

# The Parish Paper

OF  
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH  
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.37 No.52

The Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity

11/19/06

## REDEEMING THE WORLD

Let me begin with an arcane distinction. Like other fields of human endeavour (just think of computers, or cooking), theology makes use of certain technical terms which to outsiders may appear as impenetrable jargon – what my father, a financial journalist with a pithy writing style, would call 'byzantine obscurities' – but to the instructed are a very convenient shorthand for important concepts. (Even journalism has a few.) One of these is the distinction that Christian theologians make between the "theological" Trinity (also sometimes called the "immanent" Trinity) and the "economic" Trinity.

Normally, we use the word "theology" to mean "the study of God" and all that pertains to him; and we use the word "economy" to refer to "the management of financial and material resources". In this technical sense, however, their meaning is somewhat different: "theology" here means "pertaining to God", "economy" refers to God's "management" of the world in accord with his eternal purposes. When we combine these words with the noun "Trinity" we are talking about two distinct ways of understanding the Trinity. The theological (or immanent) Trinity refers to the distinction of persons within the Godhead – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The economic Trinity refers to the distinctions of operations outside the God-head, in the divine economy – his operations as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. The theological Trinity refers to God as he is in himself, the economic Trinity to God as he acts towards us.

As I said, these distinctions may seem arcane – the kind of doctrinal subtlety which even Christians may consider irrelevant. But fine distinctions can have immense consequences. A teaspoon more or less of baking powder spoils the cake; a few degrees of error on the compass can drive a ship aground; a few points on the stock market can add up to millions in profit or loss. And so it is with the doctrine of God. How we think about the Trinity has immense implications for our understanding and practice of the Christian religion as a whole. And so it is critical not to confuse the theological Trinity with the economic Trinity, or to treat them as equivalent.

The most common form of this confusion is found in the use of the formula "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier" as a virtual synonym for "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost". (Christians of a feminist bent, who regard the latter formula with suspicion, are prone to using the former as its substitute.) It is perfectly true that in historic orthodoxy, the Father is especially associated with creation, the Son with

redemption, and the Spirit with sanctification (just think of the Creeds, or the invocations of the Litany). Yet historic orthodoxy never forgot the fact (also reflected in the creeds) that all three persons cooperate in each operation of the divine economy. Thus for instance the Father creates the world, but he does so by his Word who is his Son, and through the Spirit (cf. Genesis 1.1-5; Psalm 33.6; 104.30; Heb. 1.2; John 1.1-3; cf. Nicene Creed, "by whom all things were made" and "the Lord, and Giver of life"). When Christian orthodoxy speaks of the Trinity, it is speaking primarily about the theological Trinity and only secondarily about the economic Trinity.

It seems to me that at least in the tradition of the western church, there was a strong interest in maintaining the proper relation of the economic Trinity to the theological Trinity. One may observe this in the Prayer of Consecration found in the classical Prayer Books (its Scottish-American variant is found on pp. 80-81 of the 1928 edition), as in its predecessor, the ancient Roman canon of the Mass. In these, the primary emphasis is on the sacrifice offered by the incarnate Son to the Father, and the offering of the Church which follows from it. That is to say, the operations of the divine economy (sharply focused on the atoning death of Christ) are subordinated to the relations of the divine persons. What is kept clearly in view, is that through the divine economy, above all the transaction of the cross, the church is brought into the bond of love that unites the persons of the Father and the Son. We are made partakers of the Father's love for the Son, and the Son's love for the Father, which overflows on the cross in "tender mercy toward mankind" and the "full, perfect, and sufficient satisfaction for the sins of the whole world".

It also seems to me that this proper relation of the theological and economic Trinity is upset in more recent liturgies, such as the Eucharistic prayers of the 1979 Prayer Book and its offspring (including the 1985 Canadian Book of Alternative Services and the feminist Eucharistic prayers of more recent years). In these, the emphasis shifts sharply towards the economic Trinity. This appears in at least three ways: first, an overall triadic structure expressive of the economic Trinity (first paragraph - creation; second paragraph - redemption; third paragraph - sanctification); second, diminished use of the language of the Father and the Son for God (reflecting feminist suspicions); and third, vague accounts of the atonement (reflecting liberal Christian embarrassment about and misunderstanding of the classical doctrine).

That may appear to be a small shift of emphasis. But its consequences for the church's preaching and practice have been great. When the Trinity is understood primarily in terms of the divine economy, in terms of God's activity toward us, rather than in terms of God in himself, and the distinction of persons, there is a great danger of the tail's wagging the dog - of our thinking of God primarily in terms of the world. With the best of intentions, we can make the finite and transitory world the measure of the infinite and everlasting God. Not only does this distort the truth about God, it also distorts the truth about the divine economy. When the economic Trinity is no longer clearly subordinated to the theological Trinity, the economy of redemption is comes to be misunderstood in worldly terms. I think this is exactly what has happened in the General Convention Episcopal Church. In next week's Parish Paper, with the help of its (I do not say "our") new presiding bishop's investiture sermon, I propose to show you how.

To be continued

**The Rev. Gavin G. Dunbar**

[send this](#)

[bookmark](#)

[print](#)

[close](#)

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.