

‘Co-Equal, Co-Essential, and Co-Eternal’:  
Introducing Anne Dutton  
and her Reflections on the Trinity

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With the passing of the Act of Toleration on May 24, 1689, religious liberty was guaranteed for various communities outside of the Anglican state church such as the Congregationalists and Particular Baptists, and a religious pluralism was enshrined within the make-up of English society. Although the Act did not provide such liberty for Anti-Trinitarians, the following decade of the 1690s saw the beginning of a profound Trinitarian controversy that raged on and off throughout the “long” eighteenth century. Contrary to the impression given by various recent historical overviews of the doctrine of the Trinity, the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were actually replete with critical battles over Trinitarianism.<sup>1</sup>

The Ancient Church’s doctrine of the Trinity, encapsulated in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, had remained basically unchallenged until the seventeenth century. Even during the theological tumult of the Reformation, this vital area of Christian belief did not come into general dispute, though there were a few, like Michael Servetus (1511–1553) and the Italians, Lelio Francesco Sozzini (1525–1562) and his nephew Fausto Sozzini (1539–1604), who rejected Trinitarianism for a Unitarian perspective on the Godhead. However, as Sarah Mortimer has argued in her ground-breaking study of seventeenth-century English Socinianism, in the century after the Reformation the Socinian understanding of human beings as “inquiring, reasoning and active individuals who must take responsibility for their own spiritual lives” did

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<sup>1</sup> For an exception, see Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 170–181.

come to play a critical role in undermining the way that Trinitarian communities in England had established theological boundaries for themselves.<sup>2</sup> This was part of a growing tide of rationalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that led to what Philip Dixon has termed a “fading of the Trinitarian imagination” and to the doctrine coming under heavy attack.<sup>3</sup> Informed by the Enlightenment’s confidence in the “omnicompetence” of human reason, increasingly the intellectual *mentalité* of this era either dismissed the doctrine of the Trinity as a philosophical and unbiblical construct of the post-Apostolic Church, and turned to classical Arianism as an alternate perspective, or simply ridiculed it as utterly illogical and argued for Deism or Socinianism.<sup>4</sup>

Now, a number of key Particular Baptist authors like John Gill (1697–1771), Caleb Evans (1737–1791), and Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), were deeply involved in this controversy about God’s being and penned significant treatises in defence of his Triunity. However, one Particular Baptist author, who also wrote on this subject and who has been generally overlooked, is Anne Dutton (1692–1765). Following an introduction to Dutton’s life and writing, this article will focus on her discussion of Trinitarian ontology in her tract *A Letter on the Divine Eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ: As the Second Person in the Ever-blessed Three-one God* (1757), written in response to a work by the Anglican Evangelical William Romaine (1714–1795).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution. The Challenge of Socinianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 240–241.

<sup>3</sup> See especially William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence. How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 164–178; Philip Dixon, ‘Nice and Hot Disputes’: *The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London/New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2003). The quote from Dixon can be found at ‘Nice and Hot Disputes’, 212.

<sup>4</sup> G. L. Bray, “Trinity” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 694.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Dutton, *A Letter on the Divine Eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ: As the Second Person in the Ever-blessed Three-one God* (London: J. Hart, 1757).

## Introducing Anne Dutton

Anne Dutton was born Anne Williams to godly Congregationalist parents in 1692 in Northampton, the East Midlands.<sup>6</sup> Her conversion came at the age of thirteen after a serious illness.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, in 1707, she joined the Congregationalist church, although she wrestled with doubt and various fears as a young believer. Subsequently, though, she experienced a significant encounter with the Holy Spirit that she interpreted as the sealing of the Spirit—a phrase derived from such Pauline texts as Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30. As she later recalled the experience, the Spirit used Philippians 4:4 (“Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say rejoice,” KJV) in his sealing of her heart:

[This] Word brake in... upon my heart, with such a ray of glorious light, that directed my soul to the true and proper object of its joy, even the Lord himself. I was pointed thereto, as with a finger: In the *Lord*, not in your *frames*. *In the Lord*, not in what you enjoy *from* him, but in what you are in *him*. And the Lord seal'd my instruction, and fill'd my heart brim-full of joy, in the faith of my eternal interest, and unchangeable standing in *him*; and of *his* being an infinite fountain of blessedness, for me to rejoice in alway; even when the streams of sensible enjoyments fail'd. Thus the Blessed Spirit took me by the arms, and taught me to go.

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<sup>6</sup> For Dutton's life and thought, see especially J. C. Whitebrook, “The Life and Works of Mrs. Ann Dutton,” *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, 7, nos. 3–4 (1921): 129–146; Stephen J. Stein, “A Note on Anne Dutton, Eighteenth-Century Evangelical,” *Church History*, 44 (1975): 485–491; Michael D. Sciretti, Jr., “‘Feed My Lambs’: The Spiritual Direction Ministry of Calvinistic British Baptist Anne Dutton During the Early Years of the Evangelical Revival” (PhD thesis, Baylor University, 2009).

The sketch of her early life that follows is dependent in part on Sciretti, “Feed My Lambs,” 48–115. For her own account of her conversion, which she detailed in her *A Brief Account of the Gracious Dealings of God, with a Poor, Sinful, Unworthy Creature* (1743), see Watson, comp., *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton*, 3:8–27.

<sup>7</sup> Sciretti, “Feed My Lambs,” 51–53.

...the Lord the Spirit went on to reveal Christ more and more to me, as the great foundation of my faith and joy. He shew'd me my everlasting standing in his person, grace and righteousness: and gave me to see my security in his unchangeableness, under all the changes which pass'd over me. And then I began to rejoice in my dear Lord Jesus, as always the *same*, even when my frames *alter'd*.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Dutton learned to put her faith in Christ alone, and not in her experience of him. Her beliefs about the sealing of the Spirit were probably derived from reading the works of the Puritan Thomas Goodwin (1600–1679).<sup>9</sup>

In 1710, she transferred her church affiliation to an open-membership Baptist church in Northampton, pastored at the time by John Moore (1662–1726).<sup>10</sup> There, in her words, she found “fat, green pastures,” for, as she went on to explain, “Mr. Moore was a great doctrinal preacher: and the special advantage I receiv’d under his ministry, was the establishment of my judgment in the doctrines of the gospel.”<sup>11</sup> It was in this congregation that she was baptized as a believer around 1713.<sup>12</sup>

When she was twenty-two in 1715, she married a Thomas Cattell, and moved with her husband to London. While there she worshipped with the Calvinistic Baptist church that met at premises on Wood Street in the Cripplegate region.<sup>13</sup> Founded by Hanserd Knollys (1599–1691), this work had known some rough times in the days immediately prior to Dutton’s coming to the church. David Crosley (1670–1744), an evangelist from the Pennine hills in Northern England, had been the pastor of the work from 1705 to 1709, but he had been disfellowshipped

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<sup>8</sup>Dutton, *A Brief Account of the Gracious Dealings of God* in Watson, comp., *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton*, 3:27–28. I have modernized Dutton’s capitalization of words in her writings, which Watson retained.

<sup>9</sup>On Goodwin’s influence on Dutton, see Sciretti, “Feed My Lambs,” 62.

<sup>10</sup>On Moore, see Sciretti, “Feed My Lambs,” 59–60, n.42.

<sup>11</sup>Dutton, *A Brief Account of the Gracious Dealings of God* in Watson, comp., *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton*, 3:47, 50.

<sup>12</sup>Sciretti, “Feed My Lambs,” 64–65.

<sup>13</sup>On this church’s history during this period, see Murdina D. MacDonald, “London Calvinistic Baptists 1689–1727: Tensions within a Dissenting Community under Toleration” (DPhil thesis, Regent’s Park College, Oxford, 1982), 109–131.

for drunkenness, unchaste conduct with women, and lying to the church about these matters when accused.<sup>14</sup> The sorrow and sense of betrayal, disappointment and consternation in the church would have run deep. It was not until 1714 that the church succeeded in finding a new pastor. John Skepp (d.1721), a member of the Cambridge Congregationalist church of Joseph Hussey (1659–1726), was called that year to be the pastor.

Now, Hussey is often seen as the father of Hyper-Calvinism, insomuch as he argued in his book *God's Operations of Grace but no Offers of Grace* (1707) that offering Christ indiscriminately to sinners is something that smacks of “creature-co-operation and creature-concurrence” in the work of salvation. Skepp published but one book, and that posthumously, which was entitled *Divine Energy: or The Efficacious Operations of the Spirit of God upon the Soul of Man* (1722). In it he appears to have followed Hussey’s approach to evangelism. It is sometimes argued that Anne Dutton’s exposure to Hyper-Calvinism at a young age shaped her thinking for the rest of her life. If so, it is curious to find her rejoicing in the ministry of free-offer preachers like George Whitefield in later years.

Skepp, though, was an impressive preacher, owing in part to what Dutton called his “quickness of thought, aptness of expression, suitable affection, and a most agreeable delivery.”<sup>15</sup> Despite his refusal to freely offer the gospel to all and sundry, the overall trend in the church during his ministry was one of growth. There were 179 members when he came

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<sup>14</sup> For his story, see the small study by B. A. Ramsbottom, *The Puritan Samson: The Life of David Crosley 1669–1744* (Harpden, Hertfordshire: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 1991). See also details in MacDonald, “London Calvinistic Baptists 1689–1727,” 118–119. Crosley genuinely repented, and years later, having lived a life in accord with genuine repentance, he would know some usefulness again in the Lord’s work. He carried on a correspondence with George Whitefield (1714–1770), who noted that their “sentiments as the essential doctrines of the gospel, exactly harmonize[d]” and who wrote a commendatory preface for a sermon Crosley published on Samson. See George Whitefield, “Preface to the Reader” in David Crosley, *Samson a Type of Christ* (London 1744 ed.; repr. Newburyport, MA: William Barrett, 1796), iii.

<sup>15</sup> Dutton, *A Brief Account of the Gracious Dealings of God* in Watson, comp., *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton*, 3:51.

as pastor in 1714. When he died in 1721, the church's membership had grown to 212.<sup>16</sup>

In the early months of 1719, though, Dutton's life underwent a deep trial as her husband of but five or six years died.<sup>17</sup> She returned to her family in Northampton, and found herself wrestling with spiritual depression. In her words, Dutton sought God "in his ordinances, in one place and another; but alas! I found him not."<sup>18</sup> She was not long single, however. A second marriage in the middle months of 1720 was to Benjamin Dutton (1691–1747), a clothier who had studied for vocational ministry in various places, among them Glasgow University. Anne and Benjamin had met in the final months of 1719 and within a year they were wed.<sup>19</sup>

Ministry took the couple to such towns as Whittlesey and Wisbech in Cambridgeshire, before leading them finally in 1731 to a Particular Baptist congregation in Great Gransden, Huntingdonshire, in 1733.<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy that prior to this call to Great Gransden, Benjamin Dutton had wrestled with alcoholism. But the Lord delivered him completely around the time of the move to Great Gransden. In his own words, he said that he now "stood not in need of wine, or strong drink. The Lord also, of his great goodness, took away my *inclination* thereto; so that I had no more inclination to it, or desire after it, than if I had never tasted any in my whole life."<sup>21</sup>

Under Benjamin Dutton's preaching the church flourished so that on any given Sunday the congregation numbered anywhere between 250 and 350, of whom roughly 50 were members. This growth led to the building of a new meeting-house, which can still be seen in the village. Benjamin decided to go to America to help raise funds to pay off the debt incurred in the building of the meeting-house but the ship on which he was returning foundered not far from the British coast in 1747, and

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<sup>16</sup> MacDonald, "London Calvinistic Baptists 1689–1727," 124.

<sup>17</sup> Dutton, *A Brief Account of the Gracious Dealings of God* in Watson, comp., *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton*, 3:63–64.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:70.

<sup>19</sup> Sciretti, "Feed My Lambs," 76–77.

<sup>20</sup> For a brief history of the church, see Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Isaac Taylor Hinstone and Holdsworth & Ball, 1830), 4:509–510.

<sup>21</sup> Sciretti, "Feed My Lambs," 91–92.

Dutton was drowned. He had sent the money he had raised by means of another ship, however, so that at least was not lost.

### **“A Talent for Writing”.**

Widowed now for the second time, Anne Dutton was to live another eighteen years. During that time “the fame of her... piety,” as Baptist historian Joseph Ivimey (1773–1834) once referred to her spirituality,<sup>22</sup> became known in Evangelical circles on both sides of the Atlantic and that through various literary publications.

Dutton had been writing for a number of years before her second husband’s demise. After his death a steady stream of tracts and treatises, collections of selected correspondence, and poems poured forth from her pen. Among her numerous correspondents were a number of key figures in the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival: the Welsh preacher Howell Harris (1714–1773), the redoubtable Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon (1707–1791), and George Whitefield.<sup>23</sup> Harris was convinced that the Lord had entrusted her “with a talent of writing for him.”<sup>24</sup> When William Seward (1711–1740), an early Methodist preacher who was killed by a mob in Wales, read a letter she had written to him in May, 1739, he found it “full of such comforts and direct answers to what I had been writing that it filled my eyes with tears of joy.”<sup>25</sup> And Whitefield, who helped promote and publish Dutton’s writings, once said after a meeting with her: “her conversation is as weighty as her letters.”<sup>26</sup>

By 1740 she had written seven books. Another fourteen followed between 1741 and 1743, and fourteen more by 1750.<sup>27</sup> And there were yet more, for she continued to write up until her death in 1765. She was clearly the most prolific female Baptist author of the eighteenth century. But she wrestled with whether it was biblical for her to be an authoress.

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<sup>22</sup> Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, 4:510.

<sup>23</sup> See the discussion of these links by Stein, “A Note on Anne Dutton,” 485–490, and Sciretti, “Feed My Lambs,” 198–280.

<sup>24</sup> Stein, “A Note on Anne Dutton,” 487–488.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>26</sup> George Whitefield, Letter to Mr. [Jonathan] B[ryan], July 24, 1741 in *Letters of George Whitefield For the period 1734–1742* (1771 ed.; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 280.

<sup>27</sup> Sciretti, “Feed My Lambs,” 100–101.

In a tract entitled *A Letter To such of the Servants of Christ, who May have any Scruples about the Lawfulness of Printing any Thing written by a Woman* (1743), she maintained that she wrote not for fame, but for “only the glory of God, and the good of souls.”<sup>28</sup> To those who might accuse of her violating 1 Timothy 2:12, she answered that her books were not intended to be read in a public setting of worship, which the 1 Timothy text was designed to address. Rather, the instruction that her books gave was private, for they were read by believers in “their own private houses.”<sup>29</sup> She asked those who opposed women writers to “Imagine then... when my books come to your house, that I am come to give you a visit” and to “patiently attend” to her infant “lispings.”<sup>30</sup> What if some other authoresses had used the press for “trifles”? Well, she answered, “shall none of that sex be suffer’d to appear on Christ’s side, to tell of the wonders of his love, to seek the good of souls, and the advancement of the Redeemer’s interest?”<sup>31</sup>

### **Talking/Writing about the Trinity**

Dutton was not slow to critique theological positions she felt erroneous or inadequate. In 1757, for example, she happened to read William Romaine’s *A Discourse upon the Self-Existence of Jesus Christ* (1755). Romaine, at the time the only Evangelical Anglican clergyman in the English capital,<sup>32</sup> had preached this sermon on John 8:24 (“I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not, that I am, ye shall die in your sins”) two years earlier and had it published the same year. In the published version Romaine gave a powerful defence of

<sup>28</sup> Anne Dutton, *A Letter To such of the Servants of Christ, who May have any Scruples about the Lawfulness of Printing any Thing written by a Woman* in Watson, comp., *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton*, 3:254.

<sup>29</sup> Dutton, *Printing any Thing written by a Woman* in Watson, comp., *Selected Spiritual Writings of Anne Dutton*, 3:254.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:257.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:256.

<sup>32</sup> On Romaine, see especially Tim Shenton, ‘An Iron Pillar’: *The Life and Times of William Romaine* (Darlington, England/Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2004). See also the classic account of Romaine’s life and ministry by J.C. Ryle, *The Christian Leaders of the Last Century; or, England a Hundred Years Ago* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1880), 149–179.

the essential deity of Jesus Christ—and thus a rebuttal of two major heresies of the eighteenth century, Socinianism and Deism—and was also insistent that the “doctrine of the Trinity is the most necessary article of the Christian religion.”<sup>33</sup> It went through at least five editions in the 1750s and was still being reprinted as late as 1788 (the seventh edition).

In one portion of the sermon, though, Dutton believed that Romaine’s language smacked of Sabellianism, or modalism. Romaine was replying to critics of the nomenclature used to describe the persons of the Godhead, namely, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

They suppose, with ignorance common to infidelity, that these names were to give us ideas of the manner, in which the persons exist in the essence [of God], but the Scripture had quite a different view in using them. The ever blessed Trinity took the names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not to describe in what manner they exist as divine persons, but in what manner the divine persons have acted for us, and for our salvation. These names were to give us ideas of the distinct offices, which the Trinity had agreed to sustain in the œconomy of our redemption. The Scripture informs us... that the covenant of grace was made before the world, and the gracious plan of man’s salvation was settled before he had his being. According to the plan of this covenant one of the divine persons agreed to demand infinite satisfaction for sin, when mankind should offend, and to be the Father of the human nature of Jesus Christ, and our Father through him; and therefore he is called God the Father, not to describe his nature, but his office. Another of the divine persons covenanted to become a son, to take our nature upon him, and in it to pay the infinite satisfaction for sin, and therefore he is called Son, Son of God, and such like names, not to describe his divine nature, but his divine office. Another of the divine persons covenanted to make the infinite satisfaction of the Son of God effectual, by inspiring the spirits of men, and disposing them to receive it, and

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<sup>33</sup> William Romaine, *A Discourse upon the Self-Existence of Jesus Christ* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.; London: J. Worrall and E. Withers, 1756), 19. For the historical context of the sermon, see Shenton, ‘An Iron Pillar’, 127–129. I first read this sermon by Romaine in November of 2003, and felt then that Romaine did not clearly distinguish his conception of the Godhead from modalism.

therefore he is called the holy Inspirer, or Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of God, not to describe his divine nature but his divine office. The terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are terms of œconomy and are accordingly used in Scripture, to describe the distinct parts, which the ever blessed and adorable Trinity sustained in our redemption. ...The Scripture makes no difference between the divine persons, except what is made by the distinct offices, which they sustain in the covenant of grace. The persons are equal in every perfection and attribute; none is before or after other; none is greater or less than another; but the whole three persons are co-eternal together and co-equal. And consequently Christ, who was from eternity co-equal with the Father, did not make himself inferior, because he covenanted to become a Son, nor did the Holy Spirit, who was from eternity co-equal with the Father and the Son, make himself inferior, because he covenanted to make the spirits of men holy by his grace and influence. Son and Holy Spirit are names of office, and the names of their offices certainly cannot lessen the dignity of their nature, but should rather exalt them in our eyes, for whose salvation they condescended to sustain these offices.<sup>34</sup>

This text more than adequately displays Romaine's commitment to the affirmation that there are three persons within the Godhead and that these three persons are absolutely co-equal and co-eternal. But it is noteworthy that Romaine does not attempt to distinguish the divine persons by classical patristic terms, namely, the Father's ingenerateness, the Son's eternal generation and the Holy Spirit's eternal procession. In fact, he appears to argue against this way of distinguishing the divine persons. The divine persons are to be differentiated on the basis of the roles that they play in the economy of salvation. The term "Son," for example, says nothing about his divine nature, but about the office he bore to effect the salvation of sinners. Likewise, the name "Holy Spirit" says nothing about his relationship to the other two persons of the Godhead, but has to do with the way he persuades sinners to believe in Christ.

When Dutton read Romaine's sermon, she was "loth to think" that Romaine was not truly Trinitarian, but she was convinced that he had

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<sup>34</sup> Romaine, *Discourse upon the Self-Existence of Jesus Christ*, 18–20.

“given great countenance to the Sabellian error.” The above-cited text essentially distinguished the divine persons solely on the basis of their work in salvation.<sup>35</sup> Dutton thus asked whether or not “the three divine persons... were not Father, Son, and Spirit, prior to their agreeing to act” in eternity past for the salvation of fallen humanity?<sup>36</sup>

She then indicated how she would distinguish the persons by means of classical Nicene Trinitarian terminology:

[T]hose proper names, by which these divine persons are described in the Holy Scriptures, are doubtless descriptive, if not of their nature, as God; yet of their distinct subsistences in, and as possessing of the divine essence, with their mutual relations to each other therein. So that the first divine person, with respect to his begetting the second divine person, is called the Father, and to beget his Son, is the peculiar property of God the Father. The second divine person, with respect to his ineffable and eternal generation, in the divine essence, is called the Son; and to be the only-begotten of the Father, is the peculiar property of God the Son. And the third divine person with respect to his proceeding from the Father and the Son, in the divine essence, is called the Spirit; and to proceed from both, as the Spirit of the Father and the Son, is the peculiar property of God the Spirit. And tho’ there is no priority, nor posteriority, among these divine persons: so that one was before, and another after the other, and a third after both, with regard to the order of time; but each of these three divine subsistences, did together and at once necessarily exist in the eternal self-existent essence of Jehovah. Yet I humbly think, that we may, yea, must conceive, according to the Scripture-names given to these divine persons, with their relative properties, that there was priority, and posteriority, with respect to the order of nature. And yet this infers not any superiority, nor inferiority, among the divine persons: in that the three distinct subsistences, do jointly possess, all the immense and eternal glories, of the one undivided, infinite essence

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<sup>35</sup> Dutton, *Divine Eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ*, 4–5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

of Jehovah... in which these three divine persons are co-equal, co-essential, and co-eternal.<sup>37</sup>

Like Romaine, Dutton affirmed her conviction that the three divine persons are “co-equal, co-essential, and co-eternal.” The three are “undivided” and share to the full the “infinite essence” of deity. Unlike Romaine, however, Dutton was not chary about using the patristic language of generation and procession to distinguish the three persons. The different names used in the Bible of the three persons speak of eternal relationships in which there is no sense of lesser or greater, but which nonetheless speaks of an order: only the Father could beget the Son, only the Son could be begotten, and only the Spirit could proceed from both the Father and the Son. *Pace* the implications of Romaine’s explanation of the divine names, these relationships are not arbitrary. As Dutton sums up her position:

...the Son’s being begotten of the Father, and the Spirit’s proceeding from both, makes no superiority, nor inferiority, among the divine persons, as each possess the same infinite essence; but only denotes the particular manner and order, in which the divine essence necessarily exists.<sup>38</sup>

To Dutton’s way of thinking, to deny that the divine names describe the “distinct subsistences in the divine essence” is “nothing less than to rob them of their personality; and so, of their divine glory.”<sup>39</sup>

## **Two Other Baptist Critiques**

It is noteworthy that Dutton’s younger Baptist contemporary, Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795), the pastor of the Particular Baptist cause in Bourton-on-the-Water, was also familiar with this idiosyncrasy of Romaine’s Trinitarian theology. In a sermon on Mark 12:28–31 that Romaine published in 1760, the Anglican minister had stated:

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<sup>37</sup> Dutton, *Divine Eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ*, 6–7, 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

The right knowledge of God then consists in believing, that in Jehovah the self-existence essence there are three co-equal and co-eternal persons, between whom there is no difference or inequality, but what is made by the covenant of grace. Their names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are not descriptive of their nature, but of their offices, they are not to teach us in what manner they exist in Jehovah, but they are covenant names, belonging to the offices, which the divine persons sustain in the covenant. The Scripture does not use these names to teach us, how the divine persons exist, but how they act; how they stand related to the heirs of promise, and not what they are in themselves, as persons in Jehovah. This is a truth of great importance, which I have endeavoured to defend both from the pulpit and from the press, and particularly in a printed discourse upon the self-existence of Jesus Christ. The true object of worship then, to whom our obedience and love are due, is Jehovah Alehim,<sup>40</sup> according to what is said in the Creed, “the unity in Trinity and the Trinity in unity is to be worshipped.”<sup>41</sup>

In an undated sermon entitled *Christ manifested to the soul*,<sup>42</sup> Beddome cited this very passage and then noted that “others contend”—was he aware of Dutton’s critique of Romaine?—that the term “Son” is

a title belonging to Christ as the second Person in the ever-blessed Trinity, and expressive of both of equality of essence, and the peculiar relation in which he stands to the Divine Father; and that this is an article of faith which enters into the experience and worship of God’s people.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Alehim” here would appear to be Romaine’s term for what is now transliterated as “Elohim.”

<sup>41</sup> William Romaine, “Upon the right Love of the Lord God” in his *Twelve Discourses upon the Law and the Gospel. Preached at St. Dunstan’s Church in the West, London* (London: J. Worrall and M. Withers, 1760), 262–263.

<sup>42</sup> In Benjamin Beddome, *Sermons Printed from the Manuscripts of the Late Rev. Benjamin Beddome, A.M.* (London: William Ball, 1835), 119–127. I owe this reference to my doctoral student, Rev. Daniel Ramsey of Cleveland, Ohio.

<sup>43</sup> *Sermons Printed from the Manuscripts of the Late Rev. Benjamin Beddome*, 119.

Beddome himself was of the opinion that the term “Son” could “be understood in both these senses” in “different passages of Scripture.”<sup>44</sup>

The doyen of Baptist theology in this era, John Gill,<sup>45</sup> was also quite critical of the sort of Trinitarian reflection proposed by Romaine. He did not mention him by name, but it is unlikely he was not acquainted with his views as both men ministered in the English capital during the 1750s and 1760s. In fact, on one occasion during the early to mid-1750s, Gill had breakfast with Romaine, along with Gill’s friend James Hervey (1714–1758), George Whitefield (1714–1770), and John Wesley (1703–1791).<sup>46</sup> For Gill, the eternal Sonship of Christ, and thus his eternal generation, “is an article of the greatest importance in the Christian religion,” even its “distinguishing criterion,” without which “the doctrine of the Trinity can never be supported.”<sup>47</sup> As Gill argued in his systematic theology, published in 1769, without eternal Sonship (and the eternal spiration of the Spirit), there is nothing to distinguish the different persons within the Godhead in eternity past:

Those men I have now respect to, hold that there are three distinct persons in the Godhead, or divine nature; and therefore it must be something in the divine nature, and not any thing out of it, that distinguishes them; not any works *ad extra*, done by them; nor their concern in the economy of man’s salvation; nor office bore by them,

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<sup>44</sup> *Sermons Printed from the Manuscripts of the Late Rev. Benjamin Beddome*, 119.

<sup>45</sup> The standard biographical sketch of Gill is John Rippon, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Writings of the late Rev. John Gill*, D. D. (Repr. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Gano Books, 1992). For more recent studies of Gill and his theology, see Graham Harrison, *Dr. John Gill and His Teaching* (Annual Lecture of The Evangelical Library; London: The Evangelical Library, 1971); Tom Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory. A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 73–107, *passim*; George M. Ella, *John Gill and the Cause of God and Truth* (Eggleston, Co. Durham: Go Publications, 1995); Michael A. G. Haykin, ed., *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997); and Timothy George, “John Gill” in his and David S. Dockery, ed., *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition* (Rev. ed.; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 11–33.

<sup>46</sup> Aaron C. H. Seymour, *The Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon* (London: William Edward Painter, 1840), 1:162.

<sup>47</sup> John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (New ed.; London: W. Winterbotham, 1796), 1:209, 210.

which are arbitrary things, which might, or might not have been, had it pleased God...<sup>48</sup>

Gill especially took aim at the thinking of the Congregationalist Thomas Ridgley (1667–1734), who maintained a position identical to that of Romaine: Sonship has to do with the office of mediator, not the internal relationship of the first and second persons of the Godhead.<sup>49</sup> As Gill responded to Ridgley—and he would have said the same to Romaine: without the Son's eternal generation “no proof can be made of his being a distinct divine person in the Godhead.”<sup>50</sup>

### Coda

There were at least three reprints of Romaine's *A Discourse upon the Self-Existence of Jesus Christ* after Dutton's robust critique, but his argument remained unaltered. It is possible he was unaware of her letter, but her friendship with fellow Evangelicals like Whitefield, who also knew Romaine well, makes this unlikely.<sup>51</sup> Did the Anglican preacher believe then that Dutton's criticism was not worth answering? If so, he would have been very mistaken. Dutton was indeed right to critique his failure to use classic terminology to differentiate the three within the Godhead. In his sermon, Romaine had rightly asserted: “The doctrine of the Trinity is the most necessary article of the Christian religion, and we cannot take one step in the way to heaven, without being clear in it.”<sup>52</sup> Dutton's letter provided a clarity that Romaine's sermon—and one might add, current quarters of Evangelicalism—greatly needed.

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<sup>48</sup> Gill, *Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 1:205, 207.

<sup>49</sup> See Gill, *Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 1:210–212. For the text that Gill is criticizing, see Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity* (London: Daniel Midwinter, Aaron Ward, John Oswald; and Richard Hett, 1731), 121–131.

<sup>50</sup> Gill, *Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 1:210.

<sup>51</sup> For Romaine's friendship with Whitefield, see Shenton, ‘An Iron Pillar’, 167–169.

<sup>52</sup> Romaine, *Discourse upon the Self-Existence of Jesus Christ*, 19.