



Weinandy, Thomas.

The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Introduction

Fr Thomas Weinandy is a Capuchin Franciscan who has a penchant for tackling weighty theological subjects. He's written books on divine impassibility, divine immutability, Christology, soteriology, confession, and perhaps the most important of all these subjects, which is the focus of the present volume, the Trinity. *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* was originally published in 1995 by T&T Clark and has since been reissued by Wipf & Stock as an affordable reprint. The volume under review is the 2010 Wipf & Stock reprint.

Weinandy shares that "as a result of being baptized in the Spirit within the Charismatic Renewal and, after witnessing the changed lives of many others who similarly had experienced this baptism" (ix) he began to prayerfully reflect on Romans 8:14-16 and thought "if we, who are Christians, are conformed into sons of the Father by the Spirit through whom we are empowered to cry out in the same words as Jesus, then the eternal Son himself must have been begotten and conformed to be Son in the same Spirit in whom he too eternally cries out 'Abba!'" (ix-x). Weinandy's experience has led him to want to give the Holy Spirit his due, so in reconceiving the Trinity he sought to understand the Spirit's active role within the Trinity, rather than simply his passive role of proceeding from the Father (*and the Son* as Western Christianity has it).

Summary

Weinandy's central thesis is that "the Father begets the Son in the Spirit and thus that the Spirit proceeds from the Father as the one in whom the Son is begotten and so in turn proceeds from the Son as the one in whom and through whom the Son loves the Father" (89). He describes this as the "one act by which the one God is a trinity of persons... in which act both the Father and the Son are conformed to be Father and Son in the Spirit" (80). In his focus on the Spirit's active role within the Trinity Weinandy coins a new verb in saying that the Spirit "persons" the Son to be Son and the Father to be Father. By "persons" Weinandy means "conforms" or "defines" so that the personal relationship between Father and Son is dependent upon the Father begetting the Son in the Spirit and the Son loving the Father in the same Spirit in which he is begotten (17).

Weinandy sees his thesis as the fix to the shortcomings of both Eastern and Western conceptions of the Trinity throughout history. Both traditions, Weinandy claims, are reliant upon errant philosophical presuppositions. The Eastern view takes its cues from Neo-Platonism, which results in an emanationist view of God whereby the Son and Spirit simply come out from the Father passively in some sort of linear sequence. The problem with this scheme is that the Father's monarchy results in subordinationism, perhaps even tritheism. The Western view is indebted to Aristotelian epistemology, which states that "something cannot be loved until it is known, and thus the Father logically begets the Son before he spirates the Spirit" (10), and the same logical or conceptual priority of the Father over the Son and Spirit results.

But if the Spirit "persons" the Father to be the Father and the Son to be the Son then every member of the Trinity plays an active role and each person is mutually constituted by the others, creating a symmetry that has been absent in both the Eastern and Western conceptions of the Trinity (80). Weinandy feels that his thesis "captures the authentic concern of the Orthodox in that it grounds more deeply the monarchy of the Father, but also his inherent dynamism" (73). He rejects that the Godhead resides in the Father alone (the Eastern view), or that it's a substance distinct from the Trinity (the Western view), but rather suggests that "the one Godhead, the one being of God, is the action of the Father begetting the Son and spirating the Spirit, and so sharing with them the whole of his deity, constituting them as equal divine persons" (60).

Weinandy also sees his reimagining of the Trinity as having ecumenical significance; perhaps even being a resolution to the *filioque* controversy. Saying that "the Father begets the Son in the Spirit confirms and stresses that the Spirit principally proceeds from the Father. The Spirit must

proceed from the one source of the Father because it is only in the procession of the Spirit that the Father begets the Son” (95). The Orthodox should be happy, according to Weinandy, to see the monarchy of the Father preserved alongside the distinct personality of the Spirit here and “should not only find this conception of the Trinity reassuring, but actually helpful in sustaining their authentic objectives” (95). The West wishes to say that the Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son, which Weinandy’s thesis affirms in saying that “the Son, being begotten by the Father, is conformed as Son by the Spirit (of sonship) and so the Spirit proceeds from him as the identical Love for the Father in whom he himself is begotten” (96).

Critique

Weinandy’s project is ambitious and he should be commended for seeking to adequately situate the Spirit within the Trinity in a fresh way. “Third article” theology is all the rage now but in 1995 Weinandy was something of an innovator. Yet it seems to me that along with his ambition comes a bit of hubris. It takes a certain kind of arrogance to argue that “neither the East’s nor the West’s conception of the Trinity is sufficiently biblical” (94) and have in mind the *entire* theological tradition of the *entire church* for the past two millennia! This isn’t to say that Weinandy is wrong on these grounds alone, but I haven’t been convinced by his overall case. I think his argument suffers from a flawed hermeneutical method; shifting perceived problems rather than solving them; caricature of the traditions; and certain unsubstantiated “scare tactics” for lack of a better term. Let’s begin by briefly highlighting the latter and working backward from there.

“Scare Tactics”

The heart of Weinandy’s critique is the repeated claim that both East and West “are scripturally inadequate precisely because both contain foreign and non-biblical philosophical presuppositions” (94). He repeatedly shouts “(Neo-)Platonism” (10-14, 55-56, 63-65, 74, 77, 79, 94, 134-35) and “Aristotelianism” (10, 14, 56, 72, 77, 82, 94) and immediately expects villagers to attack these pagan monsters with pitchforks firmly in hand. The problem is that he simply tells us that there *is* something wrong with “Neo-Platonic emanationism” and “Aristotelian epistemology” without telling us exactly *why* they are wrong. In addition to this Weinandy never actually makes a case that either the East or the West is *dependent* upon these foreign philosophies. He simply assumes it, but as Fr Andrew Louth has pointed out, Christians and pagans belonged to the same world of thought and discourse and within that world of discourse often responded to things in very similar ways (my paraphrase of Louth [here](#)).

Caricature

The point being that it won't do to simply shout "Neo-Platonic emanationism" and expect those who hear it to recoil in fear, when in fact it may very well be "Christian emanationism," or something of the sort. In reality, the charge of "emanationism" rings hollow as any conception of *eternal* generation and *eternal* procession is enough to nullify such a criticism, but add to that the understanding of Father, Son, and Spirit as *homoousios*, and the case should be closed. Yet this caricature of Eastern trinitarianism pervades this slim volume and along with it comes a few other caricatures such as the claim that, following the Cappadocians (as opposed to Athanasius), the East has situated the Godhead in the *Father alone* (10, 12-13, 54-55, 60). Is this really the case or has Weinandy misunderstood or perhaps even misrepresented the tradition?

Take something as representative as the Symbol of Chalcedon, which states that the Lord Jesus Christ is "of one substance with the Father *according to the Godhead*" and see if this makes sense. Or search through the voluminous writings of the Cappadocians and find statement after statement concerning the shared Godhead/nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Weinandy contradictorily says that "because the Father alone possesses the Godhead, which he shares with the Son and the Holy Spirit, making them *homoousios* with himself, this position always tends, despite the sincere disclaimers, to undermine the unity of the Godhead and the equality of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father" (55). One wonders how exactly the Father "alone possesses the Godhead" while at the same time he "shares [it] with the Son and Holy Spirit." A *shared* Godhead would make it *theirs*, not *his alone*, would it not?

And what are we to make of Weinandy's resolution to the problem here? He says, "The one being of God is the Father giving the whole of his divinity to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. This is ultimately what the Orthodox, I believe, rightly wish to proclaim and preserve" (56). Again, he says, "The one Godhead, the one being of God, is the action of the Father begetting the Son and spirating the Spirit, and so sharing with them the whole of his deity, constituting them as equal divine persons" (60). How, exactly, is this substantially different from what the Orthodox do proclaim? And how are statements about the "Father giving the whole of *his divinity* to the Son and to the Holy Spirit" and "sharing with them the whole of *his deity*" not open to the same criticism that Weinandy levels against the Eastern tradition? Unfortunately, this book is full of such inconsistencies.

Unresolved Problems

Weinandy's understanding of the Eastern view of the monarchy of the Father makes him concerned about a "sequentially obtained deity" (54). But this would only be a problem if the Father existed apart from the Son and Spirit eternally and then shared his Godhead with them in time. This isn't the case. The sequentialism that Weinandy takes issue with isn't exactly resolved by his proposal either though. For example, he says:

If the Father begets the Son in the Spirit then the sequentialism is done away with. The Father does not first beget the Son so that the Son then becomes the precondition for the procession of the Spirit. Rather the begetting of the Son is the precondition of the proceeding of the Spirit in the sense that the Father only begets the Son in or by the Spirit. The Spirit proceeds from the Father as the one in whom the Son is begotten (91, n. 6).

But this simply shifts the issue. The Spirit now becomes prior to the Son as being the one in whom the Son is begotten. The Spirit becomes the precondition. It doesn't solve the alleged problem; it just restates it in different terms. I say alleged problem because again, sequentialism is fictive in the eternal life of God. There is no time and thus no actual sequence in God. The Son's generation and the Spirit's procession are simultaneous, eternal, and distinct. I stress this distinction because Weinandy says, "it is only in the procession of the Spirit that the Father begets the Son" (95), which would seem to conflate the generation and procession, and yet he also argues that procession is "simultaneous with and constitutive of" begetting (91). So again, we see some confusion with Weinandy's thought process.

The conflation doesn't end there. Elsewhere Weinandy speaks of the Father "exercise[ing] his paternity in spirating the Spirit as the fatherly love in whom and *by whom* the Son is begotten" (73, emphasis mine). If the Spirit is "fatherly love" and the one "by whom" the Son is begotten, then is the Spirit to be identified with or as the Father? A sort of crypto-modalism seems to lurk beneath the surface of such conceptions. I should also mention that in Weinandy's zeal to figure out the Spirit's active role within the Trinity he undermines his stated desire to preserve the monarchy of the Father. If the Spirit "persons" the Father to be Father and Son to be Son, and the Spirit "constitutes their distinct personalities" (7), then he shifts the monarchy from the Father to the Spirit (cf. 54, 60 where Weinandy says this role is ascribed to the Father by the East).

Flawed Hermeneutic

In all of the above one could argue that theology of this kind goes beyond the text of Scripture and leaves all sorts of room for divergence and disagreement. But when we examine Weinandy's exegesis we can discern something unsettling about his hermeneutical maneuvers. Remember, Weinandy stated that his personal experience in the Spirit led him to conclude that "if we, who are Christians, are conformed into sons of the Father by the Spirit through whom we are empowered to cry out in the same words as Jesus, then the eternal Son himself must have been begotten and conformed to be Son in the same Spirit in whom he too eternally cries out 'Abba!'" (ix-x).

Note the trajectory: from Christian to Christ. The entire second chapter argues that "Christian conversion and the Christian's subsequent life" offer an "exact paradigm" of Jesus' sonship in the Spirit (33). It is usually, if not always, a mistake to reason from creature to Creator; from the finite to the infinite. This backward trajectory results in some dubious claims such as saying that the "Holy Spirit that guarantees our inheritance as the Father's children" is "the very same Spirit that *made* Christ himself an heir" (37, emphasis mine). What does this suggest about eternal sonship? If Christ was "made an heir" then it would suggest that there was a time when he was not. That sounds adoptionistic at best and Arian at worst! Weinandy is on better footing in the third chapter where he attempts to reason from infancy and baptism narratives to his eternal sonship, but there's much to be desired in his exegesis on those points as well.

The Spirit as Love; Not as Person

I think that the most disappointing aspect of this volume, however, is that for all Weinandy's attention to the Spirit, he never actually makes a compelling case for the Spirit as a divine *person*. Weinandy criticizes the Western tradition saying "the Holy Spirit assumes a rather passive function. The Spirit is merely the Love or Gift shared by the Father and the Son. It is therefore difficult to see why, in the Western conception of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is a distinct person or subject - a who" (8). This is a valid concern and a common criticism of the Western tradition, but Weinandy reaffirms it repeatedly throughout the course of his argument. We're told that the Spirit is the "bond of love between the Father and the Son" (30); the Son's "love for the Father" and the Father's "love for the Son" (37); the "bond of love, given to us by God upon faith in the Son" (46); "the love in whom the Father begets the Son and so conforms himself as Father and conforms the Son as Son" (50); so on and so forth (see also 73, 75, 79, 83, 84).

The Spirit is still very much passive in Weinandy's thesis aside from the ascription of the verb "persons" to his activity or assigning to him the actions that the traditions have reserved for the Father. For all the focus on the Spirit he still feels like the third wheel or silent partner of the Trinity. We're told that "it is through the Spirit that that the Father and the Son exist for one another" (52), yet we never read about the Father or the Son existing for the Spirit. We're never told how or even if the Father and Son love the Spirit. Who is the bond of love between Father and Spirit or Son and Spirit? Who "persons" the Spirit and how exactly is that supposed to look? In Weinandy's quest to detail the manner in which the Spirit acts upon the Father and the Son, we're left with little understanding of how they act upon him, other than the old standby, which is to say that they spirate him.

Conclusion

I greatly appreciate what Weinandy attempted to do in this volume. While I'm of the opinion that the understanding of the Trinity reached during the patristic age was correct and can be little improved on; I also recognize a need to translate ancient insights into modern faith. I think Weinandy has attempted to do just that; I simply think he's missed the mark. But the manner in which he missed the mark was thought provoking. There's hardly a page of this little book that I haven't scribbled notes all over. Yes, most of them are in strong disagreement, but this is the best kind of disagreement; the kind brought about by someone who has challenged me to think; rethink; and think some more after that. And for this reason alone I can recommend Weinandy's work as a useful volume to engage. Whether or not you agree with his thesis, you'll think deeply in reaching your conclusions.