

Glory to God the Trinity*Isaac Watts (1674-1748)*

Glory to God the Trinity,
 Whose name has mysteries unknown;
 In essence One, in persons Three,
 A social nature, yet alone.

When all our noblest powers are joined
 The honors of thy name to raise,
 Thy glories overmatch our mind,
 And angels faint beneath the praise.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***Identity and Idolatry***Kevin T. Bauder**[This essay was originally published on June 29, 2012.]*

When you ask people, “Who are you?” they usually answer first by giving you their name. A name, however, is only a label. It does not reveal the identity of the person to whom it is attached.

If you persist, “Yes, that is your name, but who *are* you,” then people invariably begin to give you answers grounded in their relationships to individuals, objects, and activities. They will identify themselves as the son or daughter of a particular person, or perhaps as the spouse of another. They will tell you about their job and their hobbies. They may identify themselves as fans of a particular sports team, followers of a particular author, or as devotees of a particular kind of music.

What all of these identifiers have in common is that they are external to the individual. People can say who they are only by pointing to things outside themselves. We know who we are only in terms of our relationships to other things, be they persons, activities, or objects.

In other words, our identity is not in ourselves. In order to know who we are, we must look outward. Our identity is formed by the persons, objects, and activities with which we bring ourselves into relationship.

God is not like that. God knows who He is, not by looking outward, but by looking inward. Nevertheless, God’s identity is still relational. He knows who He is, not by His relationship to persons, objects, and activities within the created order, but by His relationship to Himself.

Properly speaking, God is not a person. While He subsists as one God in perfect unity, He is nevertheless three persons. It is by the perichoresis of these persons that God knows who He is. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is Father because He begets the Son. The Son is Son because He is generated by the Father. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit because He proceeds from the Father and the Son. If God were not eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then He would in some sense be dependent upon the world for His identity. The world would be essential to the personhood of God. Because He is eternally Father, Son, and Spirit, however, God depends upon



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

Permission is granted to duplicate for personal and church use.

www.centraseminary.edu | info@centraseminary.edu
 900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

nothing outside Himself. He is one God who subsists eternally in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of these three has a proper position with respect to the other two, and as God relates to Himself within the eternal fellowship of the Trinity, He simply is all that He is. As He said to Moses, “I am who I am.

We are not like that. Both our being and our identity are derived. We do not exist in ourselves and we have no identity or meaning in ourselves. We are who we are only in relation to other things. Ultimately, we are who we are only in relation to God. Secondarily, our identity is defined by the relationships that God has ordained in our lives and that exist under our identity in Him. Consequently, my family, vocation, avocations, and interests do shape my identity, but only in a secondary and derivative way. For these factors to work rightly, they must always remain subject to the identity that I know by my relationship to God.

When people reject God, however, these secondary factors are used to form their primary identity. Things that are merely derivative are treated as if they are ultimate. We seek to know who we are in relationship to created things.

By themselves, however, those things are utterly incapable of telling us who we are. They cannot support our identity. The more we rely upon them, the more hollow we find them to be. We cannot really live as if we are simply our country, our family, our job, or any combination of such finite elements. We cannot live as if such things were ultimate. The attempt to do so leads us ineluctably into frustration, contradiction, and despair. Our existence becomes inauthentic.

This situation is much like trying to live under an alias. We assume an identity that is not our own. We find that aspects of our identity simply do not fit us. We cannot actually live by them. We have no integrating point for the various factors by which we try to tell ourselves who we are. Furthermore, those factors are not solid enough to support the weight of our intuitions and aspirations. They collapse under the yearnings of our souls.

The things that we treat as ultimate—the things by which we define ourselves—these things are gods. Those who reject the true and living God are doomed to pursue other gods. They can discover who they really are only in a right relationship with the true and living God. Barring that, they must seek their identity among the plethora of created things. None of those things, however, can finally tell us who we are. If we wander from the God in whose image we are made, then the first thing that we lose is ourselves.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
