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The Calvinist Doctrine of the Trinity

Roger Beckwith

Although the Lutheran and Anglican Reformers were content to re-state in traditional terms the doctrine of the Trinity, as worked out from the Scriptures by the early Fathers, and to give their emphatic endorsement to the ancient Creeds, this is less true of John Calvin. For the Anglican Reformers, Articles I–V and VIII of the ‘Thirty-nine Articles’, and the presence of the three Creeds in the services of the *Book of Common Prayer*, provide good evidence of their attitude, but the attitude of Calvin was different. Calvin had, of course, a very original theological mind, and was determined to think everything through afresh in the light of Scripture; and the profound orthodoxy of his theology was due to the devoted faithfulness which he showed to Scripture. Nevertheless, his independence of mind was bound to result in some unusual features in his theology, as it undoubtedly did, and one of the subjects on which his teaching was distinctive was the Holy Trinity.

Calvin’s basic exposition of this subject is in his *Institutes*, Book 1, Chapter 13, Sections 16–20. He teaches here that each of the three Persons is the one God, and that each, though distinct, exists in each of the others. He recognises that their relationships to each other differ, the Son being from the Father only, but the Spirit from the Father and the Son (the traditional Augustinian teaching); however, he seems not content to distinguish them by their relationships, namely, fatherhood, sonship and procession (as Augustine and the Creeds do), but maintains that these relationships are based upon something distinctive about the Persons themselves. Clearly, there *is* something distinctive about the Persons themselves, or there would be no Trinity; and to discover what this something is, one might expect him to expound their distinct names of Father, Son and Spirit, which presumably express their essential nature as well as their relationships to one another. Instead, he directs attention to their distinctive roles in the activities of God, the Father as originator, the Son as wise director and the Spirit as powerful executor, which could be regarded as just other sorts of relationships, not characteristics of the Persons themselves. Though expressing caution, he believes that these distinctive roles are taught in Scripture. He further maintains that each of the three Persons is God in himself, and only in relation to the other Persons can the Son or the Spirit be said to take his

being from another. He quotes Augustine on this point, but appears to be giving his language a new sense, which he expresses again when refuting heretics (Section 25) as follows: ‘we say then that the Godhead is absolutely from itself. And hence also we hold that the Son, regarded as God and without reference to Person, is from himself; though we also say that, regarded as Son, he is from the Father’.

What Calvin here expresses in a guarded fashion, he expressed much more boldly in his controversy with Peter Caroli, in which he declined to affirm (though without denying them) the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, and even mocked the characteristic Nicene language – ‘God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God’. He evidently regarded this as derogatory to the Son, because treating his divinity as derived (though eternally derived) from the Father.

Merits of Calvin’s teaching

Whatever questions it raises, Calvin’s teaching on the Trinity has attracted sincere admirers. B.B. Warfield’s elaborate exposition of it in his essay ‘Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity’¹ is an example. Warfield highlights, as particularly important, Calvin’s stress on the equality of the three Persons, as being each of them God (though this is not an original emphasis, as it is also explicit in the Athanasian Creed, where we are taught that ‘in this Trinity none is afore or after other, none is greater or less than another, but the whole three Persons are co-eternal together and coequal’). Gerald Bray, in his instructive book² entitles the chapter on Calvin, ‘The Primacy of the Persons in God’, and sees in his theology the climax of the search for logical consistency and scriptural faithfulness in expounding trinitarian doctrine. If one gives primacy to the one divine essence, and reinterprets the divine Persons in philosophical terms, as tended to happen in the Middle Ages, one’s concept of God becomes philosophical rather than devotional. By giving primacy to the three Persons, as Calvin did, and without forgetting their divine unity, one can focus attention and worship, in personal terms, on God as revealed in each of the Persons, co-operating in our salvation. The indwelling Spirit enables Christians to understand this, and to recognise that the relations between the Persons, being personal, are voluntary and not the results of natural causation.

1 Reprinted in his volume *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956).

2 G.L. Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1993).

Doubts about Calvin's teaching

Calvin's attempt to identify the distinctive roles of the three Persons in the activities of God must be reckoned speculative. Calvin thinks it is scriptural, which perhaps on balance it is; but how would he accommodate 1 Corinthians 1:24 and 2 Corinthians 12:9 which seem to attribute the supposed role of the Spirit to the Son; or Acts 6:3 and Ephesians 1:17, which seem to attribute the supposed role of the Son to the Spirit? When he expounds these verses in his commentaries, he sees no difficulty in them; and it is of course true that the activities of the individual Persons of the Trinity are not exclusive of the other Persons, and that the verses relate primarily to the work of the divine Persons in the world, not to their eternal relationships. Nevertheless, the work of the divine Persons in the world is consistent with their eternal relationships, and the willingness of the apostles to speak in these ways is bound to cast some degree of doubt on Calvin's proposal. So perhaps the Creeds are being more faithful to Scripture in declining to distinguish the Persons except by their personal relationships as Father, Son and Spirit.

Calvin's anxiety about phrases like 'God from God' is probably best explained from his contemporary context. He was in controversy with heretics who made the Son inferior to the Father, but the phrase 'God from God' does not do this, unless misinterpreted. On the contrary, it emphasises that the Son is '*God* from God'. Again, Calvin was heir to a mediaeval tradition which spoke of the Son as from the Father and of the Spirit as from the Father and the Son, as if these relationships were on a par and could be thought of in terms of natural causation. However, when properly understood, such language speaks of *different* relationships, not the same, and relationships of a *personal* kind. The Son is from the Father as a Person begotten by a Person, on the analogy of a human father and son; and the Spirit is equally personal, being daringly compared by Paul to the human spirit dwelling within a man (1 Cor. 2:10f.), and being symbolised, when he proceeds from Christ, by human breath (John 20:22). This is perhaps as near as we can get to a conception of the *eternal* procession of the Spirit, and if so it is a personal activity.

In speaking of 'the Son, regarded as God, and without reference to Person', Calvin is making a difficult abstraction, which disguises the fact that the Son

is a *divine* Person. He is one of the three Persons in the Godhead, and to think of him as God but not as Son is as unreal as it is to think of him as Son but not as God. Calvin seems unable to bear the thought that the Son derives his divine being from the Father, and yet, understood as an eternal and personal relationship, it is what the New Testament appears to teach, in harmony with the Creeds. One can call this, if one wishes, subordinationism, but it is a subordinationism without any of the degrading connotations which Arians and Unitarians attached to the idea. The only real alternative to it is to do the unthinkable, and to make the three Persons independent of one another, as three gods not one.

Professor Helm's lecture

In a lecture entitled 'Cautious Trinitarianism', Professor Paul Helm³ speaking as a Calvinist, discussed Calvin's teaching and then proposed an alternative, which he thought would carry Calvin's theological method further. Though modestly renouncing any claim to be a historian of dogma or a systematic theologian (he is, of course, a professor of philosophy), he pointed out that the biblical basis for the credal doctrines of the eternal begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit is somewhat limited, though he admitted that the terms 'Father' and 'Son' are much more common. He then proposed that the ideas of begetting and procession really belong to the order of redemption, not to the eternal relations of the Trinity, and that begetting should be understood as 'a metaphor' for the incarnation. 'Father' and 'Son' should likewise be understood as expressing a relationship between the *incarnate* Christ and his heavenly Father, not an eternal relationship. The implication seemed to be that procession should likewise be understood as a metaphor for the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

If the lecturer is right, we know nothing about the eternal relationships between the three Persons (a subject on which, not surprisingly, he discouraged speculation) but only about their activities in the world. This prompts the question, how then do we know that there *are* any eternal relationships between them; indeed, how do we know that there are three Persons, and not just a threefold activity in the world of the one God? How can we avoid falling into Sabellianism (the belief that God is eternally one but

3 Given on February 12, 2001, at London Theological Seminary, under the auspices of the John Owen Centre for Theological Study.

not eternally three), and its theory of a merely economic Trinity? Or need we *try* to avoid doing this?

So, if the error into which Calvin's theology of the Trinity risked falling was Tritheism, the error into which Professor Helm's theology of the Trinity runs much greater risk of falling is the opposite one of Sabellianism.

His proposal is, indeed, so radical that it seems doubtful whether it would be proper to describe it as in any sense a variation on the theology of Calvin (whose characteristic teaching on this matter was indeed censured by the lecturer as 'an obscure and unilluminating doctrine'). An argument in favour of the lecturer's proposal might be the fact that many commentators on John 15:26, from which the language of 'procession' comes, think that the verse refers to the coming of the Spirit to the church, not to his eternal activity. But if the very name of the 'Spirit' implies being breathed out, as seems probable (Job 27:3; 33:4; Ezek. 37:5f., 14), the idea of proceeding from God is essential to his nature. In the case of the Father and the Son, we have much more evidence to go on. Far from this relationship having begun at the incarnation, we are taught that God created the world through his Son (Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2), and not simply through his Word or through Jesus Christ (John 1:3; Rev. 3:14), though that refers to the same Person. Nor did this relationship between Father and Son begin only at creation: it already existed in eternity, 'before the world was' or 'before the foundation of the world', as Jesus expresses it in his prayer to his Father at the Last Supper (John 17:5, 24); and the latter of these verses shows that it existed in eternity as a relationship of *love* between Father and Son (*cf.* John 1:18). The language which Jesus uses about his incarnation likewise implies an already existing relationship in heaven between the Father and the Son. He says, 'I am come down from heaven, not to do mine own will but the will of him that sent me' (John 6:38), and later he makes it explicit that the one who sent him into the world was the Father, describing himself as 'him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world' (John 10:36). To the same effect he says, 'I came out from the Father, and am come into the world; again, I leave the world and go unto the Father' (John 16:28). Mysterious as all this language is, it is doubtless intended to instruct us, and not to be ignored as unintelligible. That being so, it follows that we do not have any *a priori* grounds for ruling out other aspects of the analogy of Father and Son, in its eternal setting, such as the begetting of the Son by the Father. This is central to the teaching of the

Creeds, and has been traditionally understood to mean an eternal impartation of the divine being and nature by the Father to the Son, whereby the Father is Father and the Son is Son.

The fact that Professor Helm feels able to play down this amount of important biblical evidence, and to discourage what he wrongly regards as speculation about the eternal relations of the three Persons, concentrating instead on their saving activities in the world to the exclusion of everything else, calls for an explanation. Does he, like some other Christian philosophers, believe in a hidden God, who is essentially different from how his activities make him appear to us? If he does, he is forgetting that, according to Scripture, God is revealed in his works and in the Person of his Son, not disguised. There is no truth that the Bible insists on more than this.

The Eternal Sonship of Jesus

Though Calvinist theologians have in general followed the Nicene teaching, with or without the support of their master, some, without going as far as Professor Helm, have ventured to deny the begetting of the Son by the Father in eternity. A good example of this can be found in a recent book⁴ where the author, Robert Reymond, lists the main biblical passages usually quoted in support of this doctrine, and claims that they either do not, or do not certainly, teach it. They fall into four classes. First are the many passages which use the expressions 'Father' and 'Son'. He says that these should be viewed as simply denoting 'sameness of nature, and in Jesus' case, equality with the Father with respect to his deity (see John 10:30-36)'. It is difficult to regard this as an adequate account, for though it is certainly true that there is a sameness of nature between the two Persons and that both are God, the names 'Father' and 'Son' imply a reason for this sameness, namely, the begetting of the Son by the Father. The sameness of nature, which enables the Son to reveal the Father (John 1:18; 12:45; 14:9), is a result of this fact. We saw above that the relationship of Father and Son, including the love it involves, already existed in eternity, so it is not just a way of speaking which depends on the incarnation; and if this is so, the begetting of the Son by the Father in eternity is necessarily implied.

The second class of passage comprises those in which the term *monogenes* is

⁴ R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 24-327.

used, traditionally translated ‘only-begotten’. These are all, with the exception of one, in the writings of John – John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9, together with Hebrews 11:17. All the Johannine passages refer to Jesus, but the passage in Hebrews refers to Isaac. It is widely held today that the term should simply be translated ‘only’, not ‘only-begotten’, and when (outside the New Testament) it is used without reference to children this is certainly so; but because of the extreme frequency of the language of begetting and being born (the same term in Greek) in the Johannine literature, it is held by some that ‘only-begotten’ is, in this case, a better translation. It certainly seems to make better sense in John 1:14, where the word is used without a noun, and also in John 1:18, if ‘God’ and not ‘Son’ is the noun in question (as some maintain, following a variant reading). In the former verse, ‘glory as of the only-begotten from the Father’ is more meaningful than ‘glory as of the only one from the Father’, and in the latter verse ‘the only-begotten God’ can more meaningfully be said to make the Father known than ‘the only God’ can. Furthermore, if 1 John 5:18 refers to Jesus as ‘he that was begotten of God’, which is what most commentators believe, it is hard not to see this as relevant to the interpretation of the five passages containing *monogenes*, especially the three in which (as in this verse) the Father is called ‘God’.

The third and fourth classes of passage contain only one passage each, John 5:26 and 1 John 5:18. Of John 5:26, Reymond claims that it refers to the Son’s incarnate role, as Messiah. It is noteworthy, however, that the passage uses the *eternal* names of the two Persons, ‘the Father’ and ‘the Son’. If, then, it does mean that the Father has given the *incarnate* Son to have life in himself, this might well be because he had already given him, as the *eternal* Son, to have life in himself. And this would conform with John 1:4, which says of the Word or Son of God, not just from the time of the incarnation but from the time of the creation – ‘In him was life’.

Much less doubt attaches to 1 John 5:18. Although its interpretation is not beyond question, the difference of tense between ‘whosoever is begotten of God’ (perfect) and ‘he that was begotten of God’ (aorist) leads most commentators to see the latter phrase as referring to a different person from the former, namely Christ. And the time when Christ was begotten of God would have to be the time when the relationship of Father and Son commenced, namely, in eternity.

The biblical basis of the credal doctrine of the Trinity appears, therefore, to be secure. We can be thankful that the Fathers embodied in Creeds the exegetical conclusions which they had so patiently worked out, since this enables churches that use the Creeds to keep those conclusions constantly before their minds. The positive contribution which Calvin made to the exposition of the doctrine, by emphasising the three Persons and their equality, as each being God, was a valuable one, but the doubt cast by some later Calvinists on the eternal impartation of the divine being and nature by one Person to another has been a regrettable development and, insofar as Calvin was responsible for it, he has had a negative influence also. This negative development has involved an attenuation of trinitarian doctrine and a reductionist approach to the biblical evidence on which it rests, and of these tendencies Professor Helm's lecture is a rather extreme example.

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