

Evangelical Reformulations of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Calvin on the Full Equality of All Persons of the Trinity

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Abstract

In the context of Evangelical reformulations of the Trinity in a new subordinationism, the article reasserts the traditional assertion of the full equality of all persons of the Trinity. To that end, the author expositis John Calvin's formulation of the Trinity and that of the church fathers, which anticipates Calvin's doctrine. Crucial to a proper understanding are the distinctions between essence and persons and between the ontological Trinity and each person's role in redemption. The historical survey concludes with B. B. Warfield's and Thomas F. Torrance's assessments of Calvin's contribution. Finally, three implications linked to our doctrine of God—knowledge, forgiveness, and love—are considered.

When presenting the doctrine of union with Christ, it is appropriate to take a careful look at who this Christ is with whom his people are in union. Some conservative evangelicals (nearly all in the Calvinist realm) have been giving a rather different account from the

mainline tradition of who the eternal Christ is, and I wish to call that new account into question. Traditionally one would have assumed that “evangelical conservatives” would be very “conservative” about the most basic doctrine of who God is: the Holy Trinity. But trends in recent years have shown that this may not necessarily be the case, especially at present. In particular, out of their concern to speak authoritatively to gender issues, not least male headship within Christian marriage, several evangelical conservative thinkers have been reworking the traditional doctrine of the Trinity in order to strengthen their case of male leadership.

1. Changes in Trinitarian Theology Proposed by Some Evangelical Conservatives

Some recent writings by evangelical conservatives have sought to anchor more firmly female submission to the male by reconsidering the ineffable relationships of the eternal persons of the Holy Trinity within the very substance of God. To do this, they have needed to reformulate the traditional understanding of the priority of the *ontological* Trinity over the *economical* Trinity.¹

I believe that this is a seriously misguided approach to the matter; one that would eternally subordinate the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father in order to provide strength for a particular view of gender roles within the human race: namely, that the female is to be submissive to the male within marriage.² This concern for submission of the female within marriage may well be valid, but this submission is not biblically based upon subordination of the second and third persons of the Trinity to the first, but rather should be properly based upon the order of creation (as in Gen 1 and 2, and 1 Cor 7, and 1 Pet 3), and particularly the love of the Son for his church, and how this exemplifies the way male and female are to act within marriage (as in Eph 5).

¹ These terms will be discussed more fully later, but basically, *ontological Trinity* refers to who the Triune God is within his own substance or being from all eternity, whereas *economical Trinity* refers to his coming down to us within the history of redemption. Orthodox believers have always held that the ontological Trinity has theological priority over the economical Trinity.

² Most (though not all) of these new formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity, which lean to some sort of eternal subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father, have been expressed on the Internet (or “blogosphere”) in 2016 and 2017. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals listed a number of exchanges on this matter between May 22, 2015, and August 22, 2016; see “Highlights on the Trinity Debate,” Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, <http://www.alliancenet.org/trinity-debate>. Steven Wedgworth also helpfully summarizes many of these (sometimes heated) interchanges; see Steven Wedgworth, “Madness from the Gods?: Evangelicals, Complementarianism, and the Trinity,” *The Calvinist International*, 29 June 2016, <https://calvinistinternational.com>.

II. *Why Some of These Reformulations Are Not Helpful*

As Liam Golligher has pointed out, it is a serious step backward in terms of the biblical doctrine of the three eternally co-equal persons within the one being of God, as well as in terms of the historic teaching of the majority of the Christian theological tradition, to read back the submission of the female to the male into the eternal relationship within the Triune God. Who the one Triune God eternally is may not properly be harnessed to human gender concerns (even legitimate ones), for—by the law of unintended consequences—that provides a seriously defective view of the eternal being of the blessed Trinity.³

As far as I know, nearly all of those who have joined in this debate, even those who argue in favor of the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father, as well as those who argue against it, would count themselves in the general rank of Calvinists. Indeed, one of the most distinguished of them, Wayne Grudem (who certainly holds to the full deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), have stated that John Calvin allowed some kind of subordinationism within the Trinity. He refers to Richard Muller as saying this.⁴

However, Muller is too careful a Calvin scholar to imply that Calvin held to any kind of *eternal* subordination between Father and Son. Rather, Muller rightly notes that Calvin, following Scripture, held any relation of subordination of the Son to the Father to be only within the working out of the plan of salvation, in which the Son willingly agrees to become incarnate for the redemption of his people on earth, and as part of that self-lowering, gladly submits to the will of the Father (which is his will, and that of the Spirit) for the grand accomplishment of the salvation of the church. To use traditional terms, this subordination of Son to Father is *economic*, not *ontological*.

³ Liam Golligher posted two articles on June 3 and June 6, 2016; see Liam Golligher, “Is it Okay to Teach a Complementarianism Based on Eternal Subordination?,” and “Reinventing God,” *Housewife Theologian Blog*, <http://www.mortificationofspin.org>. His views were affirmed by Carl Trueman on June 7, 2016, in his post “Fahrenheit 381,” *Postcards from Palookaville Blog*, <http://www.alliancenet.org>. Their critiques of the subordinationism of these new formulations were challenged by Bruce Ware and Mike Ovey on June 11, 2016; see Bruce Ware, “God the Son—At Once Eternally God with His Father, and Eternally Son of the Father,” *Reformation* 21, 9 June 2016, <http://www.reformation21.org>; and Mike Ovey, “Should I Resign? On the Eternal Subordination of the Son,” *Credo Magazine*, 11 June 2016, <http://www.credomag.com>. Several others have written pro and con these positions since then, and I will not list them here.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, “Whose Position on the Trinity Is Really New?,” *CBMW*, 9 June 2016, <https://cbmw.org/public-square/whose-position-on-the-trinity-is-really-new/>. Cf. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 4:80.

III. Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity

Since Calvin is acknowledged as a theological father by both eternal subordinationists and full egalitarians, it seems helpful to consider the great contribution made by Calvin to Trinitarian theology. In a word, any careful reading of Calvin will *not* suggest any eternal subordinationism within the one Being of God; rather, the contrary. If the innovators among the evangelical conservatives, who are reformulating their doctrine of the Trinity in terms of eternal subordination of the Son to the Father, would study carefully how their supposed leader, Calvin, actually taught his own doctrine of the Trinity, they could find a way out of their theological wanderings onto solid biblical ground.

1. Calvin's Distinction between God's Eternal Essence (or Substance) and Historical Personal Roles in the Order of Redemption

Calvin's fullest teaching on the Trinity is found in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.13). The distinction he makes there between God's *substance* (or *essence*) and his personhood is paramount to his contribution to the church's clearer grasp of Trinitarian theology. We shall see that with Calvin, a true account of the subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father only pertains to the *economy*—to the outworking of the redemption of the church by the historical tasks of the three persons—not to the eternal inner being of God (the ontological Trinity), which is always shared in absolute equality by the three in their ineffable oneness of substance.

The Difference between Person and Essence

Therefore, Calvin's understanding of *person* and *substance* (*essence* or *being*) is basic to his doctrine of the Holy Trinity and constitutes his greatest contribution to his understanding of God, rooted in Scripture and many of the fathers. First, let us see how Calvin puts these two major concepts together: "When we profess to believe in one God, under the name of God is understood a single, simple essence, in which we comprehend three persons or hypostases."⁵ This statement expresses the whole truth of Scripture about the Trinity:

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:144 (1.13.20).

For nothing excludes the view that the whole essence of God is spiritual, in which are comprehended Father, Son, and Spirit. This is made plain from Scripture. For as we there hear God called Spirit, as also do we hear the Holy Spirit, seeing that the Spirit is a hypostasis of the whole essence, spoken of as of God and from God.⁶

Secondly, we note how Calvin defines *person* in relation to “essence,”

“Person,” therefore, I call a “subsistence” in God’s essence, which, while related to the others, is distinguished by an incommunicable quality. By that term “subsistence” we would understand something different from “essence.” For if the Word were simply God, and yet possessed no other characteristic mark, John would wrongly have said that the Word was always God [John 1:1]. When immediately after he adds that the Word was also God himself, he recalls us to the essence as a unity. But because he could not be with God without residing in the Father, hence emerges the idea of a subsistence, which, even though it has been joined with the essence by a common bond and cannot be separated from it, yet has a special mark, whereby it is distinguished by a special quality. This “relation” is here distinctly expressed: because where simple and indefinite mention is made of God, this name pertains no less to the Son and the Spirit than to the Father. But as soon as the Father is compared with the Son, the character of each distinguishes the one from the other. Thirdly, whatever is proper to each individually, I maintain to be incommunicable, because whatever is attributed to the Father as a distinguishing mark cannot agree with, or be transferred to the Son. Nor am I displeased with Tertullian’s definition ... that there is a kind of distribution or economy in God which has no effect on the unity of the essence.⁷

This clear distinction between person and substance (or essence) should show us that we do not seek to penetrate into God’s eternal essence in order to seek a role model for Christian males and females, but rather into the roles of the persons in the historical order of redemption. Calvin was no innovator here; he was following several leading Eastern and Western fathers of the church on the all-important distinction.

Calvin Follows Augustine in Thinking of God Both “Substance-wise” and “Relationship-wise”

Let us start with Saint Augustine in the West, whom Calvin quotes more than any other father. Augustine says that God can be spoken of both relationship-wise and substance-wise. He holds that if Father could be thought of apart from Son, and Son apart from Father (that is, only in relationship to themselves alone), they would, in effect, be different substances:

⁶ Ibid., 1:145 (1.13.20).

⁷ Ibid., 128 (1.13.6). Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 2.9.

But since the Father is only called so because he has a Son, and the Son is only called so because he has a Father, these things are not said substance-wise, as neither is said with reference to itself but only with reference to the other. ... Therefore, although being Father is different from being Son, there is no difference of substance, because they are not called these substance-wise but relationship-wise.⁸

The Distinction between Substance and Person in Eastern Fathers
This distinction was also the insight of major Eastern fathers, such as Gregory of Nazianzus and Epiphanius. Gregory explicates this crucial distinction between substance and person in *Oration* 40, where he shows that each of the three persons of the Trinity is fully God himself,

neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite conjunction of Three Infinite Ones. Each [is] God when considered in Himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three One God when contemplated together; Each [is] God because Consubstantial; one God because of the Monarchia.⁹

Gregory Shows That There Is No “Origin” within the Ontological Trinity
Gregory did not use the word *origin* within the Trinity.

I should like to call the Father the greater, because from him flows both the Equality and the Being of Equals (this will be granted on all hands), but I am afraid to use the word Origin, lest I make Him the Origin of Inferiors, and thus insult Him by precedence of honour. For the lowering of those Who are from Him is no glory to the Source.¹⁰

He holds that to subordinate any person of the three is to overthrow the Trinity:

For he [Arius] did not honour the Father, by dishonouring His offspring with his unequal degrees of Godhead. But we recognize one glory of the Father, the equality of the Only-begotten; and one glory of the Son, that of the Spirit. And we hold that to subordinate any of the Three, is to destroy the whole.¹¹

⁸ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.6. Augustine, *The Trinity*, 2nd ed., trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2012), 192.

⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 40.41 (NPNF² 7:375). “The Monarchy” was a term used by many church fathers to indicate “monotheism,” or the sovereignty of the one true God. Gregory’s position was that “the Monarchy” was held by the entire Trinity, not just the Father.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 40.43 (NPNF² 7:375–76).

¹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 43.30 (NPNF² 7:405).

Gregory Considers “the Monarchy” to Reside in the Entire Trinity, Not Just the Father

Gregory taught that the unity of the Godhead is complete not just in the person of the Father, but in each person as well.

But when I say God, I mean, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. For Godhead is neither diffused beyond these, so as to bring in a mob of gods; nor yet is it bounded by a smaller compass than these, so as to condemn us for a poverty-stricken conception of Deity; either Judaizing to save the Monarchia, or falling into heathenism by the multitude of our gods.¹²

... acknowledging the Unity in the Essence and in the undivided worship, and the Trinity in the Hypostases or Persons (which term some prefer). ... [That they are same essence as God, but are distinguished by personal properties].¹³

Epiphanius Sees That the Persons of the Trinity Have Always Existed “Beyond Beginning and Beyond Time”

It is the same with Epiphanius, who held that each person of the Trinity is whole and perfect God.¹⁴ He affirmed that the being of the persons of the Trinity is “beyond beginning and beyond time” with no “before” or “after” in God. Epiphanius taught that the Monarchy refers to the entire Trinity, not just to the person of the Father: “In proclaiming the *Monarchia* we do not err, but confess the Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, one Godhead of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Epiphanius, *Adversus haereses* 62.3).¹⁵

The teaching of Calvin was in full accord with that of Augustine, of Gregory of Nazianzus, and Epiphanius, and also of Cyril of Alexandria. In his controversy with Pierre Caroli, Calvin puts forth the teaching of Cyril (who was in line with Epiphanius and Gregory Nazianzus) that “the Father has nothing of himself which the Son does not have of himself” (Cyril of Alexandria, *De Trinitate* 3).¹⁶

Calvin clearly teaches against the theory that the Father “gave essence” to the Son and Spirit, as though they held a merely derived Deity. In arguing against Valentine Gentile, who held this position, Calvin answered,

¹² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 38.8 (NPNF² 7:347).

¹³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 42.16 (NPNF² 7:391).

¹⁴ Epiphanius, *Adversus haereses* 62.3ff. (PG 41:1053ff.).

¹⁵ As quoted in Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 120 (cf. PG 41:1053).

¹⁶ Referred to by Calvin in John Calvin, “*Adversus Petri Caroli Calumnias* (1545),” *Calvini opera* (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 7:322.

For if we consider no one but the Father to be God, we definitely cast the Son down from this rank. Therefore whenever mention is made of deity, we ought by no means to admit any antithesis between Son and Father, as if the name of the true God applied to the latter alone. For of course the God who manifested himself to Isaiah [Isa. 6.1] was the true and only God, the God whom nevertheless John affirms to have been Christ (John 12:41).¹⁷

2. Calvin Teaches the Self-Existence of the Son

In a great clarifying moment of Trinitarian theology, Calvin attributes self-existence (*autousia*) to the Son. In so doing, he is directly following Epiphanius.¹⁸ Thus Calvin affirms the full deity of the Son and the Spirit (who are distinct persons from the Father), while at the same time affirming the absolute oneness and simplicity of the essence the three persons share in common from all eternity.

Unlike some modern evangelical conservatives who have sought to subordinate the deity of Son and Spirit to the Father, Calvin shows that the personal distinctions of the three generally refer to their personal relationships within the work of redemption, in which there is “economic order,” according to which the Father has priority. This order of personal relationship “takes nothing away from the deity of the Son and the Spirit.”¹⁹ Thereby, Calvin teaches that according to the Scriptures, “God is one in essence, and hence that the essence both of the Son and of the Spirit is unbegotten.... Thus God without particularization is unbegotten; and the Father also in respect to his person is unbegotten.”²⁰

In sum, Calvin shows that the three persons are distinct from one another (though not divided), in which Father is first, Son is second, and Spirit is third, in the order of revelatory and redeeming activity.²¹ The Father is the fountain of Deity, with respect, not to being, but to order.²² This means that sonship is a relation so that the Son differs from the Father only by this property of sonship (or being begotten), but as to his own being, it is the same essence as that of the Father.²³ Calvin writes,

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 149 (1.13.23).

¹⁸ Epiphanius, *Adversus haereses* 69. Calvin, “Adversus Petri Caroli Calumnias (1545),” *CO* 7:322–23; cf. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 65.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 144 (1.13.20).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 153 (1.13.25).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.13.18.

²² *Ibid.*, 1.13.26.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1.13.6.

We confess that the Son since he is God, exists of himself, but not in respect of his Person; indeed, since he is the Son, we say that he exists from the Father. Thus his essence is without beginning; while the beginning of his person is God himself. Those orthodox writers who formerly spoke concerning the Trinity applied this name only to the persons.²⁴

This means that considered as to their one godness, they share absolutely and simply the same eternal essence as *autotheos* or self-existent, underived deity. Hence the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each *autotheos* or *a se esse*, because they are the one true and Triune God.²⁵ Each of them possesses the whole essence of the Godhead, and yet this does not make them more than one God, nor remove their personal distinctions.²⁶ “Hence it is quite clear that in God’s essence reside three persons in whom one God is known.”²⁷

This obviously means that the essence of God is totally beyond human conceptions of it. His being may reverently be thought of as something like a being which is always personal and never impersonal, so that for God to exist is always for him to exist within personal relationship, which constitutes no division of his being.²⁸

This is in the line of Athanasius, who taught that if the Son is whole and complete God, then he too is the origin or principle of being along with the Father.²⁹ That is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit eternally coinhere in one another with “one Godhead and one Principle.”³⁰

IV. Two Twentieth-Century Trinitarian Theologians: Warfield and Torrance

Two great Trinitarian theologians of the twentieth century, B. B. Warfield and Thomas Torrance, saw that the major contribution of Calvin to the doctrine of the Trinity was in pointing out clearly the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit. To accomplish this, Calvin had to reject some of the subordinationist statements of such fathers as Gregory of Nyssa and Basil the Great, who appear to have followed Origen in some limited respects. In

²⁴ Ibid., 154 (1.13.25).

²⁵ Ibid., 1.13.20.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 140 (1.13.16).

²⁸ Ibid., 1.13.17.

²⁹ Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* 3.3–6 (NPNF² 4:395–97); *De Synodis* 49 (NPNF² 4:476).

³⁰ Athanasius, *Tomus ad Antiochenos* 5.5–11 (NPNF² 4:484–86); *Orationes contra Arianos* 2.33 (NPNF² 4:366).

doing so, Calvin followed some of the great church fathers already mentioned above. Warfield writes,

It was, therefore, a very great service to Christian theology which Calvin rendered when he firmly asserted for the second and third persons of the Trinity their *autotheotēs* ["self-existence" or "aseity"]. ... If we will glance over the history of the efforts of the Church to work out for itself an acceptable statement of the great mystery of the Trinity, we shall perceive that it is dominated from the beginning to the end by a single motive—to do full justice to the absolute deity of Christ. ... [Warfield then mentions the names of three of the greatest contributors to this effort: Tertullian, Augustine, and Calvin.] It is into this narrow circle of elect spirits that Calvin enters by the contribution he made to the right understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. That contribution is summed up in his clear, firm and unwavering assertion of the *autotheotēs* of the Son. By this assertion the *homoousiotēs* of the Nicene Fathers at last came to its full right, and became in its fullest sense the hinge of the doctrine.³¹

Similarly, Torrance shows that in a sense, Calvin overcame the lingering subordinationism of some (though *not* all—as we saw immediately above) of the Nicene fathers. According to Torrance,

Calvin's account of the manifold interpenetrating personal relations or subsistences within the one indivisible Godhead, [is] in many respects his most significant contribution to the doctrine of the Triunity of God. Here it becomes clear that his biblical approach has led him to offer a more unreserved account of the Deity of the Son and of the Spirit both in their distinguishing properties and in their consubstantial relations with God the Father than that offered by most of his theological predecessors.³²

V. Some Modern Evangelicals Have Seriously Neglected the Distinction between Essence and Person within the Godhead

With all due respect to some of my evangelical-conservative brethren, it seems to me that they have not taken adequate account of the all-important distinction between essence and person within the Godhead. Strangely, it is as though they have unwittingly sought to penetrate the essence of God in order to enforce the submission of women to men. But the implications of submission within the married order is rather based on the *economic* relations of the *persons* within the history of redemption, and I think that those who have sought to reformulate the doctrine of the Trinity would have done well to have kept that in mind.

³¹ B. B. Warfield, "The Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), 273, 284.

³² Torrance, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 54.

For instance, that fine evangelical theologian Grudem has—I think—tended to overlook this very important distinction in his formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. In his *Systematic Theology*, Grudem gives a generally helpful and sound exposition of the Holy Trinity, and the vast majority of his volume is to be highly commended. However, unlike the careful discernment made by Calvin between God's eternal essence and his historico-redemptive roles, Grudem seems to teach that the Son must be *eternally* subordinate to the Father, not just subordinate as the historic mediator.

Grudem holds that the Son is eternally subordinate in his person to the Father (and not just in his historical role). He writes, "For example, if the Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father in role, then the Father is not eternally 'Father' and the Son is not eternally 'Son.' This would mean that the Trinity has not eternally existed."³³

But surely Calvin and Augustine would answer that the absolute, eternal equality among all three persons of the blessed Trinity is given in the simplicity of the being of God, prior to historico-redemptive roles. We do not start with the redemptive roles of the three persons, and then read that back into the ineffably eternal existence of the very substance of God, and thereby claim that the Son has always been ontologically lower than the Father!

VI. Calvin Points Out a Better Way

Calvin's approach is clearer and more biblically sound in its Trinitarianism. He states, "It remains that the essence is wholly and perfectly common to Father and Son. If this is true, then there is indeed with respect to the essence no distinction of one from the other."³⁴ Warfield underlines why:

[Calvin's] conception involved, of course, a strongly emphasized distinction between the essence and the Personality. In essence the three Persons are numerically one: the whole essence belongs to each Person: the whole essence, of course, with all its properties, which are only its peculiarities as an essence and are inseparable from it just because they are not other substances but only qualities.³⁵

Calvin teaches that the substance (or essence) of God is absolutely and eternally shared and undivided; none of the three persons has either more or less of it:

³³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 251.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 151 (1.13.23).

³⁵ Warfield, "The Doctrine of the Trinity," 243.

For since the essence of God is simple and undivided, and he contains all in himself, without portion or derivation, but in integral perfection, the Son will be improperly, even foolishly, called his “stamp” [referring to Heb 1:3]. But because the Father, although distinct in his proper nature, expresses himself wholly in the Son, for a very good reason is it said that he has made his hypostasis visible to the latter. In close agreement with this are the words immediately following, that the Son is “the splendor of his glory” [Heb. 1:3]. Surely we infer from the apostle’s words that the very hypostasis that shines forth in the Son is in the Father. From this we also easily ascertain the Son’s hypostasis, which distinguishes him from the Father.

The same reasoning applies to the Holy Spirit: for we shall presently prove that he is God, and yet it is necessary for him to be thought of as other than the Father. Indeed, this is not a distinction of essence, which it is unlawful to make manifold.³⁶

We may summarize Calvin’s theologically sophisticated account of the relationship between the absolute equality of the one substance of the Holy Trinity (i.e., the ontological Trinity), and the ordered role of the three persons within the history of redemption (i.e., the economic Trinity) in these words:

Therefore, whenever the name of God is mentioned without particularization, there are designated no less the Son and the Spirit than the Father; but where the Son is joined to the Father, then the relation of the two enters in; and so we distinguish among the persons. But because the peculiar qualities in the persons carry an order within them, e.g., in the Father is the beginning and the source, so often as mention is made of the Father and the Son together, or the Spirit, the name of *God* is peculiarly applied to the Father. In this way, unity of essence is retained, and a reasoned order is kept, which yet takes nothing away from the deity of the Son and the Spirit.³⁷

VII. *Why Do Such Controversies Really Matter?*

It is my hope that many of those who feel it necessary to reformulate the doctrine of the Holy Trinity will reconsider the all-important distinction made long ago by Calvin (who himself was following his theological masters such as Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine) between the eternal simplicity and godhood of God and the roles he took on in the economy of redemption of his church. Why should they do so, and why does it really matter?

Carl Trueman put his finger on the crucial problem when he wrote,

Because, mark this, to have an eternally subordinate Son intrinsic to the Godhead creates the potential of three minds, wills and powers. What they have done is to take the passages referring to the economic Trinity and collapse them into the ontological Trinity.³⁸

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 122–23 (1.13.2).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 144 (1.13.20).

³⁸ Trueman, “Fahrenheit 381.”

But on the contrary, the true simplicity of God, the full and eternal equality of all three persons of the Holy Trinity, as is conveyed by the distinction between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity assures every believer of the identity between the knowledge of Jesus, the forgiveness of Jesus, and the love of Jesus and that of Almighty God.

1. *Knowledge of God*

One of the chief issues in the presentation of saving truth and of continuing pastoral care is the teaching that to know Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit is to know God himself! This is what Jesus said to Philip:

Philip saith unto him, Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father; and the Father in me? ... or else believe me for the very works' sake. (John 14:8–11 kjv)

This knowledge of Christ being finally equivalent to direct knowledge of God is a central characteristic of the great promise conveyed by the new covenant, as Jeremiah foretold:

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer 31:33–34)

When we know God, we abide in his presence through our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, to know Jesus is to know God the Father directly. To be indwelt by the Holy Spirit is to have God himself within us. Because of the truth of the absolute equality of the three persons of the Trinity within the undivided substance of God from all eternity, to be in touch with any one of the three is to be in touch with them all at one and the same time. We are not asked to seek to move upwards from some subordinated person (or persons) to the highest person; we *already* possess this saving, transforming knowledge of the Father, when we believe in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, who is one essence with Father and with Son. What a transforming assurance! This truth is safeguarded in the distinction between God's antecedent, eternal essence (or *ontological* Trinity) and his historical roles within the order of redemption (or *economical* Trinity).

2. *Forgiveness of God*

As Jeremiah has shown, to know God directly is to be confronted by our sin and guilt, and to have that sin and guilt purged away. The glory of the gospel is that the forgiveness by Jesus of people's sins is absolutely identical with the forgiveness of God the Father on his majestic throne!

How frequently the Gospel accounts show the horror of the scribes and Pharisees when they hear Jesus forgiving a sinner! But that is the joy of the gospel; it is the fulfillment of the new covenant! We see this when Jesus healed a man with palsy in Capernaum, who had been let down the roof into the room where Jesus was:

When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee. But there were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, Why doth this man thus speak these blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only? And immediately when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house. And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion. (Mark 2:5–12)

The Son of God who came to earth to save his people could forgive sins immediately, because he had always possessed the very essence of God as the eternal Son, thus possessing an authority that only one who exists in the substance of God could exercise. As he said in another context, “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:17–18).

One of my theology professors many decades ago had served as a chaplain in the Allied Armies during some of the worst fighting in northern Italy during World War II. Near the end of a particularly gruesome battle in the snowy mountains, when the Allies were getting the worst of it, this faithful evangelical British chaplain knelt down beside a young English soldier, who was bleeding to death with no medical help in sight. The dying soldier said to the chaplain, who grasped his hand, “Padre, I was taken to Sunday School when I was a small boy, and learned about Jesus. I know I cannot live much longer, and here is what I wonder. Is the God whom I must soon see like Jesus, or is he different?” The evangelical chaplain assured that dying young man that the God he would soon meet was precisely the same as Jesus and that he could trust in him now and forever for forgiveness. (I can add here

that this theology professor, who taught me in the 1960s, was firmly convinced of the full equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the undivided substance of the eternal Trinity. That faith informed both his pastoral practice and his theological teaching.)

3. *Love of God*

The love of Jesus to us, and the love of the Holy Spirit in us and to us, is identical with the love of God the Father Almighty. That is because there is no subordination of one to the other in the eternal essence or being of God. When you experience the love of the Son, it is the love of the Father; when you know the love of the Spirit, it is the love of the Father. Yes, in “the economy” there is a definite order (but not division) of persons, so that the Father is first, the Son is second, and the Holy Spirit is third, but in the eternal substance, it is the same knowledge, the same mercy, and the same love forevermore, for their being has always been one and the same!

God is love (1 John 4:8). The love of God sent the Son (John 3:16), and that love has “in the economy” been manifested in the Son (1 John 4:10), and in the Spirit (1 John 4:13). We are told that the Son, “having loved his own which were in the world, ... loved them unto the end” (John 13:1). The love of the Son was identical with that of the Father, for they have always been one in the undivided essence of God.

The love of the Spirit (cf. Rom 5:5, “because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who is given unto us”) is identical with the Father’s love, for they have always shared the very same eternal essence as the One Triune God. The love we know by the Spirit’s indwelling is not a lower (or subordinate) reality from the Father’s love; it is precisely the same, for they have always been, and will always be one in substance.

Paul says a very important thing about this in passing. In Romans 15:30, he makes a prayer request: “Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.” This clearly means that the Spirit loves us! The *Father* loves us, the *Son* loves us, and the *Spirit* loves us! That is because the Triune God in his substantial oneness is love.

Gregory of Nazianzus writes of the profound significance of the oneness of substance of the three holy persons:

No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendour of Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking of escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of

That One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the Rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light.³⁹

We do not know what the essence of God is, but love is there! It is not three different loves; it is one and the same love, but shared in and expressed out of the one eternal essence in a way appropriate to each of the three divine persons. We could go on to say that there is actually only one divine consciousness within the ontological Trinity, but it is shared in differently by the three Persons, in accordance with their own peculiar characteristics. Thus, there is within the eternal substance of God, finally one consciousness, one will, one love, and one fount of mercy; but partaken of in distinctly different ways, according to the person, who always retains certain peculiar characteristics incommunicable to the others (to use the classical phrase of *incommunicability*).⁴⁰ As Saint Augustine wrote, God has “one will, one power, and one majesty.”⁴¹

Saint Athanasius, in his *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit*, has phrased it beautifully:

The Holy and Blessed Triad is indivisible and one in itself. When mention is made of the Father, there is included also his Word and the Spirit who is in the Son. If the Son is named, the Father is in the Son, and the Spirit is not outside the Word. For there is from the Father one grace which is fulfilled through the Son in the Holy Spirit; and there is one divine nature, and one God “who is over all and through all and in all.”⁴²

For the profoundly evangelical reasons of true knowledge of God, true forgiveness by God, and true love of God in the experience of salvation, I for one, am unwilling to back down from the biblical teaching, so well

³⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.41 (NPNF² 7:375).

⁴⁰ The classical theological tradition, formulated so well in the twelfth century by Richard of Saint Victor in his *De Trinitate*, defined the meaning of “person” to be “... intellectualis naturae incommunicabilis existentia” (4.16, 22, 24; PL 196:940, 945–47)—that is, “a person is the incommunicable existence of intellectual nature.” That means that the personal distinctions of the Father are not conveyed away and lost by his relationship to the Son, nor are the personal distinctions of the Son exhausted in his relationship to the Father, and similarly, the personal distinctions of the Holy Spirit are not conveyed away and lost as he is (in the words of Augustine) “the bond of charity linking Father and Son” (cf. Augustine, *The Trinity* 15.37). This concept of incommunicability is employed by Calvin in his definition of “person” in *Institutes* 1.13.6.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 22.15 (NPNF¹ 7:150).

⁴² Athanasius, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, trans. C. R. B. Shapland (London: Epworth, 1951), 93–94 (1.14).

expressed by Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzus, Augustine, and Calvin, that all three persons of the blessed Trinity are ever one in essence, though three in personhood, as they bring this transforming experience of God, in their own appropriate ways, to all the elect for all time and all eternity.

I hope that others who for some years have been reformulating their doctrine of the Trinity—and in so doing have been erasing important distinctions between God's eternal substance and his roles in the economy—will take a fresh look at Calvin and Augustine, with whom they believe they stand in some kind of continuity. Much good could come from it for those who follow their teaching!