

God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity

I recall an occasion in 1994 when I was at a conference in Toronto, Canada. There was a crowd of perhaps three thousand people gathered and a part of the meetings that were held was given over to corporate worship. That meant singing. On those occasions, though, it was different to the usual ‘stand up and sing for three quarters of an hour’ type of thing that is so common nowadays. There may have been some of that approach among the crowd that was there then, but the same may also be said of most gatherings of Christians right through history, where ‘worship’ is assumed to be no more than what we do. However, on this particular night, the congregation of people was singing the famous hymn, ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty’,¹ and when they reached the final verse:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,
All Thy works shall praise Thy name in earth and sky and sea;
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity,

most of the people gathered burst into applause. It was not just applause, either, but a genuine expression of participation in the worship which the hymn expressed. I have no idea, actually, whether some of the crowd had seen that happen before and so copied it, or whatever. All I know is that what happened that night was, to my mind, spontaneous and thoroughly appropriate.

Another phrase comes to my mind. It is from what is known as ‘The Athanasian Creed’:

WHOSOEVER will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith. Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.
And the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance.

The phrase is ‘we worship one God in Trinity’. Once again, it would be naïve just to take the word ‘worship’ and then to assume that mention of ‘Trinity’ will be naturally associated with it. Quite the opposite is usually the case. The remainder of the Creed reads more like a legal document, with every ‘i’ dotted and ‘t’ crossed. But, nonetheless, the God whom we worship is Trinity.

Given the period in which the Creed was formulated,² the seriousness of the second clause should not be minimised either. This is what the ‘Catholick’³ Faith involves. This what Christians believe, over against those who, either by their paganism or their heresy, stand outside the church. That is why the creed warns that anyone who does not hold to this faith will perish. It is not that we are saved by

¹ Reginald Heber (1783–1826).

² The Athanasian Creed was written ‘either in the latter half of the fourth or [in] the fifth century, but not later than the sixth’ (381–428 AD); see Samuel J. Mikolaski, ‘Athanasian Creed’ in J. D. Douglas (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1974, 1978, p. 81.

³ For a discussion of the ‘catholicity’ of the church, see Ian Pennicook, *The Church of the Living God*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, pp. 67–86

knowledge but that true salvation brings us into the church and this is what the church believes.

Two things should be noted: the first is that from early in the church's life the Trinity has been a defining doctrine, or dogma; and the second is that when the church is being the church, it worships. It worships one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity. That does not mean it worships the doctrine, which can be a sad feature of so many groups, but that the God who is Trinity and Unity is the God we worship. Incapacity to understand the dogma does not exclude a person from salvation and worship. The vast amount of written 'dogmatics', the study and exposition of the dogma, shows that while the dogma is accepted the ability to explain it simply is lacking. The Athanasian Creed is not directed against those who do not understand the Trinity but against those who deliberately reject the Trinity.

But first there is worship. Worship is distinct from mere understanding. So often people will speak as if their 'faith' is assent to a set of propositions but such is not the case. Faith is primarily worship, in the sense that we have been confronted, not so much by facts about God but by God himself, and that confrontation leaves us in worshipping awe and submission. The conjunction of worship and faith with propositions comes as we hear God speak to us and we believe what he says, but without worship, faith in the utterance of God is reduced to agreeing with certain statements, placing us on a lower level than demons (James 2:19).

The worship of which we are speaking is a matter of great significance to us as human beings. Before we can examine the range of worship in life, we must see that fundamentally we are created to worship and that means that we are created to give 'due worth to God, and due honour to other persons and creatures, including one's self'.⁴ Saying this does not mean that we come to worship from within our own resources. We do not come to God: even in creation he comes to us (Gen. 2:7; 3:8). In that sense, God is not discoverable within creation; he reveals himself by means of it (Rom. 1:19–20). And neither do *we* discover God through redemption: 'the *Father* seeks such . . . to worship him' (John 4:23; see also Gal. 4:9).

A human being is a creature to whom God has come, indeed, to whom God has given himself, his own breath, his spirit, his presence, in order that the creature may live in intimate relationship, participating in the divine nature and always joyfully and wondrously acknowledging the worth of the giver. In that context, a person will see others as having the same great dignity as that given to him. His relationships will, therefore, be consistent with that. 'With my body I worship you', said in the marriage service, does not contradict the commandments of God, rather it expresses our worship of God alone. This is part of the great mystery, yet so simple.

Regeneration is not 'other than' creation; it is the fulfilling of the whole purpose of creation. God will have his worshipping community, and all hindrances to that will be treated as they are, ugly vile distortions of the truth which must be removed through a work of atonement, and the spirit, the Holy Spirit, the personal presence, once again given as the energising power in the new creation (see John 1:29, 33 and the numerous statements linking the action of the atonement and the gift of the Holy Spirit).

The atonement is always with a view to worship. This is seen on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), where the removal of the guilt of the people is followed by the offering of sin offerings, which, while momentous in their import, were nonetheless

⁴ Geoffrey Bingham, *The Way and Wonder of Worship*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1990, p. 5.

part of the regular worship which was given to Israel. Similarly, and even more momentous, is the statement of Hebrews 9:14, that:

... the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purif[ies] our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

The word 'serve' in most translations and 'worship' as in the NRSV, translates the verb *latreuein* which means 'to serve' in the context of worship.⁵ It is not the word we associate with servants and slaves. The worship being described is not that of a potentate who demands the cringing submission of his subjects. It is the worship of the Father by his ransomed children, through the Spirit-enabled work of the eternal Son.

Without this worship there is no knowledge of God. Even discussions concerning the nature of God, when carried on without worship becomes fruitless speculation. Jesus simply observed that when he spoke of the Father he did so out of full intimacy with the Father (John 8:54–55).

It may sound contradictory, but part of the problem is that there *is* a knowledge of God, but when it is not received with the moral seriousness engendered by the atonement, then it becomes a torment. The key to our understanding of this is Romans 1:18ff.:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse;²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools;²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves,²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,²⁷ and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done (Rom. 1:18–28).

The principle of evil is that of suppressing the truth, in particular the truth of God himself, though this passage shows that where the truth of God is suppressed the truth of the created image of God expressed in oneself and in others is also hideously affected. Men and women insist on, and persist in, un-knowing what they know and they do this by acts which deny the revelation which God has given. But Paul's point is that 'they knew God but did not honor him as God or give thanks to him'. All flows from the choice not 'to acknowledge God' (v. 28), lit. not 'to have God in knowledge', and that means that the worship of which we are speaking is not offered.

That there is such a thing as natural revelation⁶ cannot be doubted, though it is not a revelation which is somehow independent of God. Rather, God himself shows us

⁵ Compare the quaint title of our gatherings as 'worship *services*'.

⁶ A natural *theology*, however, will always be a debased theology because the revelation is deliberately distorted by men and women. The natural revelation is only ever a source of condemnation without the revelation of the righteousness of God which comes through the proclamation of the gospel.

himself, his eternal power and divine nature. Though these elements are invisible they are understood and seen through the things which God has made. God's whole being as God is declared. The psalmist had said that the heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1) and that the firmament proclaims *his* handiwork. What is more, this proclamation continues day and night. He then proceeded to link this with God's law, his decrees and precepts etc., which are sweet to those who fear the Lord. Psalm 97:6 expands this by noting that 'The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory'. In that psalm, the contrast is then made between those who worship images and with Zion which hears the proclamation and is glad. For Zion the only valid response is to rejoice in the LORD and give thanks (v. 12).

This failure to give thanks is:

not simply an oversight or an act of thoughtless petulance. They actually claimed they were being wise in thus turning their back on God, that it was an act of sophistication and sign of high intelligence to declare their independence from God, as though the refusal to acknowledge God as god in their daily living made them something more than creature.⁷

However, the result is not sophistication; they became fools! They became futile in thinking, and darkened in their senseless minds (cf. Titus 1:15). The evidence of this is the expression of the debased mind described in the rest of Romans 1. And not only that, but we should understand that the ongoing revelation of God means that humanity lives in the torment of denial. There can be no rest for the wicked because God is constantly present to them and will permit them none. It is not that men and women cannot find God, but rather that they dare not acknowledge him. Hence Romans 3:11: 'there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God' (cf. Ps. 14:1–3)! So they must say, 'There is no God!' (Ps. 14:1), not necessarily as if they were atheists but as those who could not tolerate the eternal God, who has revealed and who continues to reveal himself, being active and personal to them.

None of this is to suggest that human beings do not have great capacities, intellectually or otherwise. What it does say is that, unaided, men and women cannot know God. Unless there is a transformation by grace all our knowledge about God will be other than that for which we were created. Discussion of God as Trinity will be fruitless, until he is known in the intimacy of worship. And it is this which we encounter in the scriptures. It is notable that there is no discussion of God as Trinity in the New Testament. Yet the testimony of the New Testament is overwhelming that the God who reveals himself to us in Christ cannot be simply described in the same monotheistic terms as in Islam or Judaism.

The intimacy of worship is far more than some formal ecclesiastical context. It is the intimacy restored in redemption and in which we must live. There is nothing more threatening than God in his fulness speaking to a human being who will not live in the intimacy of holiness and love. This means us living in 'moral seriousness', receiving the revelation of the glory of God, not only in creation but now more particularly in the incarnate Son, and responding with all our being. It means active holiness of life, participating in the holiness of the Holy Father, Holy Son and Holy Spirit.

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⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8 (WBC 38a)*, Word, Dallas, 1988, pp. 71f.