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**SBJT: What elements of the doctrine of the Trinity are largely overlooked in substantial swaths of today's evangelicalism? And what are the practical implications of such neglect?**

**D. A. Carson:** The question is a bit cheeky, of course, since it assumes that much is wrong. All of us know fine evangelical churches that are carefully trying to teach the whole counsel of God. While majoring on biblical exposition, they are also enthusiastic about teaching sufficient historical and systematic theology to give their members a sense of the historical continuity and of the doctrinal heritage of the people of God. Nevertheless, it is doubtless fair to assert that in many churches the doctrine of the Trinity is merely asserted, or in some cases merely assumed, but never or at best rarely taught. When was the last time you heard a good sermon on the subject, complete with careful demonstration of its pastoral and spiritual relevance?

A responsible answer to the question could easily be expanded into a book. I shall restrict myself to five observations, briefly put:

(1) There are few attempts to show how the texts of the Bible came to generate what came to be called, in the patristic period, the doctrine of the Trinity. It makes little difference, of course, that the *word* "Trinity" is not found in the Scriptures, provided the concept is. Nevertheless, distinctions regarding three "persons" and one "substance" were fought-over attempts, during the patristic period, to try to handle *all* the biblical evidence, instead of just part of it.

Such attempts, of course, constitute a subset of the broader responsibility to move carefully from Scripture itself to systematic articulations of truth—i.e.,

articulations that are in fact summaries of more than any one passage, articulations often cast in the terminology of contemporary culture. Showing believers how this is done, and giving historical examples of how it has been done well, and how it has been done badly, becomes an exercise in teaching them basic interpretive skills—not to mention the sense of solidarity it engenders with believers in other centuries who, no less than we, had to wrestle with how to understand the Bible faithfully, and not least how to respond to assorted pernicious reductionisms.

(2) Careful instruction about the Trinity will draw believers to greater contemplation and adoration of *who God is*. When the tone of the instruction is deeply edifying, congregations usually lap up careful, thoughtful, biblically-demonstrated truth—not least truth about God, our blessed Maker and Redeemer. The alternative is to be so sloppy about how we think of God that the sloppiness spills over into our everyday speech, and even into our praying: e.g., “Heavenly Father, we just want to thank you for dying on the cross for us.” The Father did *not* die on the cross, of course: to say he did is to fall into the ancient heresy called *patripas-sionism*. Must we not carefully observe the *distinctive* works of the members of the Godhead, as well as all that binds them? The result of careful preaching and teaching on the Trinity is that in our thinking and praying, we will be contemplating God *as he has disclosed himself to us*, rather than pretending that zeal and clichés are an adequate defense against sloppiness and even heresy.

Sometimes introductory knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity issues in distinctions that are *too tightly* drawn. Some argue, for instance, that all Chris-

tian prayer should address the Father in the name of the Son by the power of the Spirit. Certainly that is *one* way the New Testament writers depict prayer, but it is far from the only one. Both the Father and the Son are explicitly addressed in prayer in the Scriptures. While prayer to the Spirit is not explicitly exemplified, the deity of the Spirit is affirmed, as also is his function as our Advocate (cf. John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1)—and that function itself authorizes prayer, for he, like the Son, simultaneously represents us and pleads our case. See especially the elegant essay by Edmund P. Clowney, “A Biblical Theology of Prayer,” in *Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Exeter: Paternoster, 1990), 136-73.

(3) In particular, the church must constantly go over the biblical materials that ground belief in Jesus as both God and man, not only so as to preserve sound doctrine, but so as to integrate these realities with all that Jesus accomplished, and with all that he continues to be: he will forever be both God and a human being, our elder brother. There are huge implications not only for understanding what he achieved on the cross, and not only for his high priestly ministry (read Hebrews!), but also for what we become when we finally share in his resurrection. Moreover, there are approaches to such issues that go beyond a handful of proof-texts (e.g., John 1:1; 20:28; Rom 9:5), even if those texts are important. The crucial “Son” passage, John 5:16-30, for instance, needs to be carefully thought through—a helpful way, incidentally, of clearing up at least some of the deep misapprehensions that Muslims have when we Christians confess that Jesus is the Son of God.

(4) Perhaps nowhere is the doctrine of

the Trinity more important than in our meditation upon the love of God. One may usefully compare what the Bible says in this regard with what the Qur'an says about Allah. Islam stresses God's transcendence, his utter independence of his creatures, and strongly insists he is merciful toward them, but it barely mentions his love. (A good place to start finding out more about the Qur'an, in conjunction with actually reading it, is Mateen Ellass, *Understanding the Koran: A Quick Christian Guide to the Muslim Holy Book* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004].) Christianity stresses the same characteristics, of course—God's transcendence, his independence (his "aseity," the Puritans would have said), his mercy—but adds that God is loving. Indeed, the Bible goes so far as to say that God *is* love, a clause you cannot find in the Qur'an. In the Old Testament, where the picture of God being a complex unity is still blurred, God's love is displayed in his care for his world, in the way he entreats sinners, in his love for his chosen covenant people. (I have described the different ways the Bible speaks of the love of God in *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2000].) Sooner or later, however, one cannot help but wonder in what precise sense it is proper to talk about God's love in eternity past. There is some deep sense in which God loves himself, of course (it is worth reading John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* [Portland: Multnomah, 1991]), yet since all we know of love is its "other"-orientation, then when God was the only being that existed, what precisely would it mean to confess that even "then" (if we may use a time category for eternity past), "God is love"? Here the New Testament Scriptures provide more food for thought. Twice we

are told that the Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20); similarly, we are told that the Son loves the Father (John 14:31). Nor are we to think that this love is restricted to the days of the Son's incarnation. The love of the Father for the Son stretches back before the creation of the world (John 17:24). In short, precisely because the one God of the Bible is a complex unity, a Trinity, space is created to appreciate more fully how even with respect to eternity past, it is entirely coherent to confess, "God is love," and maintain something of the "other"-orientation to the nature of love. Indeed, the love among the persons of the Godhead becomes the supreme model of the love that Christians are to display for other believers—a love which substantially constitutes their unity (John 17:20-26).

(5) Revelation itself is tied to the doctrine of the Trinity. Although God has spoken words, his final "Word" is the incarnated Son, who perfectly reflects him and displays the effulgence of his glory (John 1:1-18; Heb 1:1-4). Perhaps nowhere in the Bible is the revelation provided by the Son as tightly tied to the Son's relation to the Father as in John 5:16-30, to which I have already referred—but of course there are many passages where that relation is presupposed (e.g., Col 1:15-20). Throughout his ministry, the Son is aided and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit himself comes as the *Paraclete* who succeeds the Son and replaces him this side of the resurrection and ascension, until the Son returns. Among his tasks is the manner in which he directs people to the Son, and thus to God's revelation in the Son. All of the persons of the Godhead are united in a complex, integrated, role-specific commitment to the self-disclosure of God in what we call "revelation"—all

designed to bring himself glory and to benefit his people. A very long essay would not begin to survey the wealth of biblical texts and themes that intertwine on this subject.