

Book Review

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Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family

David J. Engelsma

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As stated in the preface, this work is essentially the Master of Theology thesis submitted by the author, Professor David J. Engelsma, in 1994. It is divided into 5 substantial chapters and covers 134 pages. It is, therefore, a comparatively short book but what it may appear to lack in length, it certainly makes up for in erudition and insight, as we might expect from the writer. Although this is a very difficult and weighty subject, the author handles it with his typical analytical insight. It seems to the reviewer that often theological works treat their subjects in much the same way as a scientist analyses organisms that multiply in a test tube, that is, with cold detachment. Although theology is the queen of the sciences, if it does not begin with worship and devotion, if it does not lead its practitioners to deeper piety and holy awe, then it is sterile and empty. This danger is particularly acute in dealing with the subject before us, the very being of the Almighty. Here we seek to grapple with the profoundest of mysteries and are conscious that we tread on holy ground. Let the reader be encouraged that Prof. Engelsma has brought before us a work of true piety as well as theological perception. This is not an easy subject and the book cannot be taken up as an “easy read;” it is a book, which requires some concerted effort and serious thought and study.

The book begins with a chapter entitled “Unfinished Trinitarian Business.” In this chapter, the writer seeks to paint a picture of where, theologically, we are. He points out that much of the church’s trinitarian thinking has centred on God’s relations with man, rather than the relations within the Godhead. This has been explored, he says, but not formalised. He deals with a development in contemporary theology known as the “Social Analogy of the Trinity.” This conceives of God as a society of persons and the

life of God as social. It is Prof. Engelsma's contention that Reformed theology should "respond positively" to this new emphasis, by taking it to a further level through the application of the doctrine of the covenant. That is not to say that he wishes to embrace contemporary theology's epistemological starting point, as Leonard Hodgson, who begins with the Christian community and reads back into the Godhead. Rather, he begins with God's revelation of Himself in the Holy Scriptures, and an excursus on this occupies the latter part of the first chapter.

The second chapter is entitled "Fear of the Three." This is an historical review of the church's response to this central doctrine. Our author demonstrates that fear of tritheism has meant that the church has not fully embraced the Trinity's true wonder and depth. Beginning with the trinitarian heresies and the church's response to Arianism and Sabellianism, Engelsma points out that,

the church's defense of God's threeness did not indicate a free and ready acceptance of that threeness, much less a lively development of that aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity. Particularly the church in the West was burdened by fear of the three.

Beginning with Augustine and going on through Calvin, the writer traces a certain "timidity" in dealing with the three and a preoccupation with the oneness of God. On through Barth and the Reformed tradition, he finds the same reluctance to embrace the threeness of God. He concludes the chapter with a critique of the social analogy. While finding much to embrace and benefit in this perspective, Prof. Engelsma rejects it for its tendency to deny the oneness of God. So then, whither do we go? The writer's response is found in chapter 3, "The Holy Family."

I have to confess that chapter 3 was a significant intellectual challenge for this poor reviewer, and I needed to read it several times, not because of any weakness in the writing or argument, but simply because of the depth of the subject matter. That said, it is a powerful statement of the threeness of God. It is at the core of the argument of the whole book. In answer to the historical concerns regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, the writer makes the following assertion,

So strong ought the confession of God's threeness to be that it inevitably draws the charge of tritheism. Although a good confession of threeness will easily be able to defend itself against the charge of tritheism, it should draw the charge.

He begins his argument neither with oneness nor threeness but with Jesus Christ, "the proper starting point of trinitarian theology." As he says, our Lord repeatedly states that He and His Father are one. There was nothing new in the concept of God's oneness; what was blasphemous to the Saviour's hearers was His assertion that there are two who share that oneness. Engelsma discusses the concept of persons and shows that at base what is being conceived is the notion of self-consciousness. "Each of the three is conscious of himself and of the others as distinct from himself." However, each differs from the other; they are not the same. They are not alien from one another but the divine persons are utterly distinct, and this is established in the names ascribed to them. In dealing with the begetting of the Son, the writer diverges from Calvin, who restricted this begetting to the Son's *person* (Calvin's doctrine of *aseity*). Our author argues that this doctrine actually undermines the essential oneness of the Father and the Son. He rather contends for the begetting of the Son in His "entirety, person and being."

There follows a section entitled "The Family God." The writer argues that this is an appropriate description of God, not because of His relationship to His creation, but quite simply because it reflects His own being, that of a loving bond of friendship. This is the clear teaching of Scripture. "It is as triune that God is love," says Prof. Engelsma. Indeed, the teaching of Scripture that God is love is proof of the Trinity: "a god consisting of one solitary person could not be love." The writer goes on to deal with the relationship of *perichoresis*, a concept much neglected in the Reformed tradition. As he explains, this term refers to "the mutual interpenetration and indwelling of the Father and the Son" and it is an expression of the intimacy of their union.

There then follows a section on the Holy Spirit, "the weakest aspect of the church's knowledge of the Trinity." As Prof. Engelsma points out, there is a need for a development of this aspect of the Trinity, since its absence has left the ground open to charismatic confusion. He disagrees with the views of many by stating that the Spirit is "not the third family

member.” Though such a concept may appear reasonable, he argues that Scripture, which only supports the *perichoresis* of Father and Son, does not support it. Indeed, Scripture never refers to the love of the Spirit for the Father or the Son or even the church. Rather our writer wishes us to conceive of the Holy Spirit as the “Bond of Love,” as originally proposed by Augustine and later developed by Jonathan Edwards. Bernard of Clairvaux referred to our Lord’s words to the disciples in John 20:23, “Receive ye the Holy Spirit,” as “the kiss of Christ.” This does not deny the Spirit’s deity or His personality—these must be defended to the last—but it does help us in defining the Spirit.

The fourth chapter is entitled “*Vestigium Trinitatus*” and deals with the “marks” or “footprints” of the Trinity, that is, the evidence for the Trinity in creation. This is a masterful chapter. While Augustine found many such *vestigia*, the Reformed tradition, with some notable exceptions, has tended to avoid them. Prof. Engelsma argues that, though the *vestigia trinitatis* as conceived of by Augustine are mistaken, the church is wrong in ruling them out *per se*. “In the end, absolute rejection of the *vestigium* would disparage the Trinity inasmuch as this rejection would imply that the Trinity makes no difference regarding creation.” As the writer proceeds to expand upon his theme, we are lifted up into realms of worship and praise, as he looks at creation, redemption and family fellowship. He concludes the chapter with the following statement:

Knowledge of the *vestigium* by faith works a longing and striving for closer fellowship with God and with his church. This longing and striving take form in the fervent prayer for the indwelling Spirit of Christ, the Fellowship of God.

The fifth and last chapter deals with “The Way Forward for Reformed Theology: The Covenant.” This final chapter brings all of the previous arguments together and proposes a distinctive Reformed contribution in a vigorous development of the doctrine of the covenant. He begins with a disavowal of the traditional Reformed view of the covenant as a contract and seeks to redefine it as fellowship. In other words, the covenant is not an agreement between two parties in which conditions are set out and blessings or otherwise appended. Rather the covenant is about incorporation into the family of the Godhead. It is about the creature sharing in God’s

own life. Thus seen, even the admonitions and commands of the covenant take on a new hue, as being the instructions of a loving covenant Father to His children on how they may know true joy and bliss, since this can only be found in covenant fellowship with God their maker. Surely there is no greater demonstration of the character and nature of God than this, that He should, before time, have decreed in the blissful communion of the Godhead, to share His own being with a creature—one who could add nothing to Him, one who would rebel and fall—and require the Father’s well-beloved to take upon Himself the nature of the creature, becoming one with them, to lay down His blessed life, the deathless to suffer death at the hands of His creation, so that He might take it again and lift these same creatures and make them partners of His throne. This is love. This is the covenant of the Triune God.

The writer concludes by re-examining the covenant with Noah and shows that, in contrast to the views of Abraham Kuyper, it is an everlasting covenant established with all the elect in all nations and peoples and extended to the earth itself and to every living creature. “The covenant with Christ, our true ‘Rest,’ is a cosmic covenant.”

“The triune God will embrace his world. In Christ, glorious head of all, and by the Spirit, hidden fellowship of God, all things will enjoy covenant communion with their God, creator, redeemer, friend.”

There is great blessing to be had from the reading of this book. It is intellectually challenging and stimulating, but most of all it is spiritually enriching. This is an important book and should find a worthy home in the libraries of God’s children.¹

¹Prof. Engelsma’s *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* is available from the CPRC Bookstore (7 Lislunna Road, Kells, Ballymena, BT42 3NR, N. Ireland) for £9.90 (inc. P&P).