

Critical Comments on the Trinity

By: Dan Mages

Alongside Karl Barth, I think we must choose and use terms carefully in regards to this doctrine that filled with theological sophistication and words that are not used with their usual import. Karl Barth did not like the word person, and Augustine said he used it just so that he could say something instead of nothing. Barth did not want to communicate that God was three selves, three individuals, or three separate entities. He wanted to shy away from the conception of a divine family, which could easily be seen as tri-theistic. On the other hand, he has to deal with the clear and unambiguous distinction between God and Jesus. Jesus seeks to do God's will, speak God's words, accomplish God's mission. Jesus prays to God, hears God's voice, and felt abandoned by God while hanging on the cross. With this in mind, it would seem legitimate to speak of two separate persons, two individuals, two egos, two minds and two wills. Jesus plainly said, not my will, your will be done. Barth's problem at this point is that he is convinced that Jesus is God. If Jesus is God, and he is a separate person from his Father, then there would inevitably be two God's. Wanting to escape this, Barth chooses to say that God was eternally three modes of being. Although he evades the charge of tri-theism at this point, he then can be charged with modalism. Barth's defense against this accusation is that in modalism, God morphs into different modes of being, whereas he believes God eternally existed in three modes of being. I'm wondering at this point if Barth would have said that God has one mind or two, one will or two, if God is one person or more.

Some say that God is one "what" in three "who's". If this is the case, do the monotheistic affirmations in Scripture mean that God is one substance, one essence, one thing, one abstract noun? Is God an abstract noun? I find it more plausible that Scripture is saying that only Yahweh is God. If Yahweh is a person, the everlasting God, to say that there is another person who is also God, would certainly seem to make two God's. Simple math will demonstrate that one plus one is two. The 11,000 plus singular personal pronouns used for God, is grammatically, an overwhelming testimony that God is one person, one entity.

I appreciate James Dunn's effort to demonstrate that passages traditionally used to teach a personal, pre-existent, non-human Jesus were not meant to be understood in this manner. Rather, he suggests

that they are teaching that Jesus is the embodiment of God's wisdom (Colossians 1, Hebrews 1). What was once ascribed to wisdom in various Judaic texts was being reapplied to the Messiah by his followers. In Dunn's mind, this does not mean that Jesus was the word/wisdom as in a 1:1 relationship, but that God's wisdom became fully manifested in the human being, Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14). In this manner, whatever was ascribed to wisdom should all the more be ascribed to Jesus since his is the clearest and greatest reflection of God's wisdom ever revealed. In Dunn's *Christology in the Making*, he compares this to saying President Bush went to Yale. This statement does not mean that George Bush was the President of the United States when he went to Yale. In like manner, Jesus was not Jesus of Nazareth, the person, at the creation of the world, but the word/wisdom of God. It can now be said that all things were created through Jesus, but this is identifying the human Jesus with what was the word/wisdom of Almighty God.

Dr. Brown has pointed out a number of times in class that John 1:1 does not say in the beginning was Jesus, in fact, he says it is wrong to read it as if it said anything along those lines. He is quick to point out that it is the "word" that was in the beginning. God's word is an extension of God just as our word is an extension of ourselves. Just as God revealed himself through the creative word in the beginning, so God's greatest revelation of God is that same creative word become flesh.

If Jesus is understood, not as God the Son, but the Son of God, much Trinitarian confusion can be laid to rest. This directly follows the insight of Dr. Brown, who in his article "Trinity and Incarnation" in *Ex Auditu* (1991) states, "Indeed, to be a 'Son of God' one has to be a being who is *not* God." Tri-theistic charges are impossible, and modalism is avoided all together. The one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob can be conceived as the one God and Father of Jesus. With this conception, Paul's unitary monotheistic creeds begin coming to life. "For there is *one* God and one mediator between God and man, the *man* Messiah Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5 Emphasis mine). "There is one body and one spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Even Jesus' recitation of the *Shema* in Mark's gospel becomes all the more meaningful (12:29-33).