

THE FATHER ALMIGHTY

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The great creeds arrange the Christian faith in a clear, trinitarian outline, leading our confession confidently from Father to Son to Holy Spirit. And when we linger to consider each of the three divine Persons in turn, the creeds meet our minds: we can recite a robust creedal Christology (He is Lord, Son of God, eternally begotten, born of the virgin, crucified and risen) and go on to an answering creedal pneumatology (He is Lord and giver of life, He spoke through the prophets and is worshipped and glorified).

But something surprising happens when we seek in the creeds for a biblical theology of God the Father. First, the section is brief: “God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” Here is just one great attribute and one great action. Second, what is said about the Father also applies to the Son and the Spirit, who are certainly almighty (“the Father almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty,” as the Athanasian Creed puts it) and who must be included in creating all things. And third, what is said about the Father almost seems to be what we could say about God in general. As a result, we seem to come away from the creed without having learned a doctrine of the Father as a Person in particular. Even in systematic

theology, we have words for the doctrines of the Son and the Spirit: Christology and pneumatology. But we somehow get by without a word for the doctrine of the Father: Patrology? Paterology?

To be sure, there is no Father-forgetfulness in the creeds. Far be it from us to bring such an accusation against the venerable confessions of faith that constantly keep worshipers mindful of “the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” But the Father-brevity gives the creeds a tendency to set the doctrine of the Father so close to other doctrines (between the doctrine of God’s oneness and then the doctrine of the Son) that the Father’s distinct personhood is almost concealed behind them.

We might even sympathize with the Apostle Philip who asked Jesus, “‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us,’ to which Jesus replied, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’” (John 14:9-10). What Jesus says here is intentionally striking, and makes doctrinally correct theologians want to scramble for some obvious trinitarian distinctions: the Father is not the Son, after all! And in fact, Jesus Himself follows up with some theology, in the form of profound and far-reaching instruction about the Father and the Son: “Do you not believe

that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does His works.” (John 14:10 ESV, modified) If we understand what Jesus teaches here, and especially how He teaches about the Father, we will understand what the creed is doing as well.

First, the Father and the Son are mutually within each other: “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” Later tradition will call this doctrine of mutual indwelling *perichoresis*, and it entails that even though we can distinguish Father and Son, we can never have one without the other. They are in each other. As a result, while it might be understandable for us to crave direct knowledge about the Father, we should never expect to get such knowledge except in a way that simultaneously includes knowledge of the Son.

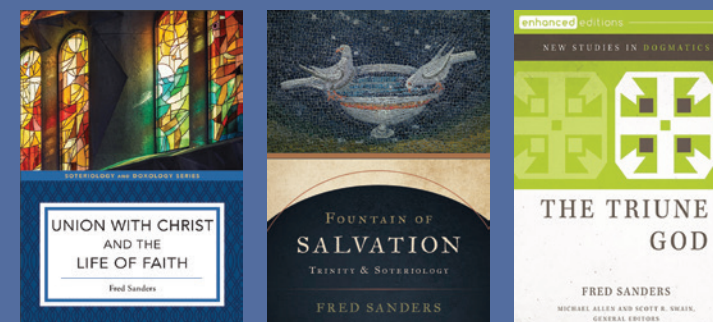
Second, the Father and the Son work all things together: “I do not speak on my own...the Father who dwells in me does His works.” Later tradition will call this doctrine “inseparable operations,” and it entails that Father and Son do not divide up tasks or take turns accomplishing them. Everything God does is done by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together. This includes even the incarnation, in which only the Son assumes human nature into personal union, but the work of assuming that nature is worked by the whole Trinity. It was Lutheran

theologians who took the ancient Augustinian rule that “the works of the Trinity *ad extra* are undivided,” and clarified it by adding that “the properties of each person are, of course, preserved.”¹ Those personal properties are the eternal relations of the persons to each other. The Father is the eternal principle or origin of the Son; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and so on. So just as we should never expect any sort of chemically pure, absolutely Son-free knowledge of the Father, we should not expect the creed to name an action of the Father that is exclusively His.

Third is a point that is less obviously taught in John 10, but which is required to make *perichoresis* and “inseparable operations” go together. The point is that some of the *perichoretic* attributes (eg. almightiness) and some of the “inseparable operations” (eg. creation) are especially helpful reminders of the personal characteristics of particular Persons of the Trinity. Later tradition will call this “appropriation.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit create together, but we can “appropriate” creation to the Father because the world coming from God in time is instructively similar to the Son being eternally from the Father in the divine essence. Think of it: the whole world serves as a cosmic reminder of the Father as the source, and points us toward the eternal relation in which the Father is eternally Father of the Son.

1 Carl Beckwith traces the extension persuasively to Melancthon and Chemnitz in *The Holy Trinity: Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, Vol. III* (Fort Wayne, IN: The Luther Academy, 2016), 328.

READ MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



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