

Allan Coppedge, *The God Who is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2007. (345pp).

The Wesleyans strike back! Or at least that is what Coppedge (Beeson Professor of Theology, Asbury Theological Seminary, Kentucky) leads us to believe in the Introduction. From the Preface we learn that this work is the first fruits of a collaborative systematic theology to be written by a group of around fourteen scholars and friends (including his daughter and father-in-law), all associated with Asbury Theological Seminary, who established a theological project that would begin with Jesus, move to a triune understanding of God, and address the main themes of Christian theology. Three contemporary movements motivate the current work: the revived interest in trinitarian studies; the debate between classical and open theism; and the reconnection between biblical and systematic theology.

The main contention of the work is that when Jesus is made central to systematic theology a trinitarian theology ensues which changes everything. Coppedge contends he is constructing a theology he terms 'triune theism' or 'trinitarian theism', in contradistinction to classical or open theism. His work promises to be a *via media* between these systems and to creatively open up the divine essence, divine attributes, and the doctrines of creation and providence to a more biblical and trinitarian understanding, which will radically alter Christian experience and practice. This accounts for the subtitle: *Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*.

Over thirteen chapters Coppedge constructs a consistent and coherent theology and offers a wonderful range of new insights, nuanced doctrines, and refreshingly lucid opinions. In the biblical survey a methodology for recognising the Trinity in Scripture is offered: instead of limiting our search to trinitarian formulas, triadic texts, and those which explicitly mention all three persons of the Godhead, Coppedge successfully argues that texts which mention any *two* of the divine persons is sufficient to show how the God of the Old and New Testaments is fundamentally triune. He states: 'Old Testament monotheism is a monotheism of the triune God, who reveals himself more fully in the New Testament as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The best way to describe this view of God is 'triune theism,' which begins with the one God of Jewish theism but accents his triune nature. Jesus is our way into this expanded understanding of God' (p23). Coppedge then explains how the movement from

Scripture to theology involves a change in method from the order of knowing (*ordo cognoscendi*) to the order of being (*ordo essendi*).

Chapter Three surveys the formulation and development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early church. A common failure of the work is first highlighted in this chapter, the work tends towards oversimplification, lacks nuance, and relies upon the readings of secondary sources. Coppedge draws uncritically upon the work of T.F. Torrance, C. LaCugna, and R. Jenson, for example, but shows no awareness of their conflicting theologies or readings of history. He also misunderstands people at key points as when he perpetuates the fallacy that Barth was a modalist due to his use of 'modes of being', and following Moltmann (p109), that Barth so stressed the oneness of God that he was somehow undermining an understanding of God as triune!

Chapters Four to Six cover the economic and ontological trinity, endorsing Rahner's *Grundaxiom* but then explaining the limitations of this if taken ontologically rather than methodologically. The 'triune theism' Coppedge constructs adopts the eastern starting point of the three persons over the one divine essence. This allows Coppedge to define the essence (*ousia*) of God as holiness and love. The three divine persons are discrete instantiations of this essence, drawing upon Torrance's theology of onto-relations and Nicene theology's stress on the *homoousios* of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Chapters Seven to Nine deal with the divine attributes from the trinitarian theology already constructed. This means ordering the discussion in a particular way, namely: personal attributes must come first, followed by moral, relative, and absolute attributes. Personal attributes include reason, imagination, emotions, and will. Moral attributes include love and righteousness, relative attributes include the omni's, and absolute attributes include simplicity, infinity and self-sufficiency. In adopting this order Coppedge is able to understand such attributes as simplicity, immensity, and immutability as subordinate to the personal and relational attributes. God's impassibility is denied (as Coppedge adopts an anachronistic reading of Patristic theology), and his immensity appears to be relativised. According to Coppedge, it is this ordering and understanding of the divine attributes which enables triune theism to adopt the perceived strengths and reject the perceived weaknesses both in classical and open theism. After discussing the concept of analogy, Coppedge concludes with outlining eight major 'roles' or attributes of divine identity to round off his discussion: God as Redeemer, Shepherd,

Creator, King, Priest, Judge, Personal Revealer, and Father. The last two are analogies of intrinsic attribution and thus reveal more of God than the six analogies of extrinsic attribution.

The remaining four chapters apply triune theism to the doctrines of creation and providence. God is clearly shown to be distinct from creation and yet intimately involved with it as Creator. In addition, the six central purposes for creation, especially human persons are stated: the chief purpose is to share God's life and love in fellowship with other persons; to share God's moral character; developing the mind of Christ; have close person-to-person relationships; serve God in their work; and to delight in the created order. Coppedge provides a contrast between naturalism and supernaturalism, and outlines a classic Arminian doctrine of providence, prevenient grace, and responsible and free humans. Throughout this section Coppedge insists that what is required is to relegate the concept of God as sovereign king to a lesser place and instead to begin with the concept of God as loving Father in relationship with the other two divine persons and with creation. Apparently the two are incompatible.

It is not until the final chapter that Coppedge directly defends triune theism against classical theism, process theology, and open theism. In the process he makes some audacious claims. According to Coppedge, 'Logically, those who begin from a trinitarian starting point are indeterminists' (p313). By indeterminism he is advocating the classical Arminian position of Molinism. (He does note that trinitarian theists could adopt the Boethian solution, Molinist solution, or the Ockhamist resolution, however [p315, fn. 8]). These are audacious claims given the fact that the most celebrated trinitarian theologians of our age, many of whom Coppedge cites with approval, are not Arminian. These include Karl Barth, T.F. Torrance, Colin Gunton, John Zizioulas, Cathy LaCugna, and Paul Molnar. There is no attempt in this work to defend Coppedge's claim against any of these authorities. Coppedge necessarily makes a distinction between foreknowledge and foreordination; the former is endorsed while the latter is radically redefined. Further, he argues that a trinitarian approach to theology necessitates that before God is considered the sovereign King he is a loving Father, Son, and Spirit. Coppedge concludes with three constituent features of trinitarian theism: first, it starts with Jesus Christ; second, it balances transcendence and immanence; and finally, it highlights God's relationality.

In his attempt to enrich the church by constructing a new trinitarian model Coppedge has provided a stimulating and helpful work. Written from a Wesleyan perspective this is a useful barometer of contemporary Arminian theology. Coppedge is to be commended for attempted to defend Arminianism from the recent challenges of open theism and also for attempting to articulate its differences from classical theism. The concept of triune theism is bold and Coppedge has made a fine attempt to outline what this new theology may look like. The focus on Jesus Christ as God's ultimate revelation was welcome, as were the pastoral and applicatory sections of the work. It is obvious Coppedge loves the triune God and wants as many others to love him as well.

That being said, the work does have some serious problems. Throughout Coppedge settles for generalisations and caricatures rather than detailed and nuanced theological analysis. Coppedge draws extensively upon the theology of Thomas Torrance, citing his work 42 times according to the index (compared to Pannenberg 18 times, Thomas Oden 16 times, Gunton 15 times, and Jenson 11 times). Despite this heavy reliance upon Torrance there is no detailed interaction with his work and at key points Coppedge affirms the opposite of what Torrance is affirming, with no comment on how he comes to these divergent views. On other occasions Coppedge makes comments that seemingly contradict his central argument, when, for instance, on p203, fn. 12 he affirms that 'After the incarnation, though, God the Son is fully corporeal'. Coppedge has argued for the incorporeality, infinity, immensity, and omnipresence of God before making this claim. So how can the two be reconciled? Coppedge offers no explanation. One simply assumes that Coppedge is committed to a Lutheran conception of the ubiquity of Christ, but this is radically inconsistent with the rest of the theology outlined in the work. Many other theological frustrations of this nature were also evident throughout which lead one to suspect that 'triune theism' will not catch on in this present form.

The God Who is Triune offers a general introduction to the doctrine of God, clearly explains some fundamental concepts and offers some fresh new insights. It also contains numerous eccentricities and theological aberrations which, in the final analysis, make the work both frustrating and disappointing.

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