

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ ” (Ex 3:14)

✠ Lecture VIII: Trinitarian Terminology & Vocabulary ✠

Before reading this lecture, please realize that to grasp the words and concepts of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is one thing; to know the living reality of God behind these words and concepts is something else. We must work and pray so that we might pass beyond every word and concept about God and to come to know Him for ourselves in our living union with Him; the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit.

✠ Important Trinitarian Terms:

Many perceive the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as the most perplexing aspect of the Christian faith due to the complexity of the vocabulary associated with it. Therefore, a working definition of the following terms will prove to be invaluable to our “limited” understanding of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity:

- **Being or Essence or Substance or Nature (Latin: *Substantia*; Greek: *Ousia*):**

The word that the Greek-speaking Fathers used to refer to the Being of God was *ousia*, a term familiar in the schools of Greek philosophy, but used in Christian theology in a very different way governed by the revelation of God’s redemptive activity in history as recorded in Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, that is, not as static but as living, speaking being, and hence as personal being. Therefore, God’s Being is not some abstract impersonal essence, but a dynamic Personal Being.

If we turn to St. Athanasius we find that from the very start he thought of God the Creator of the universe as ‘beyond all being and human conception of being’, ‘beyond all created being’. That is to say, St. Athanasius did not operate with a preconceived idea or earthly definition of being in speaking of God’s Being, but drew his understanding of the Being of God from the ever-living God Himself as He speaks to us personally in His Word and reveals Himself in His creative and saving activity. Thus, when St. Athanasius applied the term *ousia* to speak of the Being of God the Creator and of God the Father of Lord Jesus Christ he used it, as Sellers pointed out, in its simple meaning of ‘being’, but as transformed through the biblical revelation of God’s intervention in history in order to effect man’s redemption.

Moreover, it is ‘being’ understood in light of the truth that the Son and the Spirit are each of one and the same Being or *Homoousios* with God the Father; or expressed the other way round, in light of the truth that the fullness of the Father’s Being is the Being of the Son and of the Spirit. It is in view of the identity of Being between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that ‘being’ or ‘ousia’ ought to be used, not in the metaphysical and static sense of being as in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* variously translated by the Latin terms *Substantia* or *Essentia* which tend to give rise to an impersonal and somewhat abstract conception of God’s Being that has damaged the Western notions of the Holy Trinity. Although he himself wrote in Latin, St. Hilary once remarked, ‘Much obscurity is caused by translation from Greek to Latin, and to be quite literal is sometimes to be partly unintelligible.’ (*De synodis*, 9)

This is not to say that the conception of ‘being’ as that which is and subsists by itself was entirely rejected by Patristic theology, for it was used in an appropriate way to speak of the truth that God’s transcendent Being is infinite, unlimited, unoriginated and wholly grounded in Himself, for God and His Being are one and the same. However, it became adapted and transformed in the theological activity of the Church in seeking to understand the nature of God’s Being, not speculatively from some point outside of God, but from within the actual definite self-revelation of God in Lord Jesus Christ in the economy of redemption. It is in and through Him the Only Begotten Son, the very Offspring of the Father’s Divine Nature that the Nature of God is alone to be known. It is then strictly by reference to the Father-Son, Son-Father relation that the Nature of God’s Being is to be defined; or rather that God defines His own nature for us. Thus as St. Athanasius used to say, ‘It would be more godly and true to signify God from the Son and call Him Father, than to name God from His works alone and call Him Unoriginate.’ (*Contra Arianos*, 1.34)

It is particularly important to realize the radical transformation of the Greek concept of being (*Ousia*), when used of God, from a pre-Christian impersonal to a profoundly personal sense. That transformation was rooted in God's *self*-revelation and *self*-naming to Israel as 'I AM' which was applied by Lord Jesus Christ to Himself in His 'I AM' saying (**Jn 8:58**). Of course neither in the Old Testament nor in the New Testament Scriptures was the Nature or Being of God ever regarded as impersonal and Orthodox Christian theology declined to use the term *Ousia* in the impersonal sense it had in secular Greek thought.

The theological concept of the Being of God as used in the formula "One Being (*Ousia*), Three Persons (*Hypostasis*)" agreed at the Council of Alexandria presided over by St. Athanasius in AD 362, is not to be understood as referring to three Persons in God's Being as if the three Persons were other than and not identical with the one Being of God, but precisely as the One Being of God. Hence the Being of God was not understood in terms of any preconceived idea or definition of the divine Being, but exclusively in the light of God's naming of Himself as 'I AM WHO I AM' in the Old Testament revelation and as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament revelation, as in the priestly formula for Holy Baptism. Within this New Testament revelation the Old Testament self-naming of God as 'I AM' was taken up in the 'I AM' of the Lord Jesus Christ in whom as the very offspring of God's Nature and in His Spirit God has made Himself more fully known to us in the personal Communion which His own Being is.

St. Athanasius said, "When you hear it said, 'I am who I am', and 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth', and 'hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord', and 'Thus says the Lord Almighty', we understand nothing else than the very simple and blessed and incomprehensible Being of Him who is, for although we are unable to grasp what He is, yet on hearing 'Father' and 'God' and 'Almighty' we understand nothing else to be signified than the very Being of Him who is. And if you have said of Christ that 'He is the Son of God', you have thereby said that 'He is from the Being of the Father', And since the Scriptures have anticipated you in declaring that the Lord is the Son of the Father, and the Father Himself has already said 'This is My beloved Son' – and a son is no other than the offspring of his father – is it not evident that the Fathers of Nicea were right to have said that the Son is from the Being of the Father?" (*De synodis*, 34). Thus in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity the one Being of God who is three Persons, does not refer to some abstract essence, but, to the eternal living Being that God is of Himself as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and so as intrinsically Triune and intrinsically Personal. The divine Being and the divine Communion of Persons are to be understood wholly in terms of one another.

- **Person (Latin: *Persona*; Greek: *Hypostasis* – *Prosopon*):**

In our understanding of the New Testament witness to God's self-revelation, 'the Father', 'the Son', and 'the Holy Spirit' are unique and proper names denoting three distinct Persons or real Hypostases who are neither exchangeable nor interchangeable while nevertheless of one and the same Divine Being. There is one Person of the Father who is always the Father, distinct not separate from the Son and the Spirit; and there is another Person of the Son who is always the Son, distinct not separate from the Father and the Spirit; and another Person of the Holy Spirit who is always the Holy Spirit, distinct not separate from the Father and the Son. In this three-fold tri-Personal self-revelation of God one Person is not more or less God, for all three Persons are coeternal and coequal. They are all perfectly one in the identity of their Nature and perfectly homoousial or consubstantial in their Being. Each of the three Persons is Himself Lord and God, and yet there are not three Lords or Gods, but only One Lord God, and there is only one and the same eternal Being of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. St. Athanasius said, '... we confess God to be one through the Trinity, and claim that our understanding of the one Godhead in Trinity is much more godly than the heretics' conception of Godhead with its many forms and its many parts.' The Holy Trinity of three divine Persons is thus perfectly homogenous and unitary, both in God's personal activity, and in His eternal unchangeable Personal Being.

The basic term used to express this reality was the word *hypostasis* taken over from the New Testament reference to Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God as ‘the express image of His being’ (**Heb 1:3**) Then within the context of the Church’s deepening understanding of the Gospel the word *hypostasis* was adapted to express the objective self-revelation of the Son and Word of God made flesh in Lord Jesus Christ as the incarnate ‘I AM’ of the Living God. But it was only when this was further thought out in the light of the three-fold self-revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit that the specific concept of ‘Person’ took shape, and then only within the inter-personal relations of the Holy Trinity as one Being, three Persons.

St. Athanasius said that the Nicene fathers could ‘speak confidently of Lord Jesus Christ as the true and natural Son of the Father who is proper to His Being, and as Himself true God and of one being with the true Father (*Homoousios*). For ‘He is the express image of the Father’s *Hypostasis*’ and light of light, and true power and image of the (*Hypostasis*) being of the Father.’ (*Con. Ar.*, I.9, with reference to Heb 1:3) → Thus in precise theological usage *ousia* now refers to being not simply as that which is but to what it is in respect to its internal reality, while *hypostasis* refers to being not just in its independent subsistence but in its objective otherness. As Prestige expressed it, **ousia** denotes being in its ‘inward reference’, while **hypostasis** denotes being in its ‘outward reference’ (G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics*, 1954, p.88). It must also be noted that in theological usage these terms have an essentially personal meaning, which they do not have in classical Greek.

No divine Person is who He is without essential relation to the other two, and yet each divine Person is other than and distinct from the other two. They are intrinsically interrelated not only through the fact that they have one Being in common so that each of them is in Himself whole God, but also in virtue of their differentiating characteristics as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which hypostatically intertwine with one another and belong constitutively to their indivisible unity within the Holy Trinity. There is an indivisible and continuous relation of being between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit so that the Being of the Godhead is understood to be whole or complete not in the Father only but in the Son and in the Holy Spirit as well.

- **Perichoresis:**

*Perichoresis* is a refined form of thought which helps us to develop a careful theological way of interpreting the biblical teaching about the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. *Perichoresis* derives from *chora* the Greek word for ‘space’ or ‘room’, or from *chorein* meaning ‘to contain’, ‘to make room’, or ‘to go forward’. It indicates a sort of mutual containing or enveloping of realities, which can be also spoken of as *coinherence* or *coindwelling*. It is not to be confused with *chorea*, which means to dance as in a Greek *chorus*! For the use of *chorein* in relation to the Greek Patristic notion of space, *chora* (which was carried over into the concept of the mutual containing of the three divine Persons) see T. F. Torrance’s discussion in *Space, Time and Incarnation* – London, 1969, pp. 15f.

It was undoubtedly St. Athanasius who in his clarification of the dwelling of the Father and the Son in one another provided the theological basis for the doctrine of coinherence. He did this by way of clarifying statements of Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples recorded by St. John, particularly, “I am in the Father and the Father in Me” (**Jn 14:11 – also 10:30,38; 14:10**) He deepened and refined the concept of the *homoousion* which gave expression to the underlying oneness in being and activity between the incarnate Son and God the Father upon which everything in the Gospel depended. As he understood it the *homoousion* pointed both to real distinctions between the three divine Persons and to their coinhering with one another in the one being of God. For St. Athanasius this had to do not merely with a linking or intercommunication of the distinctive properties of the three divine Persons but with a completely mutual indwelling in which each Person, while remaining what He is by Himself as Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, is wholly in the others as the others are wholly in Him. Although St. Athanasius did not give us a specific term for coinherence, mutual containing, or *Perichoresis* – that came later – its basic idea was already conceived in his refutation of the Arian

belittling of the Lord's words, "I am in the Father and the Father in Me" through their question, 'How can the one be contained in the other and the other in the one?' St. Athanasius pointed out that this would be to think of the relation between the Father and the Son quite inappropriately in accordance with the way material things can empty into and contain one another. He went to explain that when it is said "I am in the Father and the Father in Me" we are to understand this reciprocal relation as one in which the whole Being of the Father and the whole Being of the Son mutually indwell, inexist or coexist in one another, which is thinkable only in relation to God Himself and which we learn only in God's revelation of Himself.

In his *Letters on the Holy Spirit* written to his friend Serapion, St. Athanasius showed that we must think of this coinherence as applying equally to the homoousial interrelations between the Spirit and the Son, and the Spirit and the Father, and thus the whole Trinity, for unless the Being and Activity of the Spirit are identical with the Being and Activity of the Father and the Son, we are not saved.

St. Hilary of Poitiers put forward much of the same teaching in the West with reference to **John 14:10** but with explicit account of the coinherence between the divine Persons in terms of their wholly *containing* one another as whole Persons without any diminishment to the honor and glory of one another. 'Although these Beings do not dwell apart, they retain their separate existence and condition and can reciprocally contain one another, so that one permanently envelops and is enveloped by the other whom he yet envelops.' He argued that while this idea of mutual containing is unintelligible in respect of natural objects, it is not impossible with God who is both within and without all things, and contains all things although He Himself is not contained by anything. (Hilary, *De Trinitate* 3.1; 2.6; 3.4; 4.10)

St. Gregory Nazianzen first used the concept of perichoresis in its verbal form to help express the way in which the divine and human natures of the one Person of Lord Jesus Christ interacted or intermingled with one another in virtue of their union without the integrity of either being diminished by the presence of the other, but without any suggestion of the human nature interpenetrating the divine Nature, or any attempt to extend this to the inner relations of the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity. The concept of perichoresis was then applied to speak of the way in which the three divine Persons mutually dwell in one another and coinhere or inexist in one another while nevertheless remaining other than one another and distinct from one another. With this application the notion of perichoresis is refined and changed to refer to the complete mutual containing or interpenetration of the three divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in one God. But this had the effect of defining it in such a way that it may not be applied to the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Lord Jesus Christ, without serious damage to the doctrine of Christ.

The first actual use of the noun *perichoresis* in extant literature is found in the work of an unknown theologian on the Holy Trinity attributed to St. Cyril of Alexandria. This is found in the key text **John 14:11**, in a passage lifted without acknowledgement by John of Damascus but which had the effect of giving it currency as a technical theological term. By *perichoresis* Pseudo-Cyril and John Damascene gave expression to the dynamic Union and Communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit with one another in one Being in such a way that they have their Being in each other and reciprocally contain one another, without any coalescing or commingling with one another and yet without any separation from one another, for they are completely equal and identical in Deity and power. Each Person contains the one God in virtue of His relation to the others as well as His relation to Himself for they wholly coexist and inexist in one another. Human beings do not exist within one another, but this is precisely what the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity do. Since God is Spirit and God is Love, we must understand *perichoresis* in a wholly spiritual and intensely personal way as the eternal movement of Love or the Communion of Love which the Holy Trinity ever is within Himself, and in His active relations toward us through the Holy Spirit from within His homoousial relations with the Father and the Son. In this homoousial way the Holy Spirit is in Himself the *enhyposstatic* Love and the Communion of Love in the perichoretic relations between the Father and the Son and as such is in Himself the ground of our communion with God in the Love of the Father and Son.

This teaching corresponds to the way in which theologians like St. Epiphanius of Salamis with considerable stress on the *homoousion* as applying to the inner relations of the Trinity as a whole, spoke of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as three *enhyposstatic* Persons eternally grounded and wholly coinhering in one another while remaining other than one another, without there being any deviation in the Trinity from complete oneness and identity. In the one Being of God the three Persons are always what they are, the Father always the Father, the Son always the Son and the Holy Spirit always the Holy Spirit, each being true and perfect God. And it corresponds also to the thought of St. Cyril of Alexandria in his view of the living and dynamic coinherence or mutual containing of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit essentially and enhyposstatically within the Holy Trinity. He brought together the emphasis of St. Athanasius upon the one Being of the Homoousial Trinity with St. Gregory Nazianzen's conception of an indivisible but internally differentiated Trinity of real hypostatic relations continuously and actively subsisting in the Godhead.

The mystery of the perichoresis expresses the truth that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinctive Persons each with His own incommunicable properties, but that they dwell **in** one another, not only **with** one another, in such an intimate way that their individual characteristics instead of dividing them from one another unite them indivisibly together, the Father in the Son and the Spirit, the Son in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit in the Father and the Son. The Father is not Father apart from the Son and the Spirit, the Son is not Son apart from the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Spirit apart from the Father and Son, for each is who He is in His wholeness as true God of true God in the wholeness of the other two who are each true God of true God, and yet in the mystery of their perichoretic interrelations they are not three gods but one only God, the Blessed and Holy Trinity.

Perichoresis is not static but a dynamic concept for it refers to an eternal movement in the Love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for one another, which flows outward increasingly toward us. But it is important to note as well that perichoresis is not a speculative concept. It expresses the soteriological truth of the identity between God Himself and the content of His saving revelation in Lord Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, and thereby assures us that what God is toward us in Lord Jesus Christ and in His Spirit He is inherently and eternally in Himself. Together with the conception of the homoousion the conception of the coinherent or perichoretic relations of the divine Persons enables us to read back the interrelations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation into the eternal relations immanent in the one Being of God. It must be said, therefore, that the basic conception of perichoresis arises out of joyful belief in Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and out of worship and thanksgiving for the saving love of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit who reconciles us to Himself and takes us up in communion with Himself. On the other hand, perichoresis is a truth about the intimate relations in the divine Life which we cannot but formulate in fear and trembling, with adoration and awe, and in recognition of the poverty and inadequacy of the language we use in trying to put into words understanding of the mystery of the oneness and three-foldness of God's self-revelation to us. We could not do this were it not for the incarnation of God's Word in Lord Jesus Christ and His gracious condescension to address us in human forms of thought and speech.

In speaking of the Holy Trinity especially we are aware not only of having to use human modes of expression provided for us in the biblical revelation which signify realities beyond themselves, but of having to employ non-biblical terms in venturing to make pronouncements beyond the actual statements of Holy Scriptures in order to clarify interpretation and refute error, yet we cannot disguise the fact that this is to tread upon holy ground where we may speak and think only with prayer for divine forgiveness; please read the moving prayer of St. Hilary in his wrestling with the difficulties and problems of human thought and speech about God, *De Trinitate*, 1. 37-38.

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\* This lecture is adapted from *The Christian Doctrine of God; One Being, Three Persons* by T. F. Torrance.