

Of the Father's Love Begotten

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-410); tr. John Mason Neale (1818-1866)

Of the Father's love begotten,
ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega;
He the source, the ending He,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see
evermore and evermore!

O that birth forever blessed,
when a virgin, full of grace,
by the Holy Ghost conceiving,
bore the Savior of our race;
and the Babe, the world's Redeemer,
first revealed His sacred face,
evermore and evermore!

O ye heights of heav'n, adore Him,
angel hosts, His praises sing,
pow'rs, dominions, bow before Him,
and extol our God and King;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
ev'ry voice in concert ring,
evermore and evermore!

Christ, to Thee with God the Father,
and, O Holy Ghost, to Thee,
hymn and chant and high thanksgiving
and unwearied praises be:
honor, glory, and dominion,
and eternal victory,
evermore and evermore!

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Divine Nature, Divine Persons

Kevin T. Bauder

God is so great and so high above us that we shall never wrap our understanding around Him. He has revealed Himself to us, and what He has said about Himself is true, but we shall never know the whole truth. We shall be learning about Him forever, and we shall always have more to learn. Furthermore, we should expect to find our understanding regularly challenged as our knowledge grows.

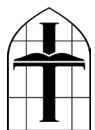
The Bible helps us to know God through analogy. The writers of Scripture compare God to things. They tell us that the Lord is a shepherd, a father, a rock, a king, a tower, a fortress, a shield, a man of war, a musician, a rider in the clouds, a potter, a husband, a judge, a military commander, an embroiderer, a shelter, a plot of land, a bird with wings, an inheritance. These are only a few of the word pictures that the Bible uses to help us imagine God rightly.

While these images aid our understanding, we must not push any of them too far. We must also make sure that we supplement each image with the others, or else our understanding of God will be deficient. We must learn to view God from multiple perspectives.

This principle applies especially to our thinking about the Trinity. We can view the Trinity from at least two distinct vantage points. On the one hand, we can think about the Trinity through the perspective of the divine nature, which is one. On the other hand, we can think about the Trinity from the standpoint of the divine persons, who are three.

Viewed from the standpoint of the divine nature, the Bible clearly teaches the existence of only one true and living God (Deut 6:4). Each of the divine persons is this God: the Father (Eph 4:6), the Son (John 1:1), and the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4). While these three are distinct from each other (2 Cor 13:14), they are not three Gods. Thus, each of them possesses the whole divine nature, for the One God is undivided.

A necessary consequence of the undivided Godhead is that each of the three persons is God in Himself. The Father is not God because He is Father. He is simply God. The Son is not promoted to God-ness by the Father. The Spirit



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is not made God by the Father or the Son. Each is fully God, equally uncreated, eternal, immeasurable, almighty, and glorious.

Some have reasoned that if the persons of the Godhead are equal in all these ways, then they must be interchangeable. Any distinction between them must exist purely for the plan of redemption. On this view, the Father becomes Father simply to send the Son. The Son becomes Son only to enter the world, assume human nature, and offer Himself. The Holy Spirit becomes the Holy Spirit only to take up the role of comforter to believers. In principle, any of the three could have chosen any of the other roles.

This understanding of the Trinity really dissolves the distinctiveness of the persons. If there is no difference *within the eternal being of God*, then there is no real distinction. Father, Son, and Spirit simply become three modes of manifestation—and that is a deadly heresy. We must find some way of differentiating the three persons within the divine life of the Trinity, and not merely within the plan of God.

In other words, we must look at God, not merely from the standpoint of the divine unity and nature, but of the three persons. Why are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit distinguishable? The answer lies in the relationships that they bear toward one another.

The Father generates (begets) the Son, and He bears the unique, personal mark of Paternity. The Son is begotten of the Father, and He bears the unique, personal mark of Filiation. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and He bears the unique, personal mark of Spiration. The uniqueness of the persons consists exactly in these relations. Indeed, it is quite correct to say that the relations are the persons.

The writer to the Hebrews illustrates the relationship between the Father and the Son by comparing the Son to the “brightness” (*apaugasma*) of the Father’s glory. In other words, the Son is to the Father as a light beam or ray is to the light source. If we imagine looking up at the sun in the sky, we could ask whether we are seeing the sun or whether we are seeing the light from the sun. The answer is that the sun, to be the sun, shines forth its light. When we are perceiving the light, we are perceiving the sun. The two have the closest possible relationship. Yet they are distinguishable, and the sun is primary while the light is derivative.

This illustration must not be applied to the Father and Son when they are viewed with respect to their *deity*. Each is God in Himself. But if they are viewed with respect to their *personal relations*, then we come to understand that the Father, to be the Father, must eternally generate the Son, and the Son, to be the Son, must be eternally begotten of the Father. They stand in the closest possible relationship, and yet the Paternity of the Father is primary and initiating, while the Filiation of the Son is secondary and responsive.

In other words, the three persons of the Trinity have an order (the Greek word is *taxis*) among them. They are not interchangeable. The Father really is the First Person of the Godhead. The Son is the Second Person, for He is begotten of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the Third Person, for He proceeds from the Father and the Son. The persons are not and could not be interchangeable. The Son could not possibly have sent the Father into the world to do His will.

The three persons assume specific administrative or economic relationships to carry out God’s plan. These economic relationships are not merely arbitrary. Such relationships are grounded in the eternal order or *taxis* of the Trinity. In other words, the Economic Trinity reflects and is grounded in the Immanent Trinity.

Thus, we rightly confess “one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” These words are not Scripture, but they summarize the biblical teaching about Jesus Christ. We find it impossible to improve upon them.



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.
