

Unity and Plurality

Man-centeredness is the age-old plague upon both our culture and our theology. The present world is inundated with self-help, self-love, best-for-me, right-for-me, true-for-me, feels-good-for-me.

Sadly, the church has not been immune to the rise of the self. For instance, low commitment to membership in a local church body is normative within Christian culture, especially with the rise of “online church” being seen as a viable alternative. Then there is the celebrity preacher—the one man (or woman) whose personality *is* the church. We also observe a popular theology presenting Jesus as a poor beggar whom we must decide to invite into our hearts so that He can save us and we can go to heaven, without regard for our relationship to the body of believers as a whole.

It is also too often seen in the way we *do* theology, even on an individual level. We start with ourselves. When we read the Bible, our first question usually is, “What does this mean for me? How is this relevant for me?” From creation to salvation, the modern church tends to see Scripture as the story of man—our fall, our salvation, our glory. But a proper view of Scripture and theology must begin with God. It must be God-centered. What we should be asking first is “What does this tell me about God?” The story

of Scripture is the story of God glorifying Himself by creating all things and sending His Son to redeem a people He had elected from all eternity—all for His own good pleasure. God is the main character, the hero. It's all about Him.

So when we approach the topic of gender, which is essential to the nature of man, we must begin with the nature of God Himself. It may appear that nothing could be more exclusively human than gender, so why bother discussing something as theological and philosophical as the ontological nature of God? But if we are to affirm that man is made in God's image—and that this fact bears a weighty importance in the gender discussion—we must first understand the nature of the God in whose image we are. The nature of God is essential to understanding the whole of human nature, and that includes the specific area of gender. To adequately articulate the beauty and importance of the male and female genders, we must begin by coming to an understanding of the beauty and importance of the triune nature of our God.

Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this book to dive into a detailed discourse on the Trinity, a doctrine that has produced countless volumes and innumerable hours of study spanning many centuries. However, several aspects of this doctrine are especially pertinent to the study of human nature and gender in particular.

Oftentimes when discussing the Trinity, we almost exclusively spend our time in the various "proof texts"—those beautiful and well-known passages that so clearly affirm the deity of Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit, and the equality that exists between the three Persons. There are such passages as Acts 20:28: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." There is also the account of Jesus's baptism: "And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'" (Matt. 3:16–17). These and many other passages plainly differentiate

between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, these passages are essential to know, understand, and teach the biblical truth we call the Trinity.

On the flip side, there is a danger in becoming bogged down in the apologetics to the point where the Trinity is seen as nothing more than a cold philosophical doctrine to be defended rather than the revelation of the very being and nature of the eternal Creator God who has entered into relationship with us. To understand the Trinity in this way—as an intimate peek at the eternal nature of the God who made us after His own image—cannot but shape the manner in which we think about God and, subsequently, all other things. God is the only proper starting point for thinking about the world.

It is true God has entered into relationship with all His creatures. Not only is this clear in the fact that God made man in His own image but He also states it explicitly to Noah following the great flood: “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you” (Gen. 9:9–10). God, as Creator, has a general covenantal relationship with mankind in which He promises to uphold and sustain life in this theater of creation. God is relational.

Yet before this—and indeed before even creation itself—God is in relationship within Himself. God, as revealed in Scripture, is unchanging; therefore, He did not *become* relational at the moment of creation but He has *always been* relational, even from all eternity. This is because there have always existed three distinct Persons within the Godhead. This great mystery, revealed in the pages of Scripture, depicts a God who is at the same time both a perfect unity and a perfect plurality, eternally one and eternally three, totally unified and totally distinct. This is the eternal nature of God.

Biblical Christianity must take God as the starting point for thought in every realm, including that of beauty. God is not only the source of beauty but also the measure of beauty and the very essence of beauty. Therefore, if we wish to get beyond the mere

fact of biological distinction and actually probe into its inherent beauty, we must firmly ground ourselves in the objectively beautiful nature of God. Down through the ages, great thinkers and philosophers have wrestled with the question of beauty, and one of the central conundrums is whether the ideal is ultimately found in unity or plurality. We see this being considered as far back as the ancient Greek philosophers. One commentator writes of Plato's thought, "Imitations of the Good will require a reduction or even an elimination of diversity, a merging of all aspects of life into one."¹ Conversely, Aristotle—a student of Plato—posits, "The error of Socrates must be attributed to the false notion of unity from which he starts. . . . The state, as I was saying, is a plurality, which should be united."² Even in more recent history, we observe this theme. At the founding of the United States, the Latin slogan *E Pluribus Unum* (one from many) was adopted, indicating that this question of unity and plurality was prominent in the minds of our founding fathers. The notion that "unity is strength" was taken up in the extreme during the rise of hyper-nationalism and fascism in the twentieth century, while the slogan "Diversity is our strength" has become a mantra of today's Left.

Clearly, these qualities remain relevant even in our own day. Ought we strive for sameness or distinction? Is everything ultimately one or many? The biblical doctrine of the Trinity is able to answer this question: both. This is because our God, who is the God of all creation, ultimately exists as both one and three. He is unity and plurality—one Being, three Persons. We therefore affirm the pre-eminence of both these concepts, sameness and diversity. What is more, we can actually celebrate and rejoice in both, purely because of the identity of our God.

Unity is beautiful. There is something objectively appealing about a marching band all dressed in perfectly matching uniforms, marching in step, synchronized in every respect. Or picture the beauty of a deep-blue ocean, where nothing but glistening water

1 Cynthia Hampton, "The Good as Unity: Its Role in the Good Life in Plato's Later Thought" (1989), *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*, 257.

2 Aristotle, *Politics*.

can be seen for miles. Our God is one. This was the great confession of God's people, Israel: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4). Unlike the other nations of the ancient world, Israel worshiped *one* God, whose authority was brought to bear over all nations and peoples. When God delivered His people out of the land of Egypt, He demonstrated through the ten plagues that while Egypt had a god for the river, the harvest, the livestock, and the sun, Israel worshiped the *true* God, and in Him was *true* command of the river, harvest, livestock, and sun. The prophet Elijah, when confronted with widespread idolatry in his day, proved Yahweh to be the one true God by humiliating the prophets of Baal with the silence of their idol (1 Kings 18:21–39). There is also a lengthy section of poetic prophecy in Isaiah (chapters 40–49) dedicated to recognizing and celebrating that God is the one and only true and living God, including declarations such as "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it" (Isa. 44:6–7). And in this God is the essence of beauty. From Him came all things, and through Him all things are sustained; He is the God of eternity past and of the unending future; He is God over every nation, ruler of all kings; He is God over the sun, sea, stars, and sand. And the fact that all this goodness, all this wisdom, all this power and glory and holiness and righteousness is wrapped up in one unified, eternal Being is truly beautiful.

Yet plurality also is beautiful. To return to the marching band example, the uniformity of the whole truly is beautiful, yet when the great and harmonious diversity of instruments begins to play, it reveals depths and dimensions of beauty not at first evident within unity. An endless field of uniform roses is beautiful, but when one examines the unique patterns and proclivities of each individual flower, the beauty is multiplied exponentially. This principle is also true of the Almighty God. God, in His absolute, perfect unity, is the fullness of beauty. He is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the

iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation" (Ex. 34:6–7). Yet it is in the revelation of His triunity, the unveiling of the three perfectly distinct Persons within the one Being of God, where His glorious beauty is seen with greater clarity and wonder than the oneness can adequately portray. And while we must be able to affirm and celebrate the reality that each Person—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and so on, the beauty of the Trinity is evident not in the similarity of the three Persons but in their distinctions.

Now, we must caution that when discussing the Trinity, it is dangerously easy to fall into misunderstanding, misrepresentation, or even heresy, especially when considering the unique works of the members in what is known as the economic Trinity. Therefore, let us clearly affirm that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all to be honored and glorified in the works of creation, providence, and redemption. But as Scripture relegates certain elements of the works of God to specific Persons, so also must we, all the while taking nothing from the glory of any one of them.

We see chiefly in the Father the beauty of the eternal decree. Throughout Jesus's earthly ministry, He speaks of His duty as doing only what is the will of the Father. It is the Father who actively sent the Son (John 17:3), the Father who gave the Son His mission (John 17:4), the Father who was well pleased with the Son's work (Matt. 3:17; 17:5), the Father whose power raised the Son from the dead (1 Cor. 15:15), and the Father to whom the Son intercedes for His people (1 John 2:1). So, while all three Persons are in full, perfect accord, the Father is credited as the primary "planner," the authority to whom the other two willingly submit. In the Father is highlighted the beauty of God's wisdom, wisdom that caused the apostle to cry out,

Oh, the depths of the riches of and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For

from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

It is for this reason that God the Father is said to be the highest recipient of glory in the final analysis. “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9–11). It is the Father who grants authority to the Son: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession” (Ps. 2:8); “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’ (Matt. 28:18). The glory and beauty of God’s work in the world are seen in the unity of purpose yet diversity of function within the Godhead. It is through the Son that every enemy of God is defeated, yet in the end, the Son will return dominion and authority to the Father as the ultimate object of praise:

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, the the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. (1 Cor. 15:24–28)

None of this means that the Father is “more God” than the Son or the Spirit; rather, it teaches us that the full beauty of headship and willing submission (which we will later speak to at length) is seen perfectly in the eternal Being who is Himself beauty.

The Son, for His part, has His own peculiar beauty that helps us to see the full spectrum of loveliness existing within God. As we mentioned, through Him, we see the beauty of joyful submission to proper authority and a greater beauty of intimacy. Although the triune God is totally holy and separate from all Creation, the