanding of salvation itself, which is the work of not one but of all three persons of the blessed Trinity. Knowing God as he truly is will always be the foundation and basis for all true worship.

---

<sup>2</sup> Personal correspondence. Dr. Magee, formerly of the Vatican’s Congregation for Divine Worship, is chairman of the department of systematic theology at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia, Pa., USA.

## References

- Erickson, Millard, *God in three persons: A contemporary statement of the doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995)
- Fairbairn, Donald, *Life in the Trinity: An introduction to theology with the help of the Church fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009)
- Frame, John M., *The doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg NJ: P and R Publishing, 2002)
- Kelly, Douglas, *Systematic theology Vol 1: Grounded in holy Scripture and understood in the light of the Church* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2008)
- Lane, A. N. S., 'Christology beyond Chalcedon', in Rowdon, Harold H. (ed), *Christ the Lord; Studies in Christology presented to Donald Guthrie* (Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982)
- Staniloae, Dumitru, *Theology and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980)
- Toon, Peter, *Our triune God: A biblical portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996)
- Torrance, T. F., *The Trinitarian faith* (London: T and T Clark, 1991)
- Torrance, T. F., *Trinitarian perspectives: Toward doctrinal agreement* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1994)
- Torrance, T. F., *Reality and evangelical theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982)