

These chapters move from describing God as he displays himself, to analyzing how faithful theological describing works, to extending these lessons to God's relations with other persons in order to gain harmonious insights on the nature of human personhood.

Downey deliberately centers his Trinitarian theology in God's threefold personhood rather than God's one nature. That makes the names of God an appropriate lead. "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" all arise in Israel, where they connote commitment, belovedness, and life (21-23). (Incidentally, Bauckham and Thompson, who are more careful and critical readers of the earliest sources, will differ in some details here.) However, these terms come into sharp *focus* in the ministry of Jesus: Jesus is the Father's beloved Son, enlivened by the Spirit and depending on the Father's commitment to all he is and does. Downey fixes on Jesus' baptism as a clear picture of the triune God-for-us (cover, 24-25) and on his career as embodying the Love that is God. The Father is "Love without origin"; the Son is its expression in the darkness of sin's world; the Spirit is its breathing, loving, living, and shining (24-25).

Revisionist theologians worry that these terms are inadequate for God, not least because they come from oppressive societies. We need different language, the argument goes. The trouble here is that *all* language comes from communities in need of redemption, and the traditional answer is that redemption arrives *through* rather than against the same communities. The self-emptying Son's vulnerability embodies the Father's heart – or, so the Council of Toledo, his womb (28-29). They interact in the Spirit, revealing the persons as merciful as well as just and overturning the expectations of fatherhood and sonship Jesus' day as well as our own (30-33). *Q: This puts this part of Downey's argument in some tension with the former part. Is Jesus redefining fatherhood, or reminding Israel that YHWH has already defined fatherhood, or a little of both? How far are these roles from their Old Testament roots?*

In any event, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ *does* overturn our self-understandings as he invites us into a life "both vulnerable and compassionate as was Love's Word Jesus, speaking and breathing God's own gift of life and love named 'Spirit'" (34). Downey will follow this trajectory of grace from the Triune God to his beloved world in the rest of the book. He does it in distinctively Catholic ways. The flow of grace is sacramental, in that Jesus chooses material means for extending his embrace (35). It is also charismatic, in that the power of both his love and our response is the Holy Spirit, "poured out as gift/ing [in the past/in the present] into his Body, the church, at Pentecost" (36-38) and enabling us to be sons [and daughters] of *our* Father.

Here is a critical point: These persons are not related to each other because they relate to us. That would make Trinity incidental to God; it would make the persons nothing but faces toward the creation. Instead, the persons' eternal relations overflow as "a life that pours itself forth," "altogether and absolutely gift," creating and reaching and including us in its mystery (38-39).

The next chapter steps back to offer a bigger picture of how theology works. Its analysis is strong medicine against the misimpressions that give theology a bad name: "it's a mystery ... someday we'll understand ... for now, just believe" or "don't worry about it, it doesn't really matter anyway" (40-41, 44). Worthy theology moves from God's disclosures (43) to experiences and practices that name God accordingly (45-46) to rules like the rules of grammar that keep our language clear, coherent, and creative. (I would say "to and through.")

The specific Trinitarian grammar is “a grammar of gift” which trains us to hear and respond more effectively to God’s grace in Jesus the Spirit-anointed one (47-48).

It is here, in *theologia*’s appreciation of the *oikonomia* or the economy of salvation, that technical terms supply precision rather than the evocative imagery of the Bible’s own terms: *hypostasis* (“person”) for the distinctiveness and interrelatedness of Father, Son, and Spirit, and *ousia* (“substance”) for the shared unity of God (50-55). Rather than speculating on who God is “in himself” (*in se*) – the “immanent Trinity” – Downey follows the ancient trail newly blazed by Karl Rahner and radicalized by his friend Catherine Mowry LaCugna and remains centered on who God is with us, for us, and in us – the “economic Trinity” that has disclosed and continues to disclose his mystery (55-59).

*Q: Trinitarian theology gets dry pretty quickly, doesn’t it? Its precision often comes at the cost of its poetry. But not at the cost of its beauty or power! What ways of reading these words can keep them attractive to us?*

*Q: This is good stuff. But does Downey’s own way of describing God – “giver, given, gift/ing” – say enough about the economy of salvation he is trying to describe?*

Chapter 3 claims that a Christian understanding of personhood follows from the personhood of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As God is relational, so humanity and all creation are relational (61-62). We do not constitute or create ourselves any more than the Father or the Son do, western individualism notwithstanding (62-63). Nor does God constitute us as lone individuals – the introspective spirituality of Augustine’s psychological vestiges of the Trinity notwithstanding (64). Rather, human as well as divine persons receive their being from others (64-65).

Downey develops this by focusing much of the rest of the chapter on attention to “the least of these,” particularly the severely mentally handicapped, as parables of what it means to be human. Humanity comes not from achievement, success, or ideal health but from openness to relationship with others (66-67). Personhood is just as subversive as a Christian category as “Father” and “Son”!

Again, note the direction of Downey’s argument: We do not determine that relatedness is constitutive of God by looking at human beings. By ourselves, human beings are ambiguous. Otherwise we would have so many competing anthropologies, and we would not treat each other as we do in our culture (especially before our births). Moreover, if we started with ourselves, our theologies would be as pliable as our self-understandings, and (as Karl Barth put it) “God” would just be “man” said in a loud voice! The horse pulls the cart, not vice versa. We do not name God until after we are named by God (*theonomous*, 71). We determine how relatedness is constitutive of *humanity* by learning the mystery of God in his relations among us (78). Anchored in the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, our conviction of the relationality of all being finally trains us to see the truly powerless in new light. The greater mystery of God educates us about the lesser mysteries of life.

*Q: Does the cross confirm or disconfirm Downey’s claim?*

*Q: Does this argument strike you as sound, or invalid? Natural, or forced?*

*Q: In what other specific ways could attention to the relatedness of the divine persons inform our understandings and attitudes regarding others?*