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ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TRINITARIAN METAPHORS AND A CONTEMPORARY ANALOGY FROM MUSIC

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"Explain the Trinity." The challenge conveyed by these words, whether delivered by the seminary professor (to students), the fourth grader in Sunday school (to the teacher) or the neighbor across the fence (to any witnessing Christian) is mind-boggling. The doctrine of the Trinity continues to draw the attention of systematic theologians.[1] Its early development, especially in the context of Christology, has been admirably presented.[2] The witness of historic orthodoxy is manifest. Yet, twenty centuries after Jesus emerged from the baptismal waters to be greeted by the Father's thunderous voice and the descent of the Spirit-dove, the challenge of explanation remains.[3]

In this struggle to connect the nature of God with human comprehension we are at one with the ancient Christians. The fourth-century churches labored, in council and creed, to formulate doctrinal definitions of divine realities.[4] "Explain the Trinity." As varieties of Nicene and Arian parties engaged, terminology (e.g. *prosōpon*, *hypostasis*, *ousia*, *physis*) became increasingly crucial. Yet, as soteriology was the concern that underlay all such deliberations, one truth was clear: Only the Lord, not mere words or theological abstractions, could bring salvation. It was this conviction that led some to further the search for trinitarian metaphors, concrete analogies from daily life that would point others to the life of God. Perhaps Hilary of Poitier best stated the case:

> If in our discussion of the nature and birth of God we adduce certain analogies, let no one suppose that such comparisons are perfect and complete. There can be no comparison between God and earthly things, yet the weakness of our understanding forces us to seek for illustrations from a lower sphere to explain our meaning about loftier themes. The course of daily life shows how our experience in ordinary matters enables us to form conclusions on unfamiliar subjects. We must therefore regard any comparison as helpful to man rather than as descriptive of God, since it suggests, rather than exhausts, the sense we seek. . . . On this principle I proceed with

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[1] Most recently M. Slusser, "The Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology," *TS* 49 (1988) 461-476.

[2] A. Grillemeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* (2d rev. ed.; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975).

[3] Classic treatments include L. Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York: Scribners' Sons, 1944) and K. Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder, 1970).

[4] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3d rev. ed.; New York: McKay, 1972) 167 ff.

> my task, intending to use the terms supplied by God, yet colouring my argument with illustrations drawn from human life.[5]

While Hilary described the purpose and limitations of trinitarian metaphors in his era, it was Tertullian of Carthage, in the previous century, who first popularized them. As the powerful advocate of economic trinitarianism and the first to utilize the term "Trinity" to describe the God of the Christians, his development of the doctrine is a study in itself.[6] His most significant work in this area was that *Against Praxeas* ("Busybody"):[7]

> Following, therefore, the form of these analogies, I confess that I call God and His Word—the Father and His Son—two. For the root and the tree are distinctly two things, but correlatively joined; the fountain and the river are also two forms, but indivisible; so likewise the sun and the ray are two forms, but coherent ones. Everything which proceeds from something else must needs be second to that from which it proceeds, without being on that account separated. Where, however, there is a second, there must be two; and where there is a third, there must be three. Now the Spirit indeed is third from God and the Son; just as the fruit of the tree is third from the root, or as the stream out of the river is third from the fountain, or as the apex of the ray is third from the sun. Nothing, however, is alien from that original source whence it derives its own properties. In like manner the Trinity, flowing down from the Father through intertwined and connected steps, does not at all disturb the monarchy, while it at the same time guards the state of the economy.[8]

Tertullian presented the trinitarian Persons as three manifestations of the one God, by *distinctio* and not by *separatio*. His analogies from the physical world of nature would influence later writers such as Athanasius of Alexandria. Even more far-reaching was his view of the generation of the Son as the act of thinking on the part of the Father.[9] This psychological analogy was developed by Augustine of Hippo in his work *On the Trinity* in a way that, through medieval scholasticism, has become foundational in western Christian thought.[10]

"Explain the Trinity." For the Christian the challenge is timeless. As a youth I can recall being presented with water (solid, liquid, vapor) and the egg (yolk, white, shell) as trinitarian metaphors. Many have found social/relational analogies (following Augustine) preferable to physical/objective ones, due to their closer approximation of God's dynamic nature and their relevance to contemporary life.[11] It is with the desire of communicating the historic faith to a new generation that the following

[5] Hilary of Poitier, *De Trinitate* 1. 19 (NPNF 9, 45).
[6] See J. Moingt, "Theologie trinitaire de Tertullien," *Theologie* 58-70 (1966).
[7] T. Barnes, *Tertullian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 55.
[8] Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeas* 8 (ANF 3, 603).
[9] Ibid. 5-6.
[10] Hilary, *De Trinitate* 8-15.
[11] M. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 1. 338-342.

possibility is suggested: that of presenting the doctrine of the Trinity based on an analogy from music.[12]

As in previous epochs, two criteria must be met by any appropriate trinitarian metaphor. (1) It must offer a clear and familiar illustration drawn from human experience. (2) It must present the truth of the triune God in a manner that is consistent with the Scriptures, though unable to fully express the mystery. The possibility proposed here is that the three Persons of the Godhead (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) find a fitting analogy in three aspects of music (source, score, sound). The remainder of this article will briefly test this proposal in light of the two above-named criteria.

The use of theological analogies from music, as the 1990s approach, has great potential. Doctrinal explanations in traditional theological language (jargon?) not only reach a limited company but also are dismissed as unintelligible or irrelevant by a lost audience. Meanwhile, both in the broad, secular culture and in the Christian experience of spirited and significant worship, music plays a burgeoning role. Recently an evangelical seminary president declared that "the strongest single orientation of young America lies in its absorption with music."[13] Whether in recognition of the source, imitation of the score or participation in the sound, the familiar presence of music itself transcends questions of literacy, class and economics. In its varied expressions it is the *lingua franca* of our age.

Is a consideration of the Trinity, illustrated by this analogy from music, helpful in faithfully communicating the truth of God? The following statements on the three Persons are offered in support of the prospect.

The trinitarian metaphor from music initially draws an analogy between God the Father and music's source. In the human sphere all music has its invisible, intangible source in the mind. There music, as the greatest symphony or the simplest tune, finds its original expression. It was this phenomenon observed, that of the mind alive with music, springing from depths beyond measure, that elicited this statement about the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: "The compositions seem to pour from his mind as if a tap were turned on, letting a fast flowing stream of crystal-clear water pour forth endlessly."[14] This reminds us of the most profound theological truth: In the beginning, God. Then, expressing his very self, God made possible all other beings, all other things. The historic Christian concept of God as thinking and acting Spirit (nonembodied mind) is perceived as problematic by many.[15] The presentation of God the

[12] The focus here is neither on hymnology nor classical music theory but on music in common expression and experience. Thought-provoking is J. Portnoy, *The Philosopher and Music: A Historical Outline* (New York: Humanities, 1954).

[13] H. W. Robinson, "Assumptions About Our Broad Environment," unpublished paper prepared for Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary (February 1987) 7. Quoted by permission.

[14] E. Schaeffer, *Forever Music* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986) 96.

[15] C. G. Kenadjian, "Is the Doctrine that God Is Spirit an Incoherent Concept?", *JETS* 31 (1988) 191-202.

Father as the mind, music's source, enables one both to identify with this doctrine and with the experience of music originating in our minds as evidence of the *imago Dei.*

The trinitarian metaphor from music, secondly, draws an analogy between God the Son and the musical score. In the human sphere, the music alive in the mind is expressed objectively in written form. The score is generated by the thought and act of one who is its musical source. Thereafter it stands as the manifestation of its author, revealed to all who, seeking to experience the music, must find in the score their normative point of reference. This reminds us of yet another truth: Jesus Christ objectively entered the human sphere as the Word of God. The Son is the unique self-revelation of God. All are called to honor this one, first, normative declaration of the mind of God. The fifth-century Christian philosopher Boethius' definition of music suggests the nature of the incarnate Word:

> What music is, anyone may understand by examining his own nature. For what is that which unites the incorporeal activity of the reason with the body, unless it be a certain mutual adaptation and, as it were, a tempering of low and high sounds to a single consonance?[16]

The trinitarian metaphor from music, finally, draws an analogy between God the Holy Spirit and the sound of music. In the human sphere, only one can be the originator of a musical piece, and there are time-space limitations for the original score. What remains is the task of imitation and instrumentation by which the music is spread abroad. When the sound is heard, those listening respond to the composition and, ultimately, to the composer. This is a reminder that God is powerfully present among us in the Holy Spirit. Like sound itself the Paraclete moves in "winds and waves" that can break apart the mightiest stronghold and yet tenderly touch the most sensitive ear. In those who offer themselves as instruments the Spirit orchestrates and harmonizes those gifts that manifest the presence of God. Being "filled with the Spirit" is described in musical terms (Eph 5:18-19). The sixth-century Christian classicist Cassiodorus Senator vividly speaks of this life in the Spirit:

> The discipline of music is diffused through all the actions of our life. First, it is found that if we perform the commandments of the Creator and with pure minds obey the rules he has laid down, every word we speak, every pulsation of our veins, is related by musical rhythms to the powers of harmony. Music indeed is the knowledge of apt modulation. If we live virtuously, we are constantly proved to be under its discipline, but when we commit injustice, we are without music. The heavens and the earth, indeed all things in them which are directed by a higher power, share in this discipline of music.[17]

[16] Boethius, *De Institutione Musica* 1,2, in *Source Readings in Music History Selected and Annotated* (O. Strunk, ed.; New York: Norton, 1950) 84-85.

[17] Cassiodorus Senator, *Institutiones* 1,5(2), in Strunk, ed., *Source* 88.

It is, as Hilary said, our limited understanding that leads us to seek earthly illustrations of heavenly realities. Yet such metaphors and analogies, ancient or modern, are valuable if in fact they point us to the triune God. No illustration taken to its extreme can fully open the divine mystery of the three Persons and "explain the Trinity." But if presenting the doctrine, making use of an analogy from music, brings one into tune with the source, the score and the sounds of eternal life, there is no greater purpose. As Augustine declared near the close of his treatise *On Music*:

> I in my littleness have gathered with you what I could and as I could on such great matters. But, if any read this talk of ours committed to writing, they must know these things have been written by persons much weaker than those who, having followed the authority of the two Testaments, by believing, hoping, and loving, venerate and worship the consubstantial and unchangeable Trinity of the one highest God from whom, through whom and in whom are all things. For they are purified, not by flashing human reasoning, but by the effective and burning fire of charity.[18]

[18] Augustine, *De Musica* 6.17(59) in *Augustine on Music* (Writings of St. Augustine II; R. Taliaferro, ed.; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1947) 378.