

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE GLORY OF THE SON (Part II)

The doctrine of the Trinity forms the core of Christianity. Christianity is distinctively Trinitarian. Down through the centuries efforts have been made to modify or change the doctrine under the pretense of improving it, but the end result is always harmful and heretical. The recent efforts of some well-meaning Evangelical theologians to insist that the Son has always been eternally subordinate to the Father (ESS) is a case in point. Warfield noted in his classic study on the Trinity that: “It has been found necessary, nevertheless, from time to time, vigorously to reassert the principle of equalization, over against a tendency unduly to emphasize the elements of subordinationism which still hold a place thus in the traditional language in which the church states its doctrine of the Trinity. In particular, it fell to Calvin, in the interests of the true Deity of Christ – the constant motive of the whole body of Trinitarian thought – to reassert and make good the attribute of self-existence (*autotheotōs*) for the Son. Thus Calvin takes his place, alongside of Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine, as one of the chief contributors to the exact and vital statement of the Christian doctrine of the Triune God.”¹

A major component of the classical doctrine as set forth in 325 A.D. at the Council of Nicea, is that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinguished in their roles and functions (the “economic Trinity,” but equal (as the “immanent” or “ontological” Trinity). Nicea was called in response to the threat to orthodoxy posed by the heretic Arius and his followers (the “Arians”). Arius taught that the Son was subordinate to the Father because he was created by him and *homoiousios*, “of a similar substance,” a view rejected by the Council, which held they were *homoousios* or “of the same substance.” The great church historian, Adolph Von Harnack, rightly noted that had the view that the Son was in any way less than the Father (this includes the idea of ESS) “gained the victory in the Greek-speaking world, it would in all probability have completely ruined Christianity, that is, it would have made it disappear in cosmology and morality and would have annihilated religion in the religion. The Arian Christology is inwardly the most unstable, and dogmatically the most worthless, of all the Christologies to be met with in the history of dogma.”²

The old terms *homoiousios* and *homoousios* are once again front and center in the debate – why? Because the advocates of ESS are in fact adopting a *Homoian* (from the word *homoiousios*) Christology. How so? They assert that the Son eternally is subordinate to the Father and He is at some *different* level of substance or nature. Noted Evangelical theologian Millard Erickson stated it this way: “The problem is this: If authority over the Son is an essential, not an accidental, attribute of the Father, and subordination to the Father is an essential, not an accidental, attribute of the Son, then something significant follows. Authority is part of the Father’s essence, and subordination is part of the Son’s essence, and each attribute is not part of the essence of the other person. That means that the essence

of the Son is different from the essence of the Father. . . . That is equivalent to saying that they are not *homoousios* with one another.”³

Denials notwithstanding, this position *leads* to Arianism pure and simple. Our friend Carl Trueman pulled no punches when he declared, “Subordinationism was found wanting in the fourth century and set aside for very good reason. It is thus surely time for somebody of real stature in the New Calvinist world to break ranks with the Big Eva establishment and call out this new subordinationism for what it is: a position seriously out of step with the historic catholic faith and a likely staging post to Arianism. For if this is allowed to continue with official sanction or simply through silent inaction, then the current New Calvinist leadership will have betrayed the next generation in a deep and fundamental way. Far more so, I might add, than those who allow a talented woman to teach the occasional Sunday school class.

“And when, in thirty years time, Arianism is rampant among young evangelicals and the usual suspects are licensed by the powers-that-be courageously to lament the fact that nobody saw it coming and then to offer sage advice on how to handle it, please remember folks – once again, you heard it here first. Yes, you did. You really did.”⁴

I. THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON

The opening verses of Hebrews are like going out on a clear night and beholding the sheer splendor of the stars. Kent Hughes notes, “The cosmic supremacy of Christ dazzles the mind: He is *Inheritor, Creator, Sustainer, Radiator* and *Representor*. These are beautiful, soul-expanding thoughts. But they positively vibrate with glory when we see that they introduce the priestly supremacy of Christ – he is *Purifier* and *Ruler*.”⁵

A. THE THREEFOLD WORK OF CHRIST

1. Prophet (v. 2)
2. Priest (v. 3)
3. King (v. 3)

NOTE: We must understand that when the Scriptures speak of Christ in this threefold capacity, it refers not only to His state of humiliation, but also His state of exaltation.

1. PROPHET --

- a. The Scriptural idea of a prophet – The prophet is one who speaks forth from God. There are two elements involved:
 - (i) *Passive (Receptive)* – the receiving of divine revelation (dreams, visions, verbal communications). Without receiving, the prophet cannot give out the revelation.
 - (ii) *Active (Productive)* – the passing on the received revelation to the people.
- b. The duty of a prophet – to reveal the will of God to the people, whether it was a promise, exhortation, instruction, or rebuke. (cf. Deut. 18:18; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1:4-1-; I Peter 1:11).
- c. The prophetic office of Christ – He is the fulfillment of Deut. 18:15; so says Acts 3:22-23. He calls Himself a prophet (cf. Luke 13:33). He has a message from God (cf. John 8:26-28; 12:49-50; 14:10, 24).

2. PRIEST --

It is to this aspect of the work of Christ that the book of Hebrews speaks so fully. As Berkhof has written, “In the New Testament there is only a single book in which He is called priest, namely, the Epistle to the Hebrews.”⁶

- a. The Scriptural idea of a Priest – Whereas the Prophet was appointed to be God’s representative to the people, the Priest was man’s representative

with God. However, both were appointed by God. A priest had basically a twofold work:

- (i) Offering gifts and sacrifice for sins.
 - (ii) Intercession for the people (cf. Hebrews 5:1; 7:25; Leviticus 9:11)
- b. The work of Christ as Priest
- (i) Offering Gifts and sacrifice for sins. The sacrifice of Christ for sin in Scripture is regarded as that of atoning or as expiatory and vicarious (not personal). Christ's sacrifice was one of propitiation (cf. Rom. 3:21-26)

NOTE: Berkhof remarks, "The striking thing in the Scriptural representation of the priestly work of Christ is that Christ appears in them as both priest and sacrifice."⁷

- (ii) The work of Christ in intercession. This aspect is based upon His work of atoning for the sins of the people.

NOTE: "The sacrificial work of Christ and His intercessory work are simply two different aspects of His atoning work, and, therefore, the scope of the one can be no wider than that of the other. Now Christ very definitely limits His intercessory work, when He says, "I pray not for the world, but for those whom Thou hast given Me." (John 17:9). Why should He limit His intercessory prayer if He had actually paid the price for all?"⁸

- (a) The characteristics of Christ's intercession
 - 1). Constant (Romans 8:33-34; Hebrews 7:25)
 - 2). Authoritative (cf. John 14:16; 16:26; 17:9; 15, 20)

NOTE: The Son never petitions the Father like creature to Creator; rather He, as a Son, requests. As Trench has said, "The consciousness of His equal dignity, of His potent and prevailing intercession speaks out in this, that often as He asks or declares that He will ask anything of the Father, it is always EROTO, EROTASO, an asking that is, as upon equal terms (John 14:16; 16:26; 17:9; 15, 20), never AITEO or AITASO."⁹

- 3). Efficacious The prayers of Christ have never, nor will ever fail, for the Father always hears Him (John 11:42). In this we may take great comfort.

3. KING –

Note the emphasis our text places on Christ's role in creation. Letham observes, "The Son is creator and ruler of the universe, in all its multi-faceted diversity (verse 16). 'All things' is a comprehensive statement, excluding nothing. Tangible and nontangible, spiritual and material, angels and human beings: Everything owes its existence to the Son. The universe was created in him. Not only did he originate it, but it was made in union with him as its head. All things were made through him, as the agent in the actual work of creation. This is paralleled in Hebrews by the comment that God made the ages through the Son (Hebrews 1:2). In the background is the Genesis account where God shaped and structured the dark, watery and empty world by his word (cf. Hebrews 1:3). Moreover, the Son is the goal of creation: Everything was made for him. The reason the universe exists is found in Christ. The goal to which it is directed is conformity to Christ. Its unity is in him."¹⁰

CONCLUSION: Our good friend Rick Phillips has an excellent summary of our text: "What this passage tells us about Christ reminds us not merely that we must hold to him in faith, but also how to draw near to him in faith. This comes through our understanding of his three offices as prophet and priest and king. Jesus is our King. We need to be ruled and governed, protected and led. Let us therefore bow before him and crown him Lord of all, flying his banner at the gates of our hearts and forsaking all other kingdoms and rulers. Jesus is our Prophet. We need truth; he is the Truth, and he speaks the truth. Let us therefore come to his Word seeking light and forsaking all the false prophets who would lead us astray. Jesus is our Priest. So we should readily come to him for cleansing, for

forgiveness, for interceding prayers, and for a full and loving reconciliation with God the Father. Let us therefore confess our great need for his blood and for his ongoing priestly intercession in heaven. Let us lay hold of the cross, forsaking all claim to any merit of our own. In all these ways, through his three offices, let us commit ourselves to Jesus Christ alone, who is able to save us to the uttermost, to the glory of God the Father.”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹*The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Biblical Doctrines II* (rpt. Baker 1981) p. 171.

²Adolph Von Harnack, *History of Dogma IV* (rpt. Dover 1961) p. 43.

³M. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity: An Assessment of The Subordination Debate* (Kregel, 2009) p. 172, as cited by D. G. Butner, Jr. in “Eternal Functional Subordination and the Problem of the Divine Will,” *Journal of The Evangelical Society* 58/1 (2015)-49. Butner concurs with Erickson and concludes by saying, “To posit two wills or three wills in the Godhead is to posit two or three natures and thereby to undermine the idea of a Trinity altogether. On the other hand, to posit that a will is actually a personal property of a hypostasis, such that the Son can have a submissive will and the Father an authoritative one, is to undermine dyothelite Christology. Because the incarnation was, according to Chalcedon, one hypostasis in two natures, this would mean there is only one will in Christ. If Christ lacked a human will, he lacked the means to achieve our salvation according to classical models of the atonement. More than this, if Christ lacked a human will, he was not fully human, because human beings are thinking, feeling, and willing beings. The Bible is clear that ‘every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God’ (1 John 4:2-3).” (p. 150). The word *dyothelite* refers to the belief that Christ had two natures, from the Greek *duo* (“two”) and *phuseis* (“natures”). Dyophysites were those who accepted the definition worked out by the Council of Chalcedon (451), which stated that the Christ consisted of two distinct natures, one divine and one human, in one person. The term was applied to those who accepted the “two-natures” theology by their opponents, the Monophysites, who believed that the incarnate Christ consisted of only one nature. cf. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* ed. E. Ferguson (Garland, 1990) p. 285.

⁴Carl Trueman, *The Mortification of Spin: Postcards from Palookaville*, Fahrenheit 381 (Tuesday, June 7, 2016).

⁵K. Hughes, *Hebrews I* (Crossway, 1993) p. 29.

⁶L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1938) p. 362.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 395.

⁹R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1953) p. 145.

¹⁰Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (ivp. 1993), p. 200.

¹¹Richard Phillips, *Hebrews: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P & R, 2006) p. 24.