

Theological Paper

TS7461 – Major Guided Readings: Theology

Prof.: Dr. Christopher Holmes

August 22, 2009

Rick Wadholm Jr.

Box 1182

In faith and humility the following seedling of a theological treatise has been written. With St. Basil let it here be echoed, “We confess that we know what is knowable of God and yet what we know reaches beyond our comprehension.”¹ What is known is not the mere human conception of the divine, but is God Himself revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ (mediated to us through the Holy Spirit) as clearly revealed in Scripture *is* the knowledge of God (Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22). Apart from Christ, there is no revelation of God, indeed there is nothing. We must strive as that great Confessing Pastor of Germany did to be drawn again and again to Christ the Center. His reconciling mediatory *being* and *doing* is the ground and goal of all being and doing and perfectly reveals the God who is Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Doctrine of God

The doctrine of God must begin and end with God’s own self-revelation.² Speculation concerning the act and being of God is futile and indeed ultimately idolatrous apart from the recognition and confession of God in accordance with His self-revelation.³ “His immensity surely ought to deter us from measuring him by our sense, while his spiritual nature forbids us to indulge in carnal or earthly speculation concerning him.”⁴ We may indeed speak of and know God, but only because God has already spoken and made Himself known, and this through His creative and redemptive activity as recorded in Scripture, embodied in Christ Jesus and declared by the Spirit.⁵

1 T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1996), 158.

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 128.

3 *Ibid.*, 41, 48, 141, 142.

4 *Ibid.*, 109.

5 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 204.

According to this self-revelation we must confess God to be ineffable, though self-disclosed through the humility of human revelation. God has indeed condescended to the frailty of humanity, yet still has made Himself known genuinely. However truly He has made Himself known, this knowledge still comes by faith (and is not unmediated) echoing the words of Augustine, “*Credo ut intelligam* – ‘I believe in order to understand.’”⁶ This human revelation is particularized in God’s covenantal relationship with the people of Israel, but even more particularly in the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁷ This is all mediated to us in and through the Scriptures as evidenced by the testimony of the Holy Spirit.⁸

To know Christ is to know God, indeed this is the only way to know and give Him appropriate worship as God.⁹ We may rest assured that when we encounter Christ – fully God and fully man – we have truly to do with God and not any abstraction, but the living relating God – the only way to the Father and the one who baptizes in the Spirit (John 14:6, 7; Acts 2:33-39).¹⁰ In Christ, we are called to know and glorify the One God who is unity in trinity and trinity in unity and indeed we truly do know and glorify Him.

Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity

Trinitarian confession is not speculation, nor philosophical slight of hand, but is faithful response to God’s self-revelation. We worship Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the one and only God -- three *hypostases*, one *esse* or being.¹¹ There are not three Gods, nor three manifestations of the one God. There is only one God (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29) and we speak truly of the

6 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC Publications: 1989), 48.

7 T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, Pub., 1992), 7, 9, 107.

8 Calvin, 72.

9 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 9.

10 Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960), 45; and Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 23, 55.

perichoretic relations within the *hypostases* and also to the *esse* when we speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹² “Perichoresis affirms the real distinctions with one another, as well as their real oneness, and does so by providing the frame within which we may think and speak of the three divine Persons in their proper differences without detracting from their complete equality.”¹³

If any distinction is to be noted it must be in accord with God’s self revelation as Father He is the “fountain and source of all things”; as Son He is “wisdom, counsel, and arrangement in action; and as Spirit he is “the energy and efficacy of action.”¹⁴ However it must always be kept in mind that just as soon as the three are contemplated we must be driven to the worship of the One God in unity in trinity. As unity in trinity and trinity in unity, God is revealed perfectly in His Word – that is, in act and being.¹⁵ The act and being of the Word is identical to the *esse* of God. The Word is therefore the source and goal of grace and election, the extent and judgment of sin and rebellion, and the grounds and guarantee of redemption and reconciliation.

Christ – Grace and Election

The freedom of God is expressed in Christ given *to* and *for* humanity. God’s free grace is not an abstract divine attribute removed from humanity, but is embodied in the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:9). “It is precisely God’s *deity* which, rightly understood, includes his *humanity*.”¹⁶ He is the very proof of God’s freedom towards man and of man’s freedom before God.¹⁷ In Christ we are called to obey the one and only beloved Son of the Father (Luke 9:35)

11 Calvin, 127.

12 Ibid., 110, 114; Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 92.

13 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 176.

14 Calvin, 126.

15 Ibid., 116; Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 236.

16 Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 46.

17 Ibid., 46-52.

and this is fulfilled through the indwelling Spirit (Gal. 5:25). In the Spirit of Christ we are made sons of the promise and cry out to God as our Father (Rom. 8:15-18; Gal. 4:6) and are made sons in Christ *the* Son. The free choice of man in Christ *is* Christ, election must always be conceived only in relation to Christ, and this is the whole testimony of Scripture (Psalm 2; Eph. 1:3-14).¹⁸ Israel and the Church were chosen (as the one people of God) neither because of greatness nor because of goodness, but because of God's freedom demonstrated in *the* Jew -- Jesus of Nazareth.

Christ – Sin and Rebellion

Christ is also the key to knowing the full reality of depravity that humanity has been subjected to through willful disobedience. Sin and rebellion may be either wrongly conceived as too powerful or downplayed and not taken seriously enough apart from Christ. It is Christ alone who demonstrates the extent of sin and rebellion and the full measure of the wrath of God against it (Gal. 3:13). He alone bears the sin of the whole world and the very wrath of God against it. In the life of the crucified one (and His cross-bearing Church) sin and all its minions are exposed as utterly godless and vain, and finally are overcome and made subject to Christ (Col. 2:13-15).¹⁹

In Christ, the sin of the whole world is taken away (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2), and sin and death are swallowed up in the victory of His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:54-57). It is Christ, as grace, that demonstrates and overcomes the appalling nature of sin and does so without brute force, but through the self-giving love of His being.²⁰ Yet it must be remembered that the very same "Yes" in Christ that brings salvation to those who believe is the very same "Yes" that serves as the

18 Newbigin, 80; Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 210.

19 *Ibid.*, 207, 208.

judgment of those who perish in unrepentance.²¹

Christ – Redemption and Reconciliation

Christ is also the only means of redemption and reconciliation. There is no other way to be restored to fellowship with God apart from personal faith in the finished work of Christ. He alone makes atonement for sin and intercedes with the Father who sends the Spirit to convict of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:7-11; Heb. 7:25). It is the person and work of Christ that is the one true man for God and the one true God for man.²² He alone is the mediator between God and man and the very Spirit of God testifies to Him (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:8, 15).²³

The incarnation is the very work of atonement for sins where Almighty God suffers as sinful man and thereby works for humanity, what only God could do through the free love of giving Himself.²⁴ In Christ the Church is constituted as the body of God's reconciliation having been chosen *from* the world, *for* the world.²⁵

Doctrine of Creation

When we confess the Father Almighty as maker of heaven and earth, we speak of God as Father concerning his *esse* and not simply in his relation or *enhyposstatic* relation to the Son and Spirit. It is in the particularity of the very *esse* or being of God that He is Father and Creator.²⁶ Creation belongs to God in His being or *esse*, though creation is also carried out as something new even for God in his *hypostases* as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Creation belongs to the activity and being of the unity in trinity. In the incarnation we have something altogether new

20 Ibid., 178; Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 223.

21 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 246.

22 Ibid., 41.

23 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 100.

24 Ibid., 41, 42, 63, 68.

25 Newbiggin, 85.

26 Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 52.

(yet definitive and eternal) in relation to the doctrine of creation and the being of God, yet flowing from the very *esse* of God as unity in trinity.²⁷ We encounter the uncreated God as created by the Word of the Father and the overshadowing of the Spirit. Creation belongs to the very being of God, because of His nature – because of the Word – His covenantal freedom in love. In the words of Colin Gunton, “the only satisfactory account of the relation between the Creator and creation is a trinitarian one.”²⁸ Thus the wonder of the incarnation – as the perfect revelation of the trinity – is the wonder of the infinite having become finite while never forfeiting infinitude.

Everything visible and invisible was created by God and testifies to His glory even in its rebellious and sinful existence (Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:20; Col. 1:16).²⁹ The witness of creation is to the Father Almighty maker of heaven and earth (Eph. 3:14-15). Everything exists by his freedom and to His glory. Some glorify in His freedom and others glorify in their bondage, but all give glory. Even the reprobate unwillingly give glory to God in their bondage to sin as testimony to the rich mercies of God and to the wonder of His glorious providence (Rom. 11:32-36; Phil. 2:10-11). This glorifying does not belong to nor signify their salvation, but nevertheless results in the ultimate glory of God through the demonstration of His glorious providence in all things even in His righteous eternal judgment against sin.³⁰ That the wicked give God glory even in their vain attempts to defy Him only serves to demonstrate the ultimate victory of the cross of Christ. H. R. Mackintosh says as much by saying, “Providence is correlative to the

27 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 208.

28 *Ibid.*, 212.

29 Calvin, 153.

30 *Ibid.*, 203.

Cross.”³¹

Creation exists as testimony to the covenant LORD or *Yahweh* (Gen. 2:4). He *Is*, and as such He is the creator and sustainer of everything that exists. Thus in relation to the finished creation, he is called LORD because He creates in covenant. In the LORD’s creating He has not simply created, but He has covenanted Himself to creation and covenanted creation to Himself. The creation therefore cannot be conceived apart from covenant.³²

The account of creation declares the boundaries and the freedom of creation to live in covenant inter-relationships and points to the *eschaton*.³³ This is why John declares that through the Word, God created everything that is and gave it life (John 1:3-4), and Paul said *through* and *for* Christ everything was created and is held together (Col. 1:16-17). Christ is not an after thought of creation, but the very source and goal of creation, and as such the sign and seal of the covenant of creation.³⁴

God as the Creator is God as LORD - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In His freedom He created everything and nothing constrained Him. Neither is He constrained to uphold or redeem all things, but from His free love He does so. God does not create except that He freely binds Himself to creation and creation to Himself. Thus, Karl Barth may rightly say, “Creation is grace.”³⁵ This is why Christ is the firstborn over all creation. Christ is God’s loving freedom and therefore the one through whom and for whom all things were created and are made subject.³⁶ Christ is the freedom of God’s love in creation, where the LORD gives Himself for

31 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 222.

32 Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T. Thomson (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 51.

33 *Ibid.*, 63, 64.

34 *Ibid.*, 53.

35 *Ibid.*, 54.

36 *Ibid.*, 57, 58.

creation and receives creation for Himself.

Doctrine of the Church

Word and Spirit

The Church is first and foremost defined as the body constituted by the Word and the Spirit of God, and this by grace through faith.³⁷ The life of the Church is the life in the Word by the Spirit and in the Spirit by the Word.³⁸ The Church is birthed in the Spirit and washed in the Word. When the Church speaks as *the* Church it is with the voice of the Spirit and it is the clear proclamation of the Word.³⁹ The Word and Spirit belong to the very essence of the peculiarity of the *ekklesia* (those who are *called*). This *ekklesia* bears witness to the very humanity of God in the world as the present witness to the rule of the incarnate crucified, risen, and soon coming King.⁴⁰

The act of the Church is the living proclamation of the Word in the Spirit and all of this as glorying in God. The Church does not exist for itself, but for the glory of the Lord. In this glorying in the Lord, the Church is “bound to challenge in the name of the one Lord all the powers, ideologies, myths, assumptions, and worldviews which do not acknowledge him as Lord.”⁴¹ The Lordship of Christ is central to the task of the Spirit as the Church boldly preaches and lives according to the Living Word.

The Word and the Spirit belong to the Church only in so much as the Church belongs to the Word and the Spirit. The Church (as the community of faith and members of the community)

37 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*. “Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works” vol. 5, (English Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, Trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtneiss. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 47.

38 Ibid., 39.

39 Ibid., 99.

40 Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 63, 64; and Newbigin 78, 105-108, 139.

41 Newbigin, 221.

prays and works, works and prays as Christ in the world and as an eternal living praise to the Lord.⁴² Intercession is that act of trusting in the Lord on behalf of others for everything according to His Word, while acting in the unity and power of His Spirit. In this sense, the Church is one holy, catholic and apostolic Church and therefore partakes of the sacraments of baptism and communion as under and in the Word and as witness to the world. These sacraments, as “converting ordinances,” do not properly belong to what the Church does, but as testimony to “what Christ Jesus has done in our place and on our behalf.”⁴³

Baptism (Water and Spirit)

The one holy, catholic and apostolic Church is baptized in water as the outward witness to the baptism by the Spirit into Christ. Water baptism administered by the Word involves a genuine immersion into the very life of Christ - crucified, buried and raised.⁴⁴ Baptism is the bodily seal of the Spirit signifying incorporation into Christ’s one corporate and mystical body (Gal.3:27). Baptism emphasizes the once-for-all regenerating work of the Spirit that what has been started will indeed be finished.⁴⁵ Baptism declares the faith of the baptized as one having been dead in their sins, but now raised to new life in Christ (Rom. 6:3-8; Col. 2:12).

Communion (Unity and Confession)

The one holy, catholic and apostolic Church shares in the life of Christ through the table of fellowship wherein Christ’s body and blood are the elements of participation in the very life of Christ (John 6:53-58).⁴⁶ At the table of the Lord, the corporate fellowship of believers receives

42 Bonhoeffer, 68-80.

43 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 90, 97.

44 Ibid., 96.

45 Ibid., 90.

46 Ibid., 97.

tangible evidence of the ongoing work of the Spirit to continue the one work of Christ.⁴⁷

Confession of sin and its free pardon are granted as essential to participation in the Lord's Supper and becomes the affirmation of "our cross" where we find ourselves again crucified with Christ and embrace His corporate body in fellowship (1 Cor. 11:27-32).⁴⁸ Communion is shared in and with the Spirit among the many members of the one body of Christ as witness to Christ's ongoing presence and claim over the whole world (1 Cor. 11:26). The Church is declared to be Christ's body as the various members corporately confess the bodily death, resurrection and soon coming again of Christ.

Christianity Among the Religions

The world vainly proposes to offer a way of life, but that way is deceitful and only leads to death. In fact, the world exchanges the way of truth for lies, and the way of life for death. In the pluralist milieu of our post-modern context, there is still only one name that saves -- Jesus. He alone is declared to be the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). He is the only way to the Father. He is the only truth -- true God and true man. He is the only life as the baptizer in the Spirit who is Himself Lord and giver of life.

Christ the Way (to the Father)

Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. The religions of the world claim there are many paths that lead to God, but there is only one actual path and His name is Jesus. In fact, not only should we say that He leads to God, but that He leads to the Father. This is because, as has been stated earlier, there is no God apart from God as unity in trinity declared in Scripture -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The call to walk this way is diametrically opposed to a simple

47 Ibid., 91.

48 Bonhoeffer, 111.

exaltation of humanity as if humanity could walk this path of its own accord or even will to walk such a path (Eph. 2:1-10). It speaks of the gracious outpouring of the indwelling Spirit of adoption and of the love of the Father of all Fatherhood (Rom. 8:15, 23; Eph. 2:18; 3:14, 15). Jesus Christ does not simply lead us to God, but restores us to His Father and our Father (John 20:17). He guarantees that we are reconciled to the Father and are declared and indeed made to be sons and joint-heirs (Rom. 8:17). It is through the empowering work of the Spirit made manifest in Christ that we walk in righteousness the only way (which is Christ) to the Father (Gal. 5:18-25).

Christ the Truth (True God and True Man)

Christ stands as not only the center of the truth of the good news, but as the content of the good news itself. In Christ, we find with both true God and true man. In His person, true God and true man are united so as not to be confused or divided. The hypostatic union means that we have an encounter with something altogether different than the offer of the religions. We have to do with God and man in their true nature.⁴⁹ We have to do with God who is grace and truth become sinful man without sinning (John 1:14, 17). In Christ, man must face his own rebellion against God and is called to reconciliation, which is inherently a call to the truth. Christ as the Truth is the very representation and image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). In Christ, man is perfectly for God and God is perfectly for man.⁵⁰ The religions teach things concerning God and man, but in Christ we encounter the only True God and True man and thus the very object and subject of faith (Heb. 12:2). With Lesslie Newbigin it must be affirmed that the Church does not “possess absolute truth: it claims to know where to point for guidance (both in thought and in

49 Ibid., 62-72.

50 Ibid., 73, 78, 80.

action) for the common search for truth.”⁵¹ The Scriptures inspired by the Spirit points directly to *the* Truth who is Christ.

Christ the Life (the baptizer in the Spirit)

Christ is not simply offering life to those who believe in Him as something extraneous to himself, he actually offers Himself and this by His Spirit. Christ declares that he gives life, because He is the Life (John 1:4; 4:14; 5:21, 26). In Him the very life-giving Spirit of God is poured out and those who are in Christ actually partake of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) without simply being subsumed into God. Christ does not simply seek to empower humanity in their human-ness, but to fill humanity with His Spirit (John 7:39; 20:22; Acts 1:8). This is why the Church confesses that the Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life. Thus, the Scriptures declare that John the baptizer only baptized with water, but Christ would baptize with the very Spirit of God (Matt. 3:11). When Christ baptizes in His Spirit, He gives Himself and the Life that is His by nature (Rom.8:11). There is no divinizing of humanity in this, but there is an empowering, enlivening transformation of humanity from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18).

Conclusion

In Christ, God and humanity are truly revealed and reconciliation made perfect. With Christ as the center – beginning and end – freedom in creation and covenant flows from the very being of God as unity in trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “It is indeed God’s threefold giving of Himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit that is our salvation.”⁵² This salvation belongs to the eternal freedom of election in the humiliated and exalted Christ as the mediator between God and man – revealing the very love of His Father through the pouring out of His

51 Newbigin, 163.

52 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 126.

Spirit. The story of redemption is the story of all history and thus is His-story. This is the good news enacted through the living and confessing body of Christ -- Christ's glorious Church: sons of the Father, full of His Spirit declaring the eternal praise of God.

Bibliography

- Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T. Thomson. New York: Harper & Row, 1959.
- . *The Humanity of God*. Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*. "Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works" vol. 5. English Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, Trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989.
- Torrance, T. F. *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*. Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1996.
- . *The Mediation of Christ*. Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, Pub., 1992.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC Publications: 1989.