

God's Being Is in Coming: Eberhard Jüngel's Doctrine of the Trinity

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I. Introduction

In this essay I seek to provide a brief introduction to Eberhard Jüngel's constructive proposal regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. Jüngel's doctrine of the Trinity is perhaps the least understood part of his dogmatic work, and for those who do understand it, the most controversial. Jüngel understands God's triune being as a being-in-coming. This position must not be confused with his analysis of Barth's position as God's being-in-becoming. While Jüngel certainly stands in Barth's shadow, his own theology is a radicalization of Barth's theology in a way that retains the single triune subject while emphasizing the historical and missional nature of God's eternal becoming. While a fuller treatment of Jüngel's trinitarian theology has yet to be written, what follows is an inchoate outline of his position. I begin by looking at his understanding of the immanent and economic Trinity, after which I will examine his trinitarian theology of God's being-in-coming.

2. Jüngel on the Economic and Immanent Trinity

In his 1975 essay on the "economic" and "immanent" Trinity,¹ Jüngel comments (favorably) on the famous thesis by Karl Rahner: "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa." While the essay is ostensibly a collection of nascent reflections on Rahner's theology of the Trinity, in these few pages

¹Eberhard Jüngel, "Das Verhältnis von 'ökonomischer' und 'immanenter' Trinität," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 72 (1975): 353-64; ET "The relationship between 'economic' and 'immanent' Trinity," *Theology Digest* 24 (1976): 179-84.

Jüngel elucidates some of his most profound insights, ones that would find much fuller articulation in *God as the Mystery of the World*, published two years later in 1977.² Jüngel opens the essay with a remarkable summary of his entire doctrine of God:

The doctrine of the Trinity expresses the truth that God is alive. That God is alive means that he lives of himself in himself. “God lives” means that God is life. That God lives is for Christian faith a certainty which extends to the man Jesus, so that we profess, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mk 15:39). The truth, “God lives,” has to hold even at the death of the man Jesus as God’s own Son. This implies that the being of God is a unity of life and death, for the benefit of life. John clarifies this unity of life and death for the benefit of life (revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a communicable event) when he identifies God with love: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). That God lives as love is the mystery of his being, revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³

While this one paragraph is Jüngel’s doctrine of God *in nuce*, a few elements are worth pointing for the purpose of illuminating his understanding of the relation between the economic Trinity and immanent Trinity. First, Jüngel states up front that the doctrine of the Trinity is an elaboration of the more basic truth that the God worshiped by the Christian church is the living God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That God lives, for Jüngel, means that God has life in Godself. Second, following Barth’s move in §28.2 of *Church Dogmatics* II/1, Jüngel defines the truth, “God lives,” with the Johannine affirmation, “God loves” or “God is love.” Again, and throughout his theology, Jüngel grounds the doctrine of the Trinity in the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, especially in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the unity of life and death for the sake of life. I will return to this axiom later.

² Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977); ET *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983). Hereafter cited as GGW and GMW, respectively.

³ Jüngel, “Relationship,” 179.

The point here is that already we see the outline for how he will explicate the relationship between economic and immanent Trinity.

Commenting on Rahner's thesis, Jüngel says that "it enables us to establish the trinitarian concept of God through a theology of the Crucified, and thus responds to the exegetical problem better than was possible in classical teaching about the Trinity."⁴ Jüngel states that classical doctrines of the Trinity were prevented from grounding their teaching on the crucifixion of Christ because of the "principle of immutability" and the Augustinian rule against tritheism (*opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*). Together these ancient axioms resulted in a split between "theology" and "economy," in which the former was marked by immutability and the latter by temporal and spatial change, the former by eternally differentiated divine persons and the latter by unified divine action in the person of Jesus. Jüngel responds to this tradition by arguing that we need to let a different classical axiom guide us: "The Trinity is a mystery of salvation."⁵ According to Jüngel, this axiom provides a grounding of the Trinity in the event of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Trinitarian dogma, on this basis, can develop out of christological dogma without being hampered by metaphysical presuppositions regarding immutability and impassibility. Jüngel thus proposes that we radically rethink the Trinity out of a center in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jüngel argues that the unity of the immanent and economic Trinity is found in the identity of God as love: "God has shown himself as love . . . in the unique event of the surrender of Jesus Christ to death."⁶ Because Jesus reveals the very being of God, Jüngel goes on to say that God is love "both in his self-relationship . . . and in his relationship to the other who is distinct from him."⁷ To put it simply, God is what God does in Jesus Christ. Consequently, the "eternal Word of God from the beginning . . . is to

⁴ Ibid., 180.

⁵ Ibid., 181.

⁶ Ibid., 182.

⁷ Ibid.

become incarnate.”⁸ The eternal Logos is the *Logos incarnandus*, not simply an abstract *Logos asarkos*. What occurs in the economy, he says, “must be intended” immanently. The eternal Son thus has a “hypostatic function”; that is, the Son eternally has the capacity to become flesh. None of this means that Jüngel collapses the immanent and economic Trinity. He explicitly rejects a doctrine of the Trinity which would make an immanent-economic distinction “tautological.”⁹ Jüngel retains the primacy of the immanent Trinity over against the economic in order to preserve “the freedom and unmerited grace of God’s self-bestowal,” but he grounds the nature of this divine self-donation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁰

To conclude this section, I quote Jüngel from *God as the Mystery of the World*:

The immanent trinitarian doctrine understands God himself with no regard for his relationship to man; the economic trinitarian doctrine, by contrast, understands God’s being in its relationship to man and his world. This distinction . . . is legitimate only when the economic doctrine of the Trinity deals with God’s history with man, and the immanent doctrine of the Trinity is *its* summarizing concept.

Jüngel radically defines the being of God in light of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Jüngel historicizes the being of God, and lets the economic Trinity provide the definition for who God is in and for Godself. We turn now to his constructive doctrine of the triune being of God as a being-in-coming.

3. God’s Being Is in Coming

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 184.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Jüngel summarizes Barth's doctrine of the Trinity with the thesis: "*Gottes Sein ist im Werden*"—God's being is in becoming. Jüngel summarizes his own doctrine of the Trinity with the alternative axiom: "*Gottes Sein ist im Kommen*"—God's being is in coming.¹¹ Barth grounds his doctrine of the Trinity in the coming of God to the world, actualized in the coming of Jesus Christ. With this thesis, Jüngel sets forth a missional ontology of the triune God: the Father is defined as God coming from God; the Son is God coming to God; and the Spirit is God coming as God. According to Jüngel, by defining the Trinity in this way, we establish the unity of the economic and immanent Trinity without sacrificing the necessary distinction between the two. That is, by coming to the world in the economy of grace, Jüngel says that we must "understand God as being intrinsically the one who is coming, and not only because of the existence of the world."¹²

Jüngel begins his analysis of God's being-in-coming in *God as the Mystery of the World* with an opening thesis:

The statement *God's being is in coming* implies first of all that God's being is the event of his coming to himself (*das Ereignis seines Zu-sich-selbst-Kommens*). This event, this coming of God's being to itself, is what the tradition has meant when it spoke of eternity. But eternity is not something distinct from God. God himself is eternity. God is eternally coming to himself.¹³

With this statement, we see that Jüngel is going to ground the doctrine of the divine attributes in the eternal coming of God. This is in accordance with his doctrine of analogy, in which he replaces the old debate between the analogy of being and the analogy of faith with his own "analogy of advent" (*Analogie*

¹¹ Jüngel, "Das Verhältnis," 363; "Relationship," 184.

¹² GMW, 380.

¹³ Ibid.; GGW, 521.

des Advent).¹⁴ We can only speak of God on the basis of God's coming to us in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, by identifying God's coming with God's eternity, Jüngel seeks to safeguard the freedom of God. Just as eternity is something that belongs properly to God alone, so too God's coming is something that is internal to God's being. God's coming, like God's eternity, is grounded in Godself: "God always derives or comes from God. He is his own absolute origin."¹⁵ This is why Jüngel then goes on to explicate God's being as coming from, coming to, and coming as God. The coming of God is definitive for who God is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from all eternity. I turn now to an exposition of each element in Jüngel's trinitarian theology.

3.1. *Father: God comes from God (Gott kommt von Gott)*

God comes *from* God in the sense that "God is his own origin" (*Gott ist sich selber Ursprung*).¹⁶ God is not derived from anything other than God. And that means the concept of "being" is subordinate to the concept of God. Neither being nor nothingness—both of which go together—have any constitutive role in the originality of God. God is the "absolute origin" primarily of Godself, and then secondarily, of both being and nothingness. Jüngel is concerned here to avoid the classical error of beginning with the "Beyondness of God's Being" (*Seinsjenseitigkeit Gottes*).¹⁷ That is, by presupposing a general concept of being, the tradition then made God's being ineffably transcendent in order to protect God's otherness. But in doing so, the tradition made God unspeakable and unthinkable. Jüngel's entire project is an attempt to rethink the being of God along the lines of God's advent, i.e., God's self-communication. As a result, the absolute originality of God is not a static ineffable otherness but the ground of God's eternal coming from God to humanity in Jesus Christ. God is speakable because God's being is not locked up in Godself but is always rather *in actu*. God's being is thinkable because God's being is in coming.

¹⁴ GMW, 286f; GGW, 389f.

¹⁵ GMW, 380.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 381; GGW, 522.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

When we speak of God's absolute originality, therefore, we are speaking of what the tradition calls the "fatherhood" of God. To affirm that God is the Father is to acknowledge God as the Origin. God the Father is the origin of God's own being-in-coming as well as the origin of all other created being. God comes to us out of an origin in the Father, who is the Father of all that exists. God the Father is therefore also God the Creator. God the Father and Creator is the Lord over all that exists. For this reason, God the Father is also the one who is Lord over new existence, which is why Jüngel ascribes the act of God's justification of the ungodly to the Father.

Two things follow from the absolute originality of God the Father. First, as the origin of being, the Father distinguishes God's being from all that exists. The eternal Father, according to Jüngel, is "distinct from everything which is as is his Yes from what he affirms."¹⁸ There is a "qualitatively infinite and yet positive distinction" between what exists and the one who brought all things into existence. Because of this qualitative yet speakable distinction, Jüngel defines God as "earlier than being and nonbeing," and thus God is "the eternal Father in himself" apart from the existence of anything external to God.¹⁹ Second, as the one who is distinct from all being, God the Father is also the one who welcomes others by grace to participate in being. God is a "social essence" (*geselliges Wesen*) who brings others into fellowship with Godself. Because the being of God is in coming, God comes to the one who is other than God, the one who is lost and unloved, and calls them into relationship with Godself. In distinguishing Godself from others, the Father also graciously comes to others in the being of the Son.

3.2. *Son: God comes to God (Gott kommt zu Gott)*

¹⁸ Ibid.; GGW, 523.

¹⁹ Ibid.; GGW, 522-23.

If God is the origin, God is also the goal. God comes *from God* in order then to come *to God*. These are two distinct modes of existence of the one eternal being of God. God comes from the Father in order to come to the Son. These two modes of being are also equally original. The key terms in this section of Jüngel's doctrine of the Trinity are *Ziel* and *zielen*, meaning "goal" and "to aim." God the Son is the "goal" of God the Father, and God the Father "aims" at God the Son.

The central thesis in this section, the one which conditions Jüngel's entire theology, is: "God *aims* in himself at what is other. . . . God aims in his eternal begetting toward creation."²⁰ In other words, God the Son is always from eternity oriented toward the human Jesus. The *Logos* is always the *Logos incarnandus*—the *Logos* to become incarnate—and not the *Logos asarkos*. Jüngel thus says:

In the eternal Son of God, who himself was not created, but comes eternally from God the Father, in this Son of God coming *eternally* from God God aims at the man who *temporally* comes from God. . . . In this creative being of God of Son as the aim of God the Father, God is aiming at man. In that God the Father loves the Son, in the event of this divine self-love, God is aiming selflessly at his creation.²¹

Jüngel is quick to add that we must distinguish very sharply between the "eternal derivation of God from God" (Son as the goal of the Father) and the "temporal derivation of man from God" (humanity as the goal of the Father). The latter is by no means something necessary to God's own being, but it is an act of grace. The being-in-coming of God is not dependent upon the creation as the basis for the coming of God to God: "God by no means first becomes his goal when he aims toward man. He is adequate to himself."²² Jüngel thus describes God's being as "overflowing being" (*überströmendes Sein*), which is an expression that

²⁰ Ibid., 384.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Barth uses himself in *CD II/1* in describing God's being-in-act. God overflows to others out of the plenitude of God's own eternal being-in-coming.

The final and most important dimension of God's coming as the Son is that God comes to death. God is both the origin of life and the goal of life, both the alpha and the omega. By aiming at humanity in the Son, God aims at the death of Jesus Christ. God's self-love is the "event which was consummated in the selflessness of the death of the eternal Son of God."²³ God's self-love aims at the selflessness of the cross, which is the event of the unity of life and death for the sake of life. God does not "give up himself" in this death, because God's eternal being aims at and thus includes the possibility of death in itself. The Father is most truly the Father in giving up the Son to death, and the Son is most truly the Son in his surrender to death. By affirming Godself in the event of the cross, God awakens Jesus from the dead: "God's self-affirmation is thus forever identical with his Yes to the world," which was actualized in Jesus' resurrection as the justification of the ungodly.

God's self-affirmation is then the basis for God's affirmation of humanity as the covenant partner of God. God brings humanity into correspondence with God through the event of the Son's descent into death: "An analogy results in which the relation of God the eternal Father to God the Son finds its correspondence in the relation of God the heavenly Father to us humans as his earthly children."²⁴ Here we have an example of what Barth called the analogy of relation (*analogia relationis*), which is an analogy of grace alone, and not by nature. As a result of this analogous relationship between God and humanity, human persons are capable of knowing and speaking about God. In other words, the death and resurrection of the Son of God which establishes the correspondence between God and humanity is the

²³ Ibid., 385.

²⁴ Ibid., 386.

basis for all God-talk. This relation is the relation of faith—a relation in which God addresses us and we can address—and “this happens in the power of the Spirit.”²⁵

3.3. Spirit: God comes as God (*Gott kommt als Gott*)

The Father is the origin of God’s mission into the far country in Jesus Christ. The Son is the goal of God’s mission as the one who identifies himself with the dead Jesus for the sake of new life. The Spirit is the “bond of love” (*vinculum caritatis*) who binds Father and Son in an orientation toward a new future. Temporally speaking, the Father is the past origin, the Son is the present death, and the Spirit is the future life:

As the ‘bond of love,’ the Holy Spirit is simultaneously the ‘vehicle of eternity’ (*vehiculum aeternitatis*). As the Spirit of love, God is *from* eternity to eternity, from age to age. As Spirit, God is eternally not only the one “who is” and “who was,” but also “who is to *come*.”²⁶

God comes from God (the Father) to God (the Son) as God (the Spirit). By coming “as God,” the Spirit is the ground of mutual self-affirmation between Father and Son. As the “bond of love,” the Spirit ensures that God’s identification with the dead Jesus is self-affirmation and not self-alienation. The Spirit ensures that the goal of the Son “does not become an end point,” but is instead the continuation of God’s being-in-coming. In the Spirit, God proceeds and advances toward the open future. In the Spirit, we are able to believe in God as the one who came in Jesus Christ and who is always coming anew to us in the word of the gospel. The Spirit is thus the future of God and our own future, though “the future opened

²⁵ Ibid., 387.

²⁶ Ibid., 388.

up by the Holy Spirit is not empty but instead concretely and sharply contoured by the person of Jesus Christ.”²⁷

Jüngel’s trinitarian doctrine of God seeks to explicate the being of God as the one who is love. God comes from God, to God, and as God solely because this God is a God of love, who goes into the far country in order to justify the ungodly and address us as God’s covenant partners. The future of God and our own future is thus a future of love: “God and man will have love as their mutual future. Faith in the Holy Spirit takes us along into this future by leading us now along the way of love.”²⁸ By virtue of Jesus’ death and the affirmation of the Father in the power of the Spirit, we are made participants in the triune love of God. God’s being-in-coming is thus the dynamic unity of divine life and human death for the sake of new life together in covenant fellowship for all eternity.

4. Conclusion

Eberhard Jüngel’s trinitarian doctrine of God is a radical attempt to rethink the being of God in the light of God’s advent in Jesus. If Jesus is in fact the coming of God to humanity, then we are forced to understand the eternal being of God as one who comes from God to God. Jüngel is here simply following Barth’s theological method: the immanent Trinity must correspond to God’s economic self-revelation in Jesus Christ. What Jüngel adds is a stronger emphasis on the historical and missional nature of God’s being, so that God’s being embraces human history and God’s coming is grounded in the mission of the Son into the far country.

Why begin with God’s advent? Jüngel does not answer this question directly but it seems clear that he wants a doctrine of the Trinity which will not only fund a historical-missional movement into the far country in Jesus Christ but also—and perhaps more importantly—provide the ground of possibility for

²⁷ Ibid., 389.

²⁸ Ibid.

God's coming to human individuals in the kerygmatic word of the cross. Jüngel's theological ontology is thus a dialogical ontology: God's addresses humanity in the Word made flesh and continues to address us in the word of the gospel. God's address is grounded in God's coming to us, which is itself grounded in God's coming to Godself.

This brief essay has been an attempt to explore the logic of Jüngel's doctrine of the Trinity. A future analysis could show how Jüngel (1) enables God's being to enter death without rupturing the divine life (Moltmann), (2) establishes a robust sociality within God without resorting to proto-tritheistic social trinitarianism (Moltmann again, Pannenberg, et al.), and (3) actualizes the being of God without simply collapsing the immanent into the economic Trinity or turning God into the process God of radical Hegelianism. Unfortunately, all this will have to wait for a future essay.