

Bertram's Subtle Dependence Employing the sincere form of flattery,

a response by Paul Rorem

to Robert W. Bertram's

Putting the Nature of God Into Language: Naming the Trinity

May 18. 1987

The Style

1. There is nothing like a Bertram exposition... circling th[e]center, fending off misunderstandings, making words serve new meanings, until it seems language itself is no longer under the law. (Richard Luecke, Currents 14, p. 100, footnote 9)

2. There is a daring creativity in this particular Bertram exposition, beyond its delightful freedom of language. It is better than that. Who among us would dare dance so close to the rim of the Arian pitfall, that oldest and most stubborn of oft-condemned heresies? Not I, but I know a daredevil when I see one. And why not? Why not take Arianism (and its aftermath) seriously? Not as a heresy wherewith to bludgeon opponents—as might an immature polemicist—but as a half-truth or near-truth to ponder, along with its substantial scriptural foundations.

3. Exactly. Exactly the question of our last seminar: how does one move from the dominant monotheism of the Bible to the explicit trinitarianism of the ecumenical councils, creeds, and the Christian faith? One way, perhaps the best way in the long

run, is to follow the tracks of those who first made that trip, instead of imagining the journey ourselves. The Council of Nicaea, after all, was an exegetes' dispute, with the Gospels poised on a podium in their midst, lest any bishop—or the emperor—miss that point. The Arians had plenty of biblical evidence, as any Jehovah's Witness will unwittingly demonstrate on your doorstep. But what texts or implicit scriptural message propelled the others, the winners, to their conclusion? Perhaps Gerhard Ebeling had a point. We should view the history of doctrine as the history of the exposition of scripture, and thereby engage exegetes and systematicians on the common ground of church history. But no need, our essayist has anticipated that point.

The Issue

4. Principally, Bertram's essay rescues Father-Son language from our parentalist preoccupation with "Father", for a new appreciation of God the Child's filial and therefore divine dependence. A remarkable achievement, adorned with related insights all along the way. Yes, the Holying Spirit may be called "She", not in order to concede the propriety of "He" for God as First and/or Second Person [See Paul Bieber's accidentally unsigned piece in this week's Rhetor (I.2, p. 3) decrying "the notion that the Godhead is a majoritarian institution"], but rather in order to qualify all of our language about God (endnote 46), just as "Goddess" may helpfully qualify "God", for some. Dea/Deo volente. Else not at all. And yes, Jesus' own use of "Father" was not a disembodied theological preference over the term "Mother", but part of his incarnate context of calling someone else by that name (#50). Now that someone says it so plainly, of course!

5. Still, that was the question to begin with: Can "Father" language and therefore "Son" language escape a hierarchical

patriarchalism within the Godhead, not to mention toward us and among us? Can we speak of God the Child as dependent without the bad name of dependency, as subordinate without subordinationism? Can we acknowledge Arius' biblical arsenal without falling into Arianism?

6. Several pitfalls open before us. If the divine Child is dependent on God the Parent's will, that is straight-forward Arianism, as Gregg and Groh's Early Arianism, A View of Salvation (Fortress, 1981) points out, and perhaps the weakness of liberalism (#19). In that case, the Son may be "begotten, not made," but not only-begotten or uniquely begotten, but (merely) begotten as we are, as one of the dependent children of God, albeit the one who achieved the eternally foreseen breakthrough to divinity as the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

7. But Bertram has kept his balance on this precipice, with the classical Cappadocian maneuver. The dependent one is not simply a child of God, the Arian loophole, but God the Child. Yet the Cappadocians thereby took another risk, as does this essay. Do we really want to use the human analogy of "one person's reliance upon another, vis a vis" (#5)? Leaning away from Arian subordinationism, some seemed egalitarian enough, but almost tritheist. No wonder Gregory of Nyssa was forced into disclaiming "That there are not three gods."

8. Ironically, in re-activating the Nicene christology (#20), Karl Barth also reactivated both of these pitfalls by using a husband and wife analogy. There is still subordinationism in speaking of "first" and "second", not to mention the disastrous application to marriage, giving any such sort of dependency a deservedly bad name (#10-12). And, such a human or social analogy of the Trinity puts us back on Gregory's precarious edge. How to prevent speaking of the Triune God as a trio, however harmonious or as triplets, however identical?

9. Our rim-dancing essayist has also kept his balance here, but only through an implicit safeguard which is rarely revealed, rather like a daredevil's adhesive soles. The original antidote to subordinationism and to di- or tri-theism was the homoousion. This unbiblical expression ultimately depended not on any explicit biblical reference to a triunity in God, but on the theological implications of calling Jesus "Lord" while yet affirming that God is one, just to summarize drastically a very debatable point. This particular "Son of God" was and is God the Son or God the Child, dependent not on the will or (separate) existence of God but on the one divine essence which "dependee" and dependent share. "The one who is depended upon is of course God, but the one who does the depending is likewise God, the self-same God. The latter assertion is as important as the former" (#3). Yet how can the homoousion itself, which admitted of several interpretations, or this latter assertion be unassailably maintained, without Augustine's methodological insistence that God is first of all one?

The Solution

10. Augustine's conceptual (not temporal) priority first on God as one and then on God as three seems shared in Bertram's hints that the dependent God is the "self-same" God. This one-word tip reassured me, at least, of the massive Augustinian iceberg below the surface, which starts with God's unity. But why keep this legacy from Augustine so subdued? Is this the essayist's own subtle dependence? The massive influence of Augustine on all western theologians needs more than a reminder from "Moltmann and the whole Augustinian tradition before him" (#15). For are not Moltmann, Jenson, Pannenberg, Jungel, Welch, Hodgson, and scores of others in the Western, "Augustinian" tradition outdoing each other to disavow Augustine himself and go Cappadocian?

11. These theologians yearn for a clearer articulation (sometimes in radical new terms previously unknown in East and West) of the threeness of God, even if God's oneness seems left behind. Of course it is not truly left behind—but then again may it is—for these (and we!) are western theologians after all, whose very upbringing in the faith and formative doctrinal training were inescapably Augustinian. Rather, they and we and this essay assume the oneness of God in their/our deepest conceptual structure, and then appreciate the Cappadocian articulation of God's threeness from that Augustinian starting point. Ironically, the current shift from the "western" emphasis on de deo uno to the eastern interest in de deo trino is itself the Augustinian move. Are those western theologians who make the most of their new-found appreciation for the Christian East thereby revealing themselves precisely as Augustinians after all?

12. Or are they really discarding Augustine's insights? Yet at such risk. What more content to the "Father-Son" distinction can be given, except that the Godhead is internally relational, as in Augustine's lover-beloved language, without falling into the subordinationist or even tritheist ditch on the one side. True, Augustine dances close to the modalist edge of monotheism on his side, but to abandon him altogether is to lose the counter-weight and risk a headlong fall.

13. Is that why, amid Bertram's apparent dissatisfaction with merely generic relational language, even his remarkable eloquence gives so little content to this new liberated childhood? What is this new filial dependence which avoids infantile dependency? Would he begrudge an Augustinian explanation for this reticence? Giving any more content to this dependency, to the Parent-Child distinction within the immanent Trinity, might return him to the brink of the Arian downfall. Unless we want to de-mythologize

this language completely (that saying “God the Parent begot God the Child” simply means that God’s intentions were actualized, or some such modern move), we are left with Augustine’s minimalist safeguard that the Parent is not the Child and the Child is not the Parent, period.

The Conclusion

14. Perhaps that which was given short shrift at the outset (the immanent and economic Trinity, endnote 2) and he who was only named in passing were actually the stabilizing connections all along during this exhilarating dance on the edge of perils left and right? Remarkable connections. Perhaps the crucial and subtle dependency here is on the theological Father of us all, the Bishop of Hippo? How else to explain the creative genius of this essay, circling a new insight, fending off misunderstandings, making words serve new meanings, and yet with no loss of balance? Does that make Bertram the dependent, without a servile dependency? a daredevil with a barely visible Augustinian balance pole? Perhaps, but a remarkable dependent.

[BertramsSubtleDependence \(PDF\)](#)