

# THE STRAIGHT CUT

## Some Biblical Trinitarian Conundrums

Systematic theology teaches us to keep things in order, not to confuse what we know should be distinguished. And it would work so well if the Bible didn't throw an occasional wrench in the works. While theology attempts to give order to the divine truth, the Bible simply relates it, seemingly without the character of system that we naturally respect and readily impose. In all honesty, it is easy to selectively highlight some amount of biblical data and thus selectively ignore other data to make theology work. Evidence the biblical record concerning the Trinity and the theology that has developed over the centuries. The formulae of theology say: "One in essence; three in hypostasis or person" and "The three are distinct but not separate." But the simple truth is that essence, hypostasis, person, distinction, separation, etc., are not actual biblical predications but derivative explanations that seem to make sense of the biblical predications. Without the explanations, the predications would perhaps contradict—or so we say.

### Some Conundrums

Consider the following verses:

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul"; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45).

And the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Cor. 3:17).

Many of us will recognize that these verses require more than the normal amount of explication if they are to be understood properly. If taken at face value, they seem to go against the grain of traditional understanding concerning the distinctions in the Trinity, and hence, systematic theology comes to the fore to explain how the biblical predications should be properly understood. Let us consider what these verses seem to say and what theologians have been trained to understand. First, Isaiah 9:6 has been understood for centuries as a clear verse of prophecy concerning the coming of the Christ through the incarnation. The subject

of the verse is the Lord Jesus, at least in most Christian minds. Theology, based on John 1:14, teaches us that the second of the Trinity became flesh; thus, this verse should be referring to the Son of God. Immediately, however, we are struck by the mention of Eternal Father. Casually, we might think that this is God the Father, but theology comes in to help us interpret in a way that respects the usual understanding of the Trinity. The Father here, we are told, is not to be understood as the first person of the Trinity, for that would confuse the distinction among the persons of the Godhead. Instead, we should see this as a predication concerning the Son, that the Son is in some sense a Father. How He is a Father invites a multitude of interpretations, which we need not consider here. What is important is that according to the conventional wisdom of theology the term *Eternal Father* is to be taken not as referring to the Father in the Godhead but as a predication assigned to the Son directly. A similar problem exists in 1 Corinthians 15:45. *The last Adam* clearly refers to Christ Jesus, the second of the Trinity become man. He is said to have become [a] life-giving Spirit. Again, at first glance we might see the third of the Trinity, God the Spirit, as the referent here. But traditional theology warns against it, bidding us to keep the Son and the Spirit distinct. Thus, we should seek another interpretation whereby we predicate the notion of spirit to the Son. Most interpreters in following this line take the *life-giving spirit* to mean Christ's post-resurrectional state: Formerly, He was material; now He is spirit, only not merely spirit, but life-giving spirit. Finally, in 2 Corinthians 3:17 the identification of the Son with the Spirit, which seems to be the natural way to understand this verse, is precluded by the dictates of theology, which require us to maintain the distinctions among the three. The situation in 2 Corinthians 3:17, however, is not so easily explained because the terms *Lord* and *Spirit* in this verse more naturally refer to God Himself. Typically, expositors have said that *Lord* refers to Yahweh of the Old Testament and thus say that Paul here is paralleling Yahweh in the giving of the law in the Old Testament to the Spirit in the unveiling of truth in the New Testament.

There is a common interpretive device in operation in the traditional handling of these three verses. In each case, it appears that the predication of the verse confuses the hypostases of the Trinity. In other words, if we disregard what theology mandates, we read in these verses, in reduced

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form, that: 1) the Son is called the Father, 2) the Son became the Spirit, and 3) the Son is the Spirit. In order to avoid the confusion of the hypostases, one side of the predication is stripped of its hypostatic meaning and given a more generalized one. In Isaiah 9:6, then, we should take *Father* not as a reference to the Father's hypostasis in the Trinity but as a metaphorical role of the Son; in 1 Corinthians 15:45 we should understand *Spirit* not as the hypostatic Spirit of the Godhead but as spiritual essence, yet essence that gives life; and in 2 Corinthians 3:17, where *Spirit* can only with difficulty be denied its hypostatic meaning, we are forced to understand that the subject *Lord* is not a hypostatic reference to the Son but a general reference to the Lordship of God.

### Some Interpretive Problems

These interpretations certainly respect our notions concerning the distinction among the three of the Trinity. But it seems that these notions have shaped our interpretations, that we have come around to interpret as we do because first we have understood as we do. We do not fault this approach, for as much as we might protest against *a priori* notions affecting Bible interpretation, it is impossible to completely ignore theology in interpreting particular texts. Nor do we fault the particular trinitarian notions that motivate such interpretations; indeed, the three are eternally distinct. The question is, however, are the notions necessary for a proper interpretation of these difficult verses, or can we interpret without them as long as we do not contradict the theological notions that we possess? In other words, can these difficult verses be taken at face value without defying the orthodox understanding of the Trinity? We feel that the answer is yes, and further, that to do otherwise has serious undesirable effects.

Opting for the general meanings of the terms *Father*, *Spirit*, and *Lord*, instead of admitting specific references to the hypostases of the Trinity, invites some additional meanings into our conception of the Trinity. We should consider what meanings we invite into these verses by dismissing specific references to the hypostases of the Trinity and determine if we are bettering our understanding of the verses or actually worsening it. In Isaiah 9:6 the common view is that *Eternal Father* is not a reference to God the Father but to Christ the Son in the role of a father (perhaps to Israel).

But if Christ is a father in any sense of the word, He must have a real basis to be a father. We must be able to find in Him some sense in which He can be understood as a father. Is He a father in the sense of being the source, as God the Father is a Father in the eternal Godhead? If not, in what sense then is He a father? Is He a father in the sense of being one who oversees and cares for His people, as a father would his children (cf. Keil and Delitzsch, ad loc.)? If so, He is not really a father but only one metaphorically. Does that not then invite us to take the other predicates metaphorically, to say that He is only metaphorically "the Mighty God," for example? We certainly cannot. However we come to it, short of metaphorizing away the meaning in the text completely, we would be forced to admit that Christ is a genuine father in some sense of the term. But if He has a real basis to be a father, then He is not merely the Son but a father as well, and He soon is indistinguishable from the Father within the eternal Trinity. Hence, in avoiding one theological pitfall, we fall into another. By pointing the reference of *Father* away from God the Father, we inadvertently assign fatherhood to the Son and ruin the

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distinction we are attempting to maintain. In fact, ascribing fatherhood to the Son is more damaging to the eternal distinctions than merely calling the Son the Father, as Isaiah tells us to do.

In 1 Corinthians 15:45 *life-giving spirit* is generally said to refer to Christ's post-resurrectional state, but there is some problem with this interpretation in that we are saying that in some sense Christ is a spirit that gives life. The same problem we saw in Isaiah 9:6 appears here again. If Christ is in some sense a life-giving spirit, how is He to be distinguished from the third of the Trinity, who also is said to give life (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6)? There are a number of verses that tell us that the Son gives life to man (e.g., John 5:21; 6:27; 17:2); thus, the issue is not the Son's function of giving life but seeing Him as a spirit in that function. Again, by claiming that the Son is a life-giving

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spirit, without recourse to the third hypostasis of the Trinity, we invite attribution to the Son that damages the eternal distinctions among the Three. Are we to understand that there are two life-giving Spirits?

The problem associated with 2 Corinthians 3:17 is less theological than exegetical. At issue is the referent of *Lord*. Because of theological considerations, the majority of exegetes understand the term as referring to either Yahweh of the Old Testament or God in general. But the context is more specific than this. Paul's point here is that the veil that existed over the hearts of the children of Israel is now being done away with in Christ. He says as much in verse 14. It is not God as He manifested Himself to the Old Testament saints who takes away the veil, but God as He manifests Himself in the New Testament age, as Christ. In verse 16 Paul declares that whenever the heart turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Surely this Lord must be the Christ by whom the veil is being done away with. To break the chain of noun references here and refer *Lord* in verses 16 and 17 to anything other than *Christ* is to break the natural arrangement in the language. Exegesis never permits such an unnatural use of the text.

### A Safer Alternative

In trying to avoid confusing the distinctions among the three of the Trinity, it appears that other less conspicuous but equally serious problems are created. We may superficially satisfy our theological requirements, but without too much thought we find that we offend the same sensibilities that motivated us in the first place, only now not so obviously. In view of this, the safer alternative is to let the text say what it seems to be saying and to try to make sense of the predications as they stand. Actually, in doing so we do not endanger our understanding of the Divine Trinity by confusing the distinction among the three; rather, we enrich it by seeing more clearly the great difference between distinction, which is the truth, and separation, which is not.

Perhaps the difficulty some interpreters have with these biblical trinitarian conundrums stems from a lack of appreciation for the economical aspect of the Trinity and an

overemphasis on the essential Trinity. If one views God in His eternal existence, the greater focus will be more on His being than on His doing, and the distinctions among the three are very acute and well-defined. But when one turns to consider the economy of God, with His emanation in His Trinity and His action to fully save man, the distinctions become less defined. The reason for this is very simple: In His doing the Trinity is unitary, not triple. Thus, none of the three ever acts independently of the other two. Whatever one does, the other two also do with Him. For example, in the incarnation the three of the Trinity act, not just the Son, as we might be tempted to think. The angel that appeared to Mary foretold the triune action of God in the incarnation: "The angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore also the holy thing which is born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Christ the Son was conceived of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20), yet God is His Father. In His ministry on the earth, the Lord Jesus declared that He did what the Father

was doing. Perhaps the clearest of His declarations are in John 5:17 and 14:10: "My Father is working until now, and I also am working"; and "The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works" (cf. also 10:38 and 14:11). The three of the Trinity are involved in the resurrection of Christ as well, as Paul says in his epistle to the Romans: "If the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you" (Rom. 8:11). Here we have the Father, the Son, and the Spirit active in the one endeavor of raising Christ from the dead. A careful examination of the Scriptures will indicate in instance after instance that the three of the trinity, while distinct in their respective hypostases, operate as one in their actions. Thus, whatever one of the Trinity does must be understood as being done by the other two as well. There is never an action of one of the Trinity that is independent of the other two. While the personal distinctions among the three are maintained, any operation of the Trinity is one operation, and hence when one acts, the other two are identified with the one. Because of this, particularly in the economy of God the distinctions among the three are less acutely maintained in the biblical record.

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This is the key to resolving these biblical trinitarian conundrums. These three verses are all very economic verses. The Son's being given to us, related in Isaiah 9:6, is the initiation of God's saving economy, His incarnation. In His becoming man, the Son was not independent of the Father and the Spirit; rather, His coming was the Father's coming as well. For this reason Christ told the disciples: "He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how is it that you say, Show us the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works." (John 14:9-10). Certainly the Father is not identical to the Son and the Son is not identical to the Father, but the three of the Trinity are never separate from each other. Thus, the Son given to us not only is the Mighty God, but also can be called the Eternal Father, because the Father is in Him and with Him at all times. In His eternal identity God is distinctly three, but in His economic and salvific action He works as one, and the Son given can be called the Father, who works in His works.

In 1 Corinthians 15:45 another step in the economy of God's salvation is involved, and the economic Trinity is strongly referred to. The death of Christ dealt with all our sins and terminated the old creation with all its negative elements. But it is through the resurrection of Christ that the new creation is germinated and the divine element of God—the divine life and nature—is applied to the believers. In this sense, Christ is said to be the life-giver, but He gives life through the life-giving Spirit. In Paul's simple language, Christ is said to have become the life-giving Spirit, for it is in the life-giving Spirit that Christ personally comes to the believers to apply the virtue of His resurrection. In this sense, Christ has indeed become the life-giving Spirit. He does not cease to be the second of the Trinity, but in that the third of the Trinity now applies the person and accomplishments of the second, the second, from this economic perspective, has become the third. Elsewhere in the writings of the apostles this close identity of the Son with the Spirit is maintained. On three occasions Paul refers to the Spirit as the Spirit of the second. In Romans 8:9 he says that the Spirit who confirms that we are of God is "the Spirit of Christ." In Galatians 4:6 he tells us that our sonship is effected and reinforced by "the Spirit of His Son" in our hearts. In Philippians 1:19 he declares his trust in the full effectiveness of our salvation through "the Spirit of Jesus Christ." In Acts too the Son is identified with the Spirit at least once when Luke describes "the Spirit of Jesus" forbidding Paul and his company from

traveling from Mysia into Bithynia for the gospel (16:7). In all these cases, the Spirit is not serving merely as a representative of the Son but as the "bearer and communicator" (to quote Andrew Murray) of the Son in His virtue and effectiveness. All that the Son has and is in resurrection is made available to the believers as the Spirit. Certainly the Son is distinct from the Spirit, but the Son comes in the Spirit and the Spirit communicates the Son; thus, the Son becomes the Spirit in applying Himself to the believers for their enjoyment of and participation in God.

The same can be said of Paul's declaration in 2 Corinthians 3:17. There is really no need to avoid referring the term *Lord* to the person of Christ, spoken of in verse 14. The Lord in verse 17 is the Christ spoken of in verse 14, and because the Spirit transforms the believers with the element of the resurrected and glorified Christ, Paul declares that "the Lord is the Spirit." The practicality of Christ, in-

sofar as He is the source of the glory in the new covenant by which and unto which we are being transformed, is the Spirit. Paul continues this identification of the Son with the Spirit in verse 18, where He particularly speaks of our being transformed into the same glorious image of Christ by and from the Lord Spirit. This compound title *Lord Spirit* is yet another instance of showing the close iden-

tity of the Son and the Spirit in the application of Christ to the believers for their full salvation.

The Bible is not haphazardly imprecise in its presentation of the persons of God. While theology comes behind the text of the Scriptures to arrange the matters of divine truth in order to better organize the content, we should never take such arrangements as superior to the presentation found in the biblical record. The way the persons of God are set before us in the Bible gives us the safest way to understand Him, respecting both His plurality and His unity, how He is distinct in His persons and how He is unitary in His actions. The predications of the Bible give us the patterns of speaking about Him and serve as the standards for our own descriptions of Him. We cannot go beyond what the Scriptures say about Him, and we need not be timid about speaking of Him as the Bible does. Our theologies must submit to the full domain of biblical predication and not become filters which ultimately rob us of the rich biblical expressions that best relate what the Triune God is to us.

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by Kerry S. Robichaux