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**Embarrassed by Our Father
Unraveling “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing”**

Analysis by Gerrit Dawson

What scares me most is that renewal-minded, historically orthodox, confessional Presbyterians will eagerly embrace the paper, *The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing*, to be presented to the General Assembly this summer. “Look, the church still believes in the Trinity!” we’ll say. “Isn’t that great! We’re still allowed to say Father, Son and Holy Spirit. See, there’s room for everyone!” The paper will be a triumph on the order of 2002’s *Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ*.

Meanwhile, we will have given away still more of our treasure. We’ll offer the church far, far less than the glory of the one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But most evangelicals will not even know why this is so. We won’t do the hard theological work and we won’t raise a fuss.

There are serious problems with *God’s Love Overflowing*, compounded by assertions in the document that it doesn’t have these very problems. Specifically, the paper fails to affirm that the Father-Son relationship is at the heart of God’s revelation of himself to us. The reason for such a deep theological lacuna is the paper’s aversion to recognizing the Father and the Son at all. We Presbyterians are embarrassed by our Father. We have been snookered into thinking that the Father is the source and not the solution to earthly father wounds. We have been taught for a generation that sophisticated young theologians avoid speaking of the Father unless required. This document adopts the same attitudes.

There are claims that “classic” language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit must never be forgotten (p. 5). But the paper would far rather define the Trinity as “God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.” True, these are the words Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 13: 14, but in light of the entire New Testament and the development of the doctrine of the Trinity through the first five centuries, we know that this is not the normative theological formula. Yet, because the Father and the Son can be avoided, “God, Christ and Spirit” phrasing is employed in the paper more than *fifty* times. Further, the paper is enamored with taking up new names, usually names of objects, to replace the Persons. Moreover, the stylistic contortions the authors must use to avoid using the Father and the Son, as well as any masculine pronouns, create problems ranging from a profound sense of de-personalizing God to theological imprecision or perhaps even error.¹ Most crucially, however, what is helpful in this document is constantly obscured by the paper’s forceful trajectory away from recognizing the unbroken oneness between the Father and the Son as the essence of New Testament revelation.

But will leaders of Confessing Churches do the work necessary to uncover how this occurs? I hope you will take the challenge and follow me deeper into the analysis.

Changing Texts

The marginalizing of the Father and the Son was evident to me in the penultimate draft of the paper presented to the GAC in February. One can see this by checking first the accuracy and then the context of the quotation from *The Confession of 1967* that appears on p. 2. It reads:

The work of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, humanity, and the world (*Confession of 1967*, BC 9.07).

The sentence being referenced from BC 9.07, however, actually reads:

This work of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, *man*, and the world (italics mine).

Well, so what? A “this” was changed to a “the,” and a “man” was changed to “humanity.” Is that so bad? The “humanity” came from the inclusive language version and I suspect most of us would prefer it today. It’s just that our *Book of Confessions* doesn’t actually say that, and when do scholars, who labor in a field where prudent accuracy is valued, get to presume the future mind of the church on a change in our confessional documents? Still, just in itself, this change could be more sloppy than sinister.ⁱⁱ

But what about changing “this”? Was that just a typo? I don’t think so. If we read a declaratory sentence set apart by indention, which begins, “This work...” our minds ask the obvious question, “Which work?” The word *this* refers back to something. I don’t believe the paper wants us to look back at the full paragraph, for it contains a clear statement about the Father-Son relationship. Referring to Jesus, it reads: “He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation.” *The Confession of 1967* grasped the reality at the heart of the gospel. But, subtly, *God’s Love Overflowing* directs our attention away from this wonderful Father-Son relationship revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

If there had been any lingering doubt in my intuition about the agenda influencing the task force, it was whisked away by seeing the changes made to create the final paper. *Seven* times references to the “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” were reworded to eliminate any mention of the Father and the Son. Why would someone do that, particularly in a paper that claims those names are “etched in Scripture and creed” and remain “an indispensable anchor for our efforts to speak faithfully of God” (p. 5)? There was precious little reference to the Father and the Son as it was, and certainly no deep engagement with that primary, revealed speech. So why remove seven crucial references? What reason would there be to edit a document so we never actually read the theological narrative concerning the Father sending the Son in the Holy Spirit?ⁱⁱⁱ

What is missing is most telling. We never read in this paper a sparkling, illuminating passage like that of Acts 2:33: “Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father

the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.” Real depth to me is not dancing in joy that I may say “Voice, Bush and Flame” (p. 17) but considering just what is occurring in the heavenlies now that our brother Jesus has gone to his Father’s right hand, still in our skin, in our name and on our behalf. The Father has given him the blessed Holy Spirit in order that he, the Beloved Son, may pour out the Spirit upon the believers. Now *there* is mystery that should be at the very fore of our theological explorations of the Trinity. The power, the majesty, is in considering the faithful questions that arise from such mighty acts of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: What kind of God is the Spirit who gives himself to be given? Who is this Son who descends to become what we are, even unto death, and then returns still bearing our human nature, wedded to us unto eternity? Who is this Father who gives his Son for the world, and who gives his Spirit to his earthly children?

This doesn’t sound anything like the abusive father projected out of the pain that has hardened into anger in those who rail against our heavenly Father’s inclusion in liturgy. Rather, this is a story so personal, so wonderful that I want to consider it forever. Why in the world would I ever trade away the words by which that story was given? Who would have an interest in keeping them out of a paper on the Trinity in favor of setting me free to say “Rock, Cornerstone and Temple” (p. 7), as if those made any sense without constant reference to the heart of the gospel narrative, the relation of the Father and the Son in the Spirit. If the Biblical language is indeed our anchor concerning language about God, as the paper asserts, the final draft certainly worked hard to pull up the anchor and cut us loose in a sea of metaphors.

Frankly, I don’t mind most of the metaphors suggested because they are Biblical. But they are not primary, and they only have integrity if tethered, not just in a titular way, but in a dynamic, constant interaction with what is revealed as essential: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And, I do not accept the paper’s implication that it may be idolatrous (p. 6) to insist on the primacy of this language. I prefer to stake my fate at the judgment with Paul who declared, “yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (I Cor. 8: 6).

A Basic Error

So how has a task force allowed this to happen? A very basic theological error has been made. The writers are even aware that such a mistake is possible, yet they make it. They lift up the abstract theological language, “Triune God,” “Trinity,” and “Triune Persons” as primary and reduce the revealed names to metaphors. Now I love the phrase “The Triune God.” In fact, it near brings me to tears to recall the voice of my beloved mentor, James Torrance, speaking of the Triune God of Grace. But Trinity and Triune God are not Biblical terms. They are theological terms employed by the church to enshrine the Biblical truths and protect them from error. What is basic in our speaking of God, then, is the way he speaks of himself. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God. When we talk about what language *we* will use to speak of *the Trinity*, we have it all backwards. We are putting the abstract concept (and ourselves) first, not the revealed reality, the revealed names. The proper order is to ask, “What theological term could help us enshrine the reality of this God who makes himself known as the Father of the Son whom he sent to us, of the Son who gave his life for us and invited us to call

his Father our Father, and of the Spirit by whom we are included in the relationship of love between the Father and the Son?”

Now in some places the writers seem to realize this. They know that the only way we know who God is is by his self-revelation. They know that the supreme revelation of God is Jesus Christ. But they avoid the conclusions to be drawn from this truth. In the penultimate draft, the document included the phrase “God is none other than the one who is for us once for all in Jesus Christ.” That echoes the wonderful Christocentric theology of Barth and Torrance. But the “none other” was removed in the final draft. Someone knew what kind of bind it would put the task force in. If God is *none other* than who he is to us in Jesus, then how Jesus names God and instructs us to name God becomes normative for us. Not one metaphor among many, but a name revealed. Jesus who assumed the divine name I Am to himself (Jn. 8: 58) called God his Father (Mt. 11: 25, Jn. 17) and commanded us to do so (Mt. 6: 9, Jn. 20: 17). He named himself the Son (Jn. 5: 30-47). He spoke of the Spirit whom the Father would send in Jesus’ name (Jn. 14-16). He declared, “No one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Lk. 11: 22). This is the heart of the gospel witness to God who shows himself to be triune.

The task force ignores these passages (except the sending of the Spirit) and others like them. Thus, there is no mention of the *homoousion*, the great phrase that arose out of reflection on such verses. Athanasius employed it to secure what became the church’s historic understanding of the Trinity. That the Son is *homoousios tou patri*, of the same being as the Father, means that the Jesus the Son is very God of very God. It was this kind of reflection on the person of Jesus in relation to his Father, when considered in relation to the Spirit who is also *homoousios* with the Father and the Son, that led to the mature doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, it was those very Trinitarian discussions that gave rise to our current understanding of the meaning of *person* as a being in relationship. *God’s Love Overflowing* does not recognize the very source for its emphasis on the relations within God, because to do so would be to admit that the Father-Son relationship in the bond of the Spirit is at the heart of all Trinitarian doctrine. Thus, no matter what true and good things about the Triune God are declared, the deepest reality of the love between the Father and the Son in the Spirit has been obscured.

Conclusion

Succinctly, the paper places Father, Son and Holy Spirit as among the many Scriptural metaphors, and does not acknowledge them as divinely revealed names. It gives a nod to language it calls “classic” but is much more interested in getting past those terms to try on new names. If we as a denomination were deeply rooted in the Scriptures and the patristic writings concerning the Trinity, if we had a history of teaching and exploring the daring orthodoxy of our earliest creeds and knew how to articulate what common heresies orthodoxy corrects *for the good of our souls*, then perhaps there would be warrant to build on that foundation with an exploration of other ways of speaking about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But we are not at such a mature place, not even close.

So who stands to gain from a paper like this? In “Orphaned in Worship,” I have previously documented which constituencies have a strong interest in marginalizing the Father^{iv}

(www). Now renewal-minded Presbyterians need to ask if *God's Love Overflowing* will foster or check the incursion of "progressive" theology into our life as a denomination. Will it enable readers to enter the vast storehouse of theological treasure in our heritage and gaze upon our wonderful gospel jewels? Or will it encourage neglect of the treasure in favor of some shiny baubles?

Of course, the more urgent question for evangelicals is whether or not we will even read the paper.^v Then, reading it, will we do the work to explore what it is saying and not saying? Finally, will we care enough to speak up? These last ones are actually the questions that worry me the most.

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ⁱ Read the paragraph on p. 33 that begins with the sentence "Jesus Christ is anointed by God and sent into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit." How do we understand the time sequence involved without tumbling into adoptionism (Jesus was a man picked by God) or some kind of preincarnate Christ? The sentence in the penultimate draft read, "The Father sends the Son in the power of the Spirit..." Now that makes theological sense, but, alas, includes the words "Father" and "Son."

ⁱⁱ Lest the reader feel that I am being overly scrupulous, scholarly accuracy is an issue throughout the paper. The Matthew 3: 17 is rendered as Beloved Child (p. 6), though the Greek clearly means Son. Quotations from Basil and Gregory of Nyssa are given with no references. I did word searches on the relevant volumes from a standard edition of the Post-Nicene Fathers but could not find the quotations. That doesn't mean that the quotations are spurious, but the writers prevent me from doing what good scholars do: check the references for context, clarification and accuracy. I want to know where I can find words attributed to Catherine of Siena, Hilary or Augustine. If words from Scripture and our confessions are altered, is it not reasonable to want to see the other sources? Again, this is more than picky. The quotation attributed (on p. 7) to Gregory gives us Sun, Ray and Warmth for Trinitarian metaphors. That's lovely, but readers, I think, should understand that in the place I found where Gregory does use the sun and its rays as an image, the passage is replete with the Father and the Son in relationship. Their intimacy, as eternal Father and Son, is the source that makes the metaphor work. Check the paragraph in Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 8.1 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 5, available online at http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-05/Npnf2-05-19.htm#P1811_1055289. A very different disposition toward the Father is communicated. Further, I found interesting the references to Calvin's Commentary on Isaiah (pp. 6 & 11) in which he notes the ways in which God is like a mother to us (those citations were precisely given!). These are stellar passages, and we can all marvel at the 16th century scholars depth and breadth. But of course there is no doubt of the primacy Calvin placed on Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Discovering maternal aspects in God did not send him away from the Father.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is one quotation from John of Damascus that speaks to the Father-Son-Spirit relation. On p. 17, we read, "Through the Holy Spirit we know Christ, who is God and the Son of God, and in the Son we see the Father. The Word is the messenger who makes the divine nature perceptible to us, and the Spirit is the interpreter of the Word." That's a great passage to include, but, sadly, the way the Son illumines the Father by the Spirit is not expanded upon.

^{iv} Visit [.theologymatters.com/TMIssues/MarApr03.pdf](http://www.theologymatters.com/TMIssues/MarApr03.pdf)

^v Visit www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/issues/trinityfull.pdf