



Fairbairn, Donald.

Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Donald Fairbairn, professor of historical theology at Erskine Theological Seminary, has written an introduction to Christian theology for evangelicals that is quite different from the introductions that evangelicals are used to. Rather than going the route of presenting Christian doctrine according to the classical *loci communes* that we find in most works of systematic theology, or focusing on specific doctrines in and of themselves, he's decided to focus on what he sees as the central aspect of the Christian faith, namely participation in God. Each doctrine examined (e.g., creation, fall, redemption, incarnation, etc.) is viewed in light of the Trinity.

For Fairbairn the Trinity isn't simply a doctrine to give mental assent to or even an example to be followed; rather the Trinity is the sphere in which the believer lives; the eternal relationship of love in which we participate. The heart of Christianity according to Fairbairn (and his judgment is certainly correct) is quite simply *love*. The eternal love that exists between the Father and Son (and Spirit) is bestowed upon believers who enter into communion with the triune God. This was the relationship that the original humans enjoyed but ruined through sin. Christ's death (which Fairbairn sees as the definition of love; see pp. 159-62) and resurrection restored our ability to enter back into this loving relationship.

But love isn't some selfish gushy emotion or some isolated personal relationship that only exists between two people. Love is a reality that is to be shared with others; it's ever-expanding. Fairbairn also highlights obedience's role in love. Jesus connects the two frequently in the Gospel of John—and while it might seem counterintuitive to those who see true love as exhibiting an egalitarian character, i.e., as something that can only truly exist and be displayed among equals—Fairbairn argues that this isn't the case at all. The loving relationship between us as God cannot be relationship that exists between equals since we're not God! But what of the love shared between the equal persons of the Trinity? Even this love exhibits itself in the Son and Spirit's willing obedience to the Father.

While not attempting to remove all mystery from the Trinity Fairbairn explains the unity and diversity in terms of the shared essential attributes but distinct personal properties. So it is the

Father alone who begets the Son and spirates the Spirit while it is the Son alone who is begotten by an eternal generation and the Spirit alone who proceeds by an eternal procession. These properties are unique to each person and distinguish each from the other while doing no harm to the shared omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, etc. While I'd agree with him completely on these points I'm not in agreement with him that the doctrine of the Trinity wasn't revealed in the Old Testament because it would have been seen as just another of many polytheistic beliefs. I think the most straightforward answer is that the *doctrine* couldn't have been revealed prior to the incarnation of the Son and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost to indwell believers. The *why* of it all is above our pay-grade. If God wanted to tell us *why* he chose to reveal himself the way he did he would have.

Nor can I agree with Fairbairn that it is the Father whom we read of in the OT and not the Son or the Spirit. We read of YHWH (or God) but this doesn't necessarily mean that we read of the Father and the Father alone. The NT most commonly uses "God" of the Father but to read this back into the OT is anachronistic. The NT tells us that God the Father has never been seen (John 6:46, cf. 1:18; 1John 4:12) in agreement with Exodus 33:20 in which YHWH tells Moses that he cannot see his face and live, yet the OT also tells us that God has been seen (see e.g., Gen. 32:30; Exod. 24:9-11). The OT is full of theophanies that the Church Fathers interpreted as appearances of the preincarnate Son and not the Father.

Fairbairn is to be commended for dispensing with the polarizing presentation of patristic Trinitarian thought according to Eastern and Western paradigms. He notes that while medieval Scholastic theologians may have carried Augustine in a certain direction (with an emphasis on the one divine nature as a starting point over and against the three Persons) Augustine himself wasn't so far from the Cappadocians (who allegedly begin with the three Persons before moving to the one nature; see p. 44). The book's title is somewhat deceptive though in that Fairbairn doesn't offer much *interaction* with the Church Fathers at all. There are various sidebars scattered throughout the chapters and Fairbairn makes mention of them but there's nothing like the sustained treatment or explanation of patristic thought that one might expect if the Church Fathers are supposed to be there to "help" them. The quotations are nice, and Fairbairn has placed them in sections in which they're relevant, but he doesn't do much to explain them to a modern reader or novice student interested in patristic theology. Then again, this isn't a book about patristic theology *per se* so it might be unfair to criticize him on this point.

Probably the most disappointing aspect of this work was Fairbairn's treatment of the atonement. As noted above Fairbairn says that Christ's sacrificial death is the definition of love. Indeed, Jesus himself said that there's no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend (John 15:13), but Fairbairn posits an actual separation between the Father and the Son in the Son's death. His emphasis on the dual natures of Christ in the chapter is helpful and correct, i.e., he maintains that the *person* of God the Son died on the cross so it's improper to speak of his human nature dying. Natures don't die; people do. This avoids Nestorianism; good and well. But then he posits that while it's impossible for the eternal Son as God to ever be alienated from the other Persons of the Trinity "in his postincarnate state as man, then in terms of this human condition it is possible for him to be estranged from the trinitarian fellowship." (175) This ends up being the very Nestorianism he just safeguarded against! He goes on to speak of the spiritual

death that sin brings and asserts that Christ died this spiritual death (= separation from God) as a consequence for our sin which brings us to his (flawed in my view) understanding of atonement.

His view of the OT sacrificial practices is that God exhausted his wrath on the sacrificial animals rather than the people. My understanding is that his wrath was abated because of the sacrifices. In other words God's wrath didn't have to be carried out *at all* since forgiveness was made possible through sacrifice. I believe this is the picture we find in the NT as well and it's one that preserves the unity of the Trinity (in all aspects) as well as the mutual love of the Persons (one is hard pressed to understand how the Father can pour out wrath on the Son while loving him all the while).

I'd also say that Fairbairn is incorrect in saying that the Fathers didn't speak much of atonement. They might not have categorized things the way that we do (no one would expect that they would have) but they had plenty to say. I think the difference is that they didn't draw firm lines in the sand the way that we do nowadays. J. N. D. Kelly noted that there were at least three dominating theories of atonement in the early Church but that the "various theories, however, despite appearances, should not be regarded as in fact mutually incompatible. They were all of them attempts to elucidate the same great truth from different angles..." (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th rev. ed. [Peabody, MA: Prince, repr. 2004], 376.)

But these criticisms and disagreements aside the thing I appreciated most about this book is that it's a book about theology that's *actually* about theology. What I mean is that Fairbairn is content to talk about God as God and relate everything else to God. There's enough exposition of Scripture and quoted material from patristic writers to present the reader with a nice introduction to Christian theology. I'd recommend this to new believers with the caveat that they should seek alternate interpretations of the atonement as it relates to the Trinity.