

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN THE TRINITY: A REVIEW ESSAY OF DONALD FAIRBAIRN'S *LIFE IN THE TRINITY*



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As I was rearranging some shelves recently, I was struck by the fact that my books on spiritual formation occupy a peculiar region. They live somewhere toward the end of the whole theological collection, after the books on Christology and pneumatology and ecclesiology; in fact they're about as far from the books about God and Christ as you can get. They're somewhere between ethics and eschatology. In the Library of Congress classification system, they're around BX4511. That's what we used to call practical theology, and it's a region of books more or less dominated by studies of technique.

I know there's nothing metaphysically prescriptive about book organizing. Books that are intimately near to each other in spirit can be physically far from each other on the shelf. But the reason my attention was drawn to the strange loneliness of my spiritual formation books at the end of the shelf is that their distant placement did in fact strike me as the outward sign of an inward reality.

Here is the problem: Spiritual formation is, or ought to be, all about the change that comes about in people when they encounter the true and living God in deep and transformative ways. The subject of God should loom very large in the field of formation. As A. W. Tozer famously wrote in *The Knowledge of the Holy*, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." To say the same thing in more Trinitarian idiom, the person and work of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, are theological subjects without which spiritual formation is impossible. What are we to read if we want to think great thoughts of God and to be intentional about spiritual formation simultaneously?

There are a number of writers who manage to do theological reflection with enough scope to take in both poles at once. Some books succeed at this task so well that they actually resist being shelved at either end of the spectrum. In my estimation, one such volume from the past decade is Donald Fairbairn's 2009 book *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology*

*with the Help of the Church Fathers*.<sup>1</sup> Fairbairn is professor of early Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary—that is, his expertise is in patristics, not in systematic theology or spirituality. In many ways, this book represents a popularization and extension of his specifically patristic scholarship, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Donald Fairbairn, Oxford 2003). There Fairbairn argued that the reason there is no separate treatment of soteriology in patristic writings is that the patristic treatment of Christology was already so soteriologically determined that the major decisions about salvation were already bundled into the discussion about the person of Christ. In *Life in the Trinity* he generalizes and extends that argument, with constant reference to the church fathers. By calling on the help of the church fathers, Fairbairn reaches back to a classical approach that predates the split between doctrine and devotion, between contemplation of God and transformation of the self, between theology and spirituality. By being well grounded in his own field, Fairbairn is able to reconcile the other two fields. The patristic angle also functions properly here to make the book more biblical. His method is not merely to pile up quotations from the fathers. One of the things Fairbairn has learned from the fathers is to pay close attention to the words of Scripture, so the book mainly develops as a reading of select Bible passages according to the way the Fathers read them. While what Fairbairn presents here is not detailed scholarly exegesis of the biblical passages in question, it is certainly biblical exposition. In that sense, *Life in the Trinity* bridges not only the systematics-spirituality gap, but also the gap between those disciplines and the field of biblical studies. Of course he can only accomplish this great unifying performance by carefully staying at the introductory level. By framing *Life in the Trinity* as a supplemental textbook to be used in basic doctrine classes, Fairbairn effectively recommends that all students of doctrine ought to start out by learning what he has learned from the church fathers. I second that recommendation: everybody setting out to study theology or spirituality (or for that matter, biblical studies) ought to learn what Fairbairn has learned from patristics.

What he has learned is that the heart of Christianity is the Son's relationship to the Father. In Fairbairn's view, the central idea of Christian faith is "believers' sharing in the warm fellowship that has existed from all eternity between the persons of the Trinity, a fellowship that Scripture announces to us when it speaks of the Father's love for his Son" (p. 11). Fairbairn approaches this central point from several different angles, but the most effective is his leisurely investigation of John 13–17, Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples just before his trial and death. Fairbairn explores that Johannine passage to see in it first of all the character of the relation-

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).



ship that the Father and Son share in the Holy Spirit. That relationship, which they had "before the world began," is an aspect of the eternal mystery of God's own life. Next Fairbairn explores the character of the salvation that Christ accomplishes for us, but he explores this without really changing the subject. Salvation receives its content and its character from the Father-Son relation, so as he turns to describe our relation to God, he is able to continue his description of the Son's relation to the Father. This goes a long way toward bridging the gap between the doctrine of God and the doctrine of salvation. Though Fairbairn's prose is not especially rich or elevated (his authorial virtues are more in the range of clarity and accessibility), he keeps the reader's attention focused on the nature of God and the nature of salvation: both at the same time.

This love displayed in the Father-Son relation is the heart of the book, and true to his word, Fairbairn structures all ten chapters around this theme. There are chapters on the Trinity, the fall, the history of redemption, the incarnation, the atonement, salvation, and the Christian life. His focus on Jesus as the Son of the Father enables him to survey this vast doctrinal territory without getting lost in the details. Good systematic theologians are always looking for the grand lines of continuity that hold doctrines together; Fairbairn has found what is arguably the most important of them. Spiritual formation writers are always looking for the doctrines that make a difference in lived experience; Fairbairn has identified one that is as crucial as it is under-utilized.

The result is a unique introduction to theology, one that reorganizes the conventional material around "a different set of integrative themes than is typical in Western theology" (xiii). Where evangelical Protestants might expect the core of a theological system to be found a fall-and-redemption schema, *Life in the Trinity* is organized around a core that is Trinitarian-incarnational. The other doctrines, including the typical Protestant and evangelical favorites, find their subordinate places around that. The dark doctrines of sin and fallenness show up mainly by contrast to the central theme of sonship. Fairbairn argues that as creatures of God we stand in a relation to God our origin that is analogous to sonship, a relation that leans teleologically toward full sonship. The fall, then, is "our loss of the son's relationship to the Father." But before he describes this fall, he has already spent a chapter describing "life as it was meant to be," which is "a reflection of the Father-Son relationship" (p. 59). Fairbairn identifies the elements of that Son-life that lend a glory to human life: "a new sense of significance based not on what we do but on our connection to God, a new kind of peace that is more than just the absence of conflict and a new appreciation of work as the means by which we act out the love between the persons of the Trinity" (77). A human life properly oriented toward God is the life of a son of God: resting in true significance, enjoying an imperturbably deep peace, and working toward valuable ends. After describing each of these in his characteristic way, so that almost every statement applies both to the second person of the Trinity and to his disciples, Fairbairn adds

a fourth: the proper conduct of relationships. Taken together and viewed in trinitarian context, these four features provide the content of both ethics and spiritual formation.

The topic of conversion may seem to be too long delayed for evangelical sensibilities: it doesn't come in for explicit attention until chapter nine, on page 184 out of 237. But much has been gained by postponing this topic for so long. Fairbairn has so lovingly described the long line of sonship—from eternal sonship in the essence of God, through incarnate sonship as the Trinity makes this uncreated relationship available in created form, to adoptive sonship as the relation proper to exactly one creature becomes available by grace to others—that the subject has accumulated unspeakable riches. It arrives under the heading not only of "becoming Christian," but more profoundly as "entering the son's relationship to the Father." The mystery of conversion and the ministries of evangelism and discipleship truly thrive here in their native soil. This long approach to the subject banishes beforehand the lurking fear that conversion is a small thing, a mere transaction at the end of which sins have been judicially forgiven. In proper trinitarian perspective, of course, sin has been forgiven. But much more has also been said, and the convert has a deeper understanding of the reality that produces this result, and a familiar sense of the nature of the forgiven life.

Partly because Fairbairn is commending a very high soteriology, and partly because he is quoting the church fathers copiously, one issue that demands attention is *theosis* or deification. Fairbairn is alert to his role as a theological translator bridging between patristic and contemporary evangelical Protestant terms. He very forthrightly addresses the range of meanings that deification language has had in the theological tradition and in contemporary reclaimings. Three of the most influential possibilities include (1) sharing in the status of divine children as forgiven and freed from guilt, (2) sharing in divine qualities by grace, and (3) sharing in the relational aspects of sonship, especially the character of his fellowship with the Father. Fairbairn worries that the first possibility says too little (and indeed, few people today would use the heady language of *theosis* to invoke this changed status) and the second says too much (as in fact it shades off into rank unorthodoxy in the hands of ungrounded teachers). For his own part, of course, Fairbairn commends the third option as the "best and most biblical," (11) because the thesis of his book is that "our sharing in the Father-Son relationship is at the center of what it means for us to participate in God" (37). In fact, after his clear explanation of its range, Fairbairn refrains from using *theosis* language throughout most of the book. It is of course present in several patristic quotations, but Fairbairn's point is to train readers to interpret this patristic way of speaking as being mainly about Spiritual participation in the Father-Son relationship. Is this fair to the church fathers? I believe it is. If the training works, evangelical readers who encounter *theosis* language in the church fathers will immediately associate it with a Trinitarian reality rather than a flirtation with crossing the creator-creature boundary.



Finally, Fairbairn delivers a powerful conclusion in chapter ten, in which he turns for the first time to the Christian life proper. It would be easy to take this final section as the place where a book of theology devotes a few pages (only about 30) to the Christian life and spiritual formation. But to take it that way would be to miss the point. Fairbairn sub-titles this chapter "another look at reflecting the Father-Son relationship," partly because he has already talked in a previous chapter about the qualities of human sonship (chapter four, on significance, peace, work, and relationships), but mainly because the entire book has been about this. The discussion of God, and of Christ, and of grace, have all along been accounts of the form of life that must come to take place in us. The Trinitarian shape of human sanctification, the form of our formation, is the factor so often ignored in spiritual formation writing.

Of course much more could be said about the details, the techniques and the goals of spiritual formation. Books should be written, including books of the type that dwell securely down at the BX4511 end of the shelf, far removed from books on the doctrine of God. Not every project can focus on one of the great central realities that bind together all the theological disciplines and all the reaches of the spiritual life. Not every book should be a flyover introduction to such large stretches of spiritual terrain. But is it too much to hope for a rising generation of theologians and spiritual formation practitioners who have been introduced to the centrality of the Father-Son relation, to take the message of *Life in the Trinity* out into the details of their work? The book has already enjoyed considerable influence, and would strengthen the spiritual formation movement considerably if it received even more widespread recognition.

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