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Self-giving as the Inner Life of God

Arthur McGill
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WE HAVE been speaking of God with respect to the power that he exercises toward men. But we must go farther and ask: *What is God within himself, in his inner nature and fundamental character?*

In the Christian world today almost no one talks about God himself. Christians are preoccupied instead either with God's acts—with the good things that he gives us and the moral demands that he makes on us, with Jesus whom he sent and the church that he created—or with the human response to God's acts—with *our* faith and *our* doubt, with *our* believing and unbelieving. But attention never seems to pass beyond these events on the human scene to God as he is in himself. Even a text like "God is love" is taken to refer, not to God in himself, but to what his actions do on our behalf.

In fact, as will become clear in the next chapter, there is a great danger in this modern procedure. If God's acts of service and love toward men are not grounded upon the nature and life that God has within himself, they may seem arbitrary and unreliable.

It was to avoid this danger that the fathers in the early

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church made a distinction between two kinds of Christian knowledge. There is, first, the kind of knowledge with which we are familiar today, the knowledge of God's acts and of the results of his acts. The early fathers called this knowledge "economy," from the Greek word for "work." Economy was the knowledge of God's works, and that meant not only knowledge of his two great works, creating the world and saving men, but also every detail in the life of the world that might have to do with God. Matters of life and death, good and evil, order and disorder, the governing of the state and the significance of the home, all belonged to economy.

Alongside of economy, however, the fathers insisted that the Christian also had a knowledge of God himself, and this knowledge they called "theology." It was not gained by looking at God directly. In this life, men never see God. They only see his works. But in and through his works they come to know him as he is in himself. God is light. He is unobstructed openness. When we meet him in his actions, therefore, we meet him in his full openness toward us. In fact, the fathers believed that the works that God does toward us are done not for their own sakes but primarily to enable us to know him. As it is said in the Gospel of John, "This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (ch. 17:3). In every theological investigation, it is important to pass on from "economy," the knowledge of what God does in Christ, to "theology," the knowledge of what or who God is.

If theology is concerned with the knowledge of who or what God is, then one may say that the content of

theology is the *doctrine of the Trinity*. For the doctrine of the Trinity is just this: an attempt to clarify the nature of God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ.

IS THE TRINITY AN OUTMODED DOCTRINE?

In the last two centuries the doctrine of the Trinity has been almost a dead letter for much Christian thought. Schleiermacher thought it in need of revision, and even so orthodox a figure as Karl Barth gives it a routine treatment in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*. At the popular level it is considered to be nothing but a feat of intellectual nonsense. God is supposed to be one and three at the same time. If you find this unintelligible, that simply proves how incomprehensible is the reality of God and how bold is the Christian faith! Needless to say, any doctrine that makes God into a numerical monstrosity and that treats his presence in Christ as serving to stupefy the human mind should be rejected out of hand.

There is a further difficulty. The Trinity did not become a central focus for Christian reflection until the fourth century. This troubles those who have a static view of Christian truth and who believe that such truth can only be what stands forth as self-evident in the New Testament. But such a fixed notion of truth has not prevailed throughout the history of the Christian church. On the contrary, each age penetrates and focuses on the good news in its own way, and if first-century Christians were gripped by the resurrection, nineteenth-century Christians centered on service to the neighbor. There is a depth and manifoldness about the revelation

of God in Jesus, and the theological preoccupations of no single period in the church's history should be allowed to tyrannize the whole church.

The Trinity was clearly *the* concern of Eastern Christians of the fourth century. What we must ask is not, Was this concern also central for the New Testament writers? but rather, Is this rooted in the Biblical presentation of Jesus? Is this doctrine truly offered as a clarification and penetration of the powerfulness of God which gathers men into itself through Jesus? I hope that my exposition of the doctrine will show that the answer to both of these questions is yes.

THE UNFINISHED WORK OF NICAEA

By far the best way to approach the question of the Trinity is to examine the struggles that went on between Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, and Arius, a priest in the church of Alexandria. This conflict grew out of the Council of bishops held at Nicaea near Constantinople in A.D. 325.

The creed adopted by the majority of bishops at that Council states the decisive point: Jesus Christ is "the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God, begotten not made, one in substance with the Father."

Two points stand out here. First, there is the insistence that the divine power met in Jesus—what is called the "Son" of God—is generated from God the Father. After the analogy of human generation, the Son derives his reality from the very being of the Father. He is not

made by God from some reality external to God; he is not created out of nothing, like the Creation. He is begotten from the very "substance" of God.

Secondly, and following from this first point, the creed asserts that through this process of begetting, the Son receives the *full measure* of God's reality. He himself is fully and genuinely divine, "God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God." Here the bishops at Nicaea were simply repeating a theme found so prominently in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John. There we read that the Father has given all things to the Son, all his knowledge, all his power, all his glory (chs. 16: 15; 3: 35). The New Testament speaks of the Son, whom men encounter in Jesus Christ, as the perfect image of God the Father (Heb. 1:3), and as having complete equality with God the Father (Phil. 2: 6).

There is a third point about the Son, which is not explicit in the Creed of Nicaea, but which became very important in the later discussion. The Son in his own reality does everything for the sake of the Father. This again is simply the development of a theme in the Gospel of John, where it is said that the Son never seeks to do his own will (ch. 5: 30), never acts on his own authority (ch. 8: 28), never offers his own teaching (ch. 7: 16). In short, the Son never seeks his own glory but only the glory of the Father who sent him (v. 18). If the Son receives the fullness of divine glory from the Father, he offers all that he has received back to the Father. Therefore, whoever believes in the Son or praises the Son or adores the glory of the Son does not really believe in or praise or adore the Son as such, but actually believes

in and praises and adores the Father. For everything believable or praiseworthy or adorable which the Son possesses in himself he offers to the glory of the Father.

Here, in summary, are the three elements in the Nicene position: the Son that men encounter in Jesus and as Jesus (1) is derived from the very being of the Father, (2) is completely equal to the Father in all respects (i.e., he receives all that the Father has), and (3) fully glorifies the Father, offering as praise to the Father all that he has received.

Such was the Nicene position, accepted by the majority at the Council. But in the years that followed, Athanasius took a step beyond this and thereby raised an important issue. The Nicene Creed clearly asserts that the Son is derived from God the Father, is fully equal to God the Father, and lives for the glory of God the Father. But the creed does not make clear to what extent the Son's generation from God, equality with God, and praise of God are an *essential and permanent dimension within God's eternal being*. Might it be that God is fully and completely God in his mode as the Father? However divine the Son may be, might the Father's generation of the Son still constitute an action of God over and above what he is in his basic divine reality? Might the Son, for all his likeness to the Father, still be accidental to God's being as God? The creed insists on the full divinity of the Son, but it does not insist on the eternal and essential place of Sonship within divinity. And that was the theme that Athanasius developed. Generation, he maintained, belongs to the permanent, eternal being of God. This is an aspect—no, this is *the* essential aspect—of God's divinity.

therefore, is love, the bestowing love of the Father for the Son and the adoring love of the Son for the Father.

Let us put the matter another way. Between the Father and the Son there exists a relationship of *total and mutual self-giving*. The Father and the Son are not just entities who contain within themselves a divine level of reality, and who tenaciously hold onto what they have, in the fashion of Arius' God. The Father and the Son have divine reality in a *state of action*, in the action of total self-communication. In fact, Athanasius' point is that this state of action, this act of self-giving is the *essential mark of God's divinity*. The Father and the Son do not have their identity in terms of the reality that they possess and hold onto within themselves, but in terms of their giving this reality to the other. If God's reality in himself is the relation between Father and Son, then God is this staggering dynamism of mutual self-communication. Because the Father holds nothing back but gives all his glory to the Son, and because the Son holds nothing back but offers all that he has to glorify the Father, God within himself is supreme in the order of love.

NEEDY, YET STILL GOD!

Obviously, Athanasius had to reject the notion of God's unity which Arius championed. God, he held, is not a monad, a static, undifferentiated, monolithic "blob." The distinction between the Father and the Son is not external or accidental or temporary. God never existed from all eternity as a solitary being. Always there

was the Father generating the Son, and the Son glorifying the Father.

For Athanasius the simple unitarian notion of Arius is too crude a notion for God. God is one, yes, but in a very special sense. The content of his reality is one, because the being of the Son is derived from the Father and therefore possesses no new content. But more important, God's unity is a unity of love, a unity in which the identity of each party is not swallowed up and annihilated but established. Arius' notion of unity is devoid of the richness—and the mystery—of God's unity. It is devoid of the unity of love.

More interestingly, Athanasius points out that any God with the kind of monadic unity and self-sufficient absoluteness that Arius celebrates must be, within himself, an *agonos theos*, a sterile God. Such a God is not generative, not fecund; in short, he must be a dead God. He must be a light that does not shine, a fountain that has gone dry, a barren thing. And if within himself he is such an inert and barren unitarian monad, asks Athanasius, then where does he get the creative power to produce the world?

Finally, Athanasius identifies the dynamic giving between the Father and the Son as the inner life of God, as the life that vitalizes God, not only in all his dealings with his creatures, but also eternally within himself. For that reason Athanasius can insist that generation of the Son by the Father and the adoration of the Father by the Son are not acts done just once, but permanent and eternal *activities* within the being of God. Throughout all eternity the Father is communicating his reality to the

Son; and throughout all eternity the Son is giving all glory to the Father. These are not acts which cause changes in God; they are eternal processes which make up God's essential aliveness.

The issue between Arius and Athanasius, then, has nothing to do with whether God is one or two or three. It has to do with what quality makes God divine, what quality constitutes his perfection. From the perspective of self-contained absoluteness and transcendent supremacy, Arius can only look upon God's begetting a Son as a grotesque blasphemy. God, he observed, must be very imperfect if he must generate a Son in order to become complete. But from the perspective of self-communicating love, Athanasius can look upon the dependent derived Son, not as a blot upon God's divinity, but as a mode of its perfection. Love and not ^{mere} transcendence, giving and not being superior, are the qualities that mark God's divinity.

Since giving entails receiving, there must be a receptive, dependent, needy pole within the being of God. It is pride—and not love—that fears dependence and that worships transcendence. But Arius insists that the Father's divinity requires him to remain superior to the Son and to keep his divine reality exclusively for himself. Arius treats incommunicability—that is, the inability to give and share itself—as the decisive mark of God. In so doing, he is worshipping the very opposite of God.

But we, Athanasius says, believe that the Father is almighty, not because he keeps the Son inferior to himself and uses the Son to display his own superiority, like a Gentile lord, but because he generates the Son as true

God from his own substance and confers all his glory upon the Son.

Therefore, in challenging the whole religious viewpoint of Arius, it was only necessary for Athanasius to insist on one point: the Son, who is generated and derived, who is not sufficient in himself but needy, is still perfect God—God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God.

SERVICE, NOT DOMINATION

We noted in Chapter 3 that God exercises his power in Jesus Christ in the mode of service, and not in the mode of domination. The Trinitarian doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son understands this exercise as rooted in God's own nature. Thus, within himself God is a dynamism of giving and receiving, and of needing and serving. We must now ask: *What is God like in his relations to men?*

There can be only one answer. God exercises his power in relation to men through self-giving love and service. There is no possibility that by some fluke God should suddenly decide to suspend this kind of powerfulness and become as a Gentile lord who dominates his creatures with violent power. God has a specific character, a specific kind of powerfulness within himself. He can no more dissociate himself from that mode of power than he can dissociate himself from his own inner reality.

When Jesus stands opposed to all acts of violence and to all violent powers, and when he acts to free men from those forces which oppress and torment them, he does so as the revealer of God's own essential life.

ATHANASIUS AND ARIUS: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

Let us conclude this chapter by setting the Trinitarian God and the Arian God in the sharpest possible contrast so that all the issues may be clearly seen.

At one level, we are concerned with the question of God's essential being, of the quality that gives him his identity as God. According to Arius, the indispensable mark of divinity is unbegottenness, or what we might call absolute independence. God is divine because he exists wholly from within himself, wholly on his own. He needs nothing, he depends on nothing, he is in essence related to nothing. And this, according to the Trinitarian theologians, is precisely what the powerfulness disclosed in Jesus Christ discredits. For as these theologians read certain passages in the Gospel of John, the powerfulness in Jesus is characterized as fully and perfectly divine, and yet at the same time, as totally and continually derived.

In other words, as present in Jesus, God's powerfulness has a form—the form of dependence—which Arius can only reject as quite unworthy of God. In place of self-contained and self-sufficient autonomy, what the Trinitarian theologians see as the defining mark of divinity is that totality of self-giving which proceeds between the Father and the Son. The Father gives all that he is to the Son; the Son obeys the Father and offers all that he is back to the Father. The Father and the Son are not divine, therefore, in terms of the richness of reality that they possess within themselves. They do not exist closed up within their own being. Rather, they are divine in terms of the richness of the reality that they

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communicate to the other. Against Arius' reverential awe of the absolute, Gregory of Nazianzus puts the alternative:

Thus much we for our part will be bold to say, that if it is a great thing for the Father to be unoriginate, it is no less a thing for the Son to have been begotten of such a Father. For not only would he share the glory of the unoriginate, since he is of the unoriginate, but he has the added glory of his generation, a thing so great and august in the eyes of all those who are not altogether groveling and material in mind. (*Theological Orations* III. 11; *Christology of the Later Fathers*, p. 168.)

If Arius identifies God's divinity with his absolute independence, Gregory identifies it with his inner life of self-giving.

At a second level, we are faced with the question of how God exercises his divinity in relation to the world and to men. For Arius, God's complete self-sufficiency means that with the world he appears in the form of absolute domination. As God depends on nothing, everything else depends on him. As he is completely rich, everything else is completely poor. As he is completely powerful, everything else is completely weak, and is called to revere his power. And as he can affect other things without himself being affected, i.e., through an intermediary agent, everything else in its activity affects itself and other things, but not him.

According to the Trinitarian theologians, nothing could be more contrary to the power of God than men encounter in Jesus Christ than this Arian picture. Far from being a vessel of dominating mastery, Jesus is just the opposite. He does not come on clouds of glory. He does not stand over his followers, ordering them hither

and yon to do his bidding and vindicating his authority by unopposable acts of self-assertion. In the Epistle to Diognetus, an early Christian writing, the question is asked, Why did God send his Son?

To rule as a tyrant, to inspire terror and astonishment? No, he did not. No, he sent him in gentleness and mildness. To be sure, as a king sending his royal son, he sent him as God. But he sent him as to men, as saving and persuading them, and not as exercising force. For force is no attribute of God.

"Force is no attribute of God"—that is the basic principle for the Trinitarian theologians. God's divinity does not consist in his ability to push things around, to make and break, to impose his will from the security of some heavenly remoteness, and to sit in grandeur while all the world does his bidding. Far from staying above the world, he sends his own glory into it. Far from imposing, he invites and persuades. Far from demanding service from men in order to enhance himself, he gives his life in service to men for their enhancement. But God acts toward the world in this way because within himself he is a life of self-giving.

The Victory of Christ

IN THE previous chapter we considered the depths of God. Is our inquiry now at an end? One might be tempted to stop the investigation at this point. After all, the question of the inner life of God himself seems to be the final subject. The life of God is the crown of all reality. And God is the goal of the Christian life and its ultimate resting place.

But in the present world men have not yet attained this goal. They cannot stand directly and fully within the divine life. As Paul writes, "We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord." (II Cor. 5: 6.) Evil remains a profound factor in human existence. Men are oriented toward the life and light of God's inner reality only insofar as God frees them from evil and leads them toward himself. But such orientation is incomplete and partial at best. The Christ through whom men are related to eternal life now stands before them as the one who is victoriously overcoming the forces of evil.

And therefore it would be quite mistaken to think that because we have considered the fullness of God, all