

Review of Bruce Ware's book *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*

Book: Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005)

[Note: Updated Jan 5, 2020]

Introduction:

The Christian God, the true God, is the Triune God. He is one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Three persons, one essence. It is beyond our understanding to fully grasp what it means for God to be both one and three, yet it is not contradictory that God is both one and three, for He is one in essence and three in persons, two different categories. But is there any relevance of this mysterious doctrine of the Trinity for us today?

In his book, Bruce Ware attempts to flesh out the roles the various persons of the Godhead play in the drama of redemptive history, and tries to show the relevance the doctrine of the Trinity has for Christian living, especially with regards to gender relations. Ware states at the beginning the equality of the persons in the one essence, stating that “the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each possesses the divine nature *equally*, ... *eternally*, ... and *fully* ... The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ... each is fully God, equally God, and this is true eternally and simultaneously” (p. 41). This was done in chapter 2, with chapter 1 showing the importance of the doctrine of the Triune God.

Ware then moves on to what he really wants to get at, which is the roles and relations of the persons in the Godhead. In chapter 3, he talks about the Father, chapter 4 about the Son, chapter 5 about the Spirit, while chapter 6 concludes everything with the persons of the Godhead in community.

We must note that by separating the section on the essence of the Godhead (chapter 2) from the other chapters, when Ware speaks about the persons, he does not seem to be speaking about the persons in the being of God (*ad intra*), but rather the persons in their workings in redemptive history (*ad extra*). As he writes near the beginning of chapter 3, “We cannot look at aspects of the *nature of God* as that which distinguishes the Father from the Son and the Spirit” (p. 45). Ware doesn't use these categories, which would have been more helpful, but since he has mentioned the equality of the persons in chapter 2, it would be extremely uncharitable to think that any discussion of the persons in chapters three to six are speaking about the relations of the persons in the being of God (*ad intra*), as opposed to understanding them as speaking about the workings of the persons in both time and eternity (*ad extra*).

Positives:

Ware's book seeks to be extremely practical and pastoral. He thinks of course that roles and relations within the Godhead do have implications for issues like gender roles, and seeks to show how various actions and roles in society are not somehow inferior or demeaning. In chapter 3 on the Father, Ware shows us that the Fatherhood of God shows us how a father should be like in caring for his children (pp. 60-3). For earthly fathers, the love God the Father has for his children should be their example. Ware is also not unaware of those hurt by abusive fathers, and call on them not to give in to hate and bitterness and resentment against God the Father as "Father," but to see how God the Father is how a real father should be. Their experiences of abuse is not a reflection on God or even fatherhood, and they should learn the love a real father would have towards his children (p. 62).

Ware points out, more problematically, that delegation of responsibilities is compatible with authority, showing how the Father works with the Son and the Spirit (pp. 64-5). I would be speaking of certain concerns about this later on, but the point that authority is compatible with delegation of responsibilities is helpful, and it does not have to rely on Ware's understanding of the relations within the Godhead in this regard. There is nothing wrong with delegation of authority and responsibility, just as we see that the Father always work with the Son and the Spirit and not by Himself.

In discussing the Son, the most important thing we can take away is that "submission" is not a four-letter word! Submission does not equate to inferiority (pp. 98-100), for the Son is equal to God yet willingly submits to the Father. There is no idea of subordinationism here, for the Son is always and at all times equal to the Father. Thus, for wives to submit to their husbands is not for them to be inferior beings, or to be doormats. In fact, Ware towards the end of his book speak out against abuse from men who might think that headship gives them the right to abuse their wives (p. 142). Wives ought to submit to their husbands, but this does not give men the right to abuse their wives in any way.

Concerning the Spirit, Ware shows from Scripture how in a sense the Spirit has authority over the Son during His earthly ministry, but the Spirit then takes a subservient role from Pentecost. Ware shows that the willingness to give up authority is not an inferior quality (p. 129). Of course, the Spirit who is always working at the background to glorify and point people to Christ shows us that working in the background is not an inferior calling (p. 127-8).

In speaking about the relations within the Godhead, Ware shows how the equality in the persons does not militate against the differentiation of roles. There is therefore no inequality between people undertaking different stations in life (p. 135-6, 138-9). Focusing on the issue of gender, neither husbands nor wives are superior or inferior when the wife submits to her husband. (pp. 139-47). As the persons of the Godhead undertake various roles between them, yet all are equal, so likewise we may submit or exercise authority over equals, or those who we submit to or exercise authority over may still be our equals.

Concerns:

1) Univocity and Analogy

The thesis statement by Ware on the practical applications of the Trinity states:

God intends that his very nature—yes, his triune and eternal nature—be expressed in our human relationships (p. 132)

I do believe that we can learn from how the persons of the Godhead relate to each other, in our living together as a community of believers. But because of the distance between the Creator and the creature, there is not a univocal point of being between God and Man. Therefore, even as we look at the Godhead, our learning is through analogy. We learn to be like God in various ways, but not everything within the Godhead is for us to emulate, nor can we do so. This is especially when we use the language of “nature,” for nature normally implies ontology, not roles.

The language that Ware uses therefore is not right. First, we do not, and we will never, emulate God in his nature. We can in an analogical fashion emulate God in the nature of his roles, but “nature of roles” is not the same as “nature.” Also, while I do not think Ware wants to erase the distance between God and Man, I think language about emulating God needs to be more measured in recognition that we are not and can never be God. We emulate God in an analogical fashion, not univocally.

2) Language about authority and submission in the Godhead

While I think that there are (economic) relations of authority and submission in the Godhead, I do think Ware runs the risk of making something, even an important thing, into THE main thing, calling it the “most marked characteristic of the Trinitarian relationship” (p. 137). The main focus concerning the relation in the Godhead is not about authority and submission, but about service. Yes, authority and submission is there, but it is not the main thing. Social issues like egalitarianism should not be the tail wagging the dog. Complementarians need to be careful that they do not over-react to one error by swinging into the opposite error. By all means, speak about authority and submission, but do not overdo it.

3) Neglecting the *ad intra* relations within the Godhead

In the main body of the book, Ware totally omits any discussion of the *ad intra* relations within the Godhead (eternal generation of the Son, Spiration of the Spirit). In a footnote (Footnote 3) of chapter 5, Ware states that these conceptions seem “highly speculative and not grounded in biblical teaching” (p. 162). Ware has since modified his views as stating that he holds to them yet have reservations about their proof-texts.¹

Whether he actually holds to them as they are historically understood, it is concerning that Ware in his book omits any mention of them, while he does not seem to understand

¹ Bruce A. Ware, “Knowing the Self-Revealed God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” (Guest Post) July 4, 2016. *Biblical Reasoning* blog. Accessed at <https://secundumscripturas.com/2016/07/04/knowning-the-self-revealed-god-who-is-father-son-and-holy-spirit/> (Last accessed Sept 7, 2016)

them very well either in that more recent guest post. The *ad intra* relations are not the same as the *ad extra* roles and relations which Ware discusses in his book. It is important that such a distinction should be made, so that readers are not confused into reading roles and relations into the immanent Trinity or God in His being. Within the being of God, the eternal relations of generation and spiration distinguishes the persons of the Godhead, not authority or submission which are the external workings of the Godhead.

In the introduction of this review, I mentioned the neglect of use of the *ad intra/ ad extra* categories. While it is a charitable interpretation that chapter 2 refers to the being of God while chapters 3 to 6 speak about the works of God, uncharitable interpretations are available for those who do not read the cues properly. It would be much more helpful and clearing up of ambiguity if Ware had actually employed these categories in his book, as it would stop some of the misunderstanding that has taken place.

4) God **ALWAYS** works with the Son through the Spirit

Ware wrote as one thesis statement that “the Father *often* provides and works through the Son and Spirit” (p. 55. Emphasis added). But that is a major categorical mistake, a mistake which Ware seems to have realized in part.² It is extremely unhelpful to think as if the persons of the Trinity can work separately. They do distinct acts to be sure, but the persons of the Trinity are not separate persons like you and me. Distinct, not separate! Yes, we can see how the three persons of the Trinity work together despite the Father having primacy among the persons, and learn from it. But it is infelicitous and wrong to state as if the Father could anytime do without the Son and the Spirit, even if we are speaking hypothetically.

After all, we are not hypothetical tritheists (but actually monotheists)

5) The Father as Supreme among the person, but the Son is also supreme among the persons, and the Spirit

I agree with Ware that the Father is supreme among the persons of the Godhead. But then so is the Son supreme among the persons of the Godhead. In Colossians 1:18, the Son is to be preeminent over all things, and in Philippians 2:9 He is given the name above every other name. As for the Spirit, He is supreme over the Father and the Son in revelation, for He is the only one who mediates truth to us through Scripture (2 Peter 1:21). And while the Son is the Word made flesh exegeting the Father (Jn. 1:18), it is the Spirit

² Bruce A. Ware, “An Open Letter to Liam Goligher, Carl Trueman, and Todd Pruitt on Trinitarian Equality and Distinctions,” (Guest Post) July 8, 2016. *Biblical Reasoning* blog. Accessed at <https://secundumscripturas.com/2016/07/08/an-open-letter-to-liam-goligher-carl-trueman-and-todd-pruitt-ontrinitarian-equality-and-distinctions-guest-post-by-bruce-ware/> (Last accessed Sept 7, 2016)

“Of course, this is purely hypothetical, and I acknowledge that my wording here could be made more precise.”

who convicts us of truth and bring us to the Word (Jn. 1:9; 3:5,8; 14:26). So in revelation post Pentecost, the Spirit brings us to Christ who exegetes the Father.

Therefore, within the Godhead, the Father is supreme among the persons of the Godhead in primacy, the Son supreme among the persons of the Godhead in preeminence, and the Spirit is supreme among the persons of the Godhead in revelation. All of them are supreme, but in different manners of being.

As such, while I agree with Ware's point on the supremacy of the Father in the exegesis of those verses, Ware's point is decidedly lopsided since it leans towards some form of monarchy of the Father or "Monarchianism" (an early church heresy). Of course I do not think Ware holds to Monarchianism, but there is a danger there when the focus is on trying to emphasize supremacy as something almost as if only the Father has.

Instead of putting forward supremacy of the Father, Ware could exegete the same texts to put forward the Father's supremacy in primacy, while affirming the supremacy of the Son and the Spirit also. Better yet, why not focus on the fact of the primacy of the Father, something which is not supremacy and definitely does not include any connotation of worth and value, or gradations of honor? The main focus on looking at the "supremacy of the Father" is after all how the Father exercises his authority, which we can learn from seeing how the Father initiates and exercises authority without trying to make it seem as if one person of the Trinity is somehow "superior" to another.

Conclusions:

Bruce Ware's book on the Trinity has a lot of positive things to teach us concerning the Trinity. There are however some parts that are rather problematic and unhelpful. We certainly can learn a lot about the Trinity from Ware in his book, but one has to discern certain parts, particularly substantial portions of chapter 3, as they are liable to interpretations along less orthodox lines.