

Cur Deus Trinus? The Relation of the Trinity to Christ's Identity as Savior and to the Efficacy of his Atoning Death

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Introduction

In the eleventh century, St. Anselm famously asked the question, "*Cur Deus Homo?*", that is, "Why did God become Man?" In contemplating the doctrine of the incarnation and the Chalcedonian affirmation that in Christ the divine nature and a human nature are fully conjoined but not confused in the one Person, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Anselm sought to give explanation to why this hypostatic union of the divine and human *ousia* was in fact necessary for our salvation. One might think of Anselm's purpose, then, in these terms: he sought to articulate just why God must become man in order for the Messiah *to be a Savior* and for his atoning death *to be efficacious*. Anselm expresses the heart of his answer to this question in one place this way, saying that "it is necessary that a God-Man should pay" for sin, since, "no one can pay except God, and no one ought to pay except man."¹

In more recent days of this twenty-first century, I have been led to contemplate a similar kind of question, but this in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity and its relationship both to Christ as Savior and to the efficacy of his atoning death. So, rather than "*Cur Deus Homo?*", our question here is "*Cur Deus Trinus?*", that is, "Why must God be triune, or three in one, for salvation to be effected?" Thus, the overall question that frames this

article, then, is this: Must God be triune for the Messiah *to be our Savior* and for his atoning death *to be efficacious*? That is, is it necessary that the God who saves be the Trinitarian deity of the Christian faith? Or, yet differently, is there a necessary relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and our doctrines of Christology and soteriology? *Cur Deus Trinus?* Must God be triune for Christ's identity and his atoning death to be what they are?

I will argue that yes, the Trinitarian Personhood of God is necessary in both respects, and I shall present a summary of the case for each in the two main parts of this article. First, then, we focus attention on the question of the relationship of the Trinity to the identity of Christ as Savior to be followed in the second section by focused attention upon the relationship of the Trinity to the efficacy of Christ's atoning death.

The Trinity and the Identity of Christ as Savior

The identity of Jesus as Messiah and Savior is tied, both historically and of necessity, to his relationships with the Father and Spirit, respectively. Put differently, if you imagine for a moment removing the Father and the Spirit from the historical Person Jesus Christ of Nazareth, you realize that this Jesus the Christ could not be—i.e., he could not exist and be who he is—devoid of the Father and

the Spirit. Indeed, the identity of Christ as Savior depends on the reality of the Trinity. Consider with me the relationship of the Christ as Savior to the Father and to the Spirit, each in turn.

The Identity of Jesus and the Father

To announce the bottom line at the top, the identity of Jesus as Savior is inextricably tied to his being the Son of the Father, sent by the Father to accomplish the Father's will. In other words, who Jesus is and what it is he came to do has everything to do with his Sonship, both in the immanent and in the economic Trinities, or more simply, both in eternity and in history. Consider some of the biblical teaching supporting this contention:

I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, And the very ends of the earth as Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like earthenware" (Ps 2:7-9).²

It is not merely that Jesus is a Son, *per se*, but that he is *the Son of this Father*—this Father who himself uniquely is King and Redeemer, and who decrees to exercise both his salvation of and triumph over the nations through none other than his Son. We express no disrespect for the Son when we observe that it is absolutely true that Jesus the Christ could not be who he is, nor could his mission be what it was, apart from his being the Son of the Father, begotten by the Father, and commissioned by the Father for his mission. We have no Savior who is not the Son of *this Father*.

I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented

before Him. And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

Note that the language of "given" in v. 14 indicates that the Son's identity as the coming King of kings and Lord of lords depends on his being Son of this Ancient of Days.

As these texts imply, it was the will of the Father in eternity past to send the Son into the world to be Savior and King. The historical Sonship of the Messiah, then, reflects the eternal relationship of the Sonship of the second Person of the Trinity with his Father. Here, as elsewhere, the immanent Trinity takes priority over and explains the economic Trinity, Karl Rahner's maxim notwithstanding.³ The identity of Jesus as Savior is inexplicable without reference to his being the eternal Son of the eternal Father, now begotten as the Christ, the incarnate Son of his Father.

New Testament teaching, and particularly the teaching of Jesus himself, confirms that his identity as Son and Savior is dependent on his being sent by the Father. Over forty times in John's gospel, Jesus mentions the fact that the Father has sent him to accomplish the mission he is here to do. Some instances might be understood as a "sending" that occurred during the incarnation itself. But not all.

Consider John 3:16-17:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

In John 6:38 Jesus says, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” Similarly, Jesus says in John 10:36, “Do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?”

So, it is clear that the Son obeyed the Father in heaven, in order to come from heaven and do the will of his Father in his earthly mission. He was the Son of the Father in heaven, and he obeyed his Father in coming from heaven. Therefore, his submission to the Father existed in eternity past and his role here as Son and Savior is only thereby rightly understood.

Hear how Augustine discusses both the essential equality of the Father and Son, and the mission of the Son who was sent, in eternity past, to obey and carry out the will of the Father:

If however the reason why the Son is said to have been sent by the Father is simply that the one is the Father and the other the Son then there is nothing at all to stop us believing that the *Son is equal to the Father* and consubstantial and co-eternal, and yet that the Son is sent by the Father. *Not because one is greater and the other less, but because one is the Father and the other the Son; one is the begetter, the other begotten; the first is the one from whom the sent one is; the other is the one who is from the sender. For the Son is from the Father, not the Father from the Son. In the light of this we can now perceive that the Son is not just said to have been sent because the Word became flesh, but that he was sent in order for the Word to become flesh, and by his bodily presence to do all that was written. That is, we should understand that it was not just the man who the Word became that was sent, but that the Word was sent to become man. For he was not sent in virtue of some disparity of power or substance or*

*anything in him that was not equal to the Father, but in virtue of the Son being from the Father, not the Father being from the Son.*⁴

While the Son was fully God—“consubstantial and co-eternal” with the Father—yet he was sent, as Augustine says, “in order for the Word to become flesh.” This indicates the *taxis*, the order, in the Trinity prior to the incarnation, which *taxis* is manifest as he becomes incarnate and obeys the will of the Father. Apart from Jesus’ relationship to his Father, his identity as Savior sent into the world is inexplicable.

And of course, this very reality of being in submission to the Father marks the Son’s relationship with the Father for all of eternity future. Recall the remarkable words of 1 Cor 15:25-28:

For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For he has put all things in subjection under his feet. But when He says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

Regarding this text, the late Colin Gunton has commented, reflecting on the subjection of the Son to the Father. This description in 1 Cor 15:28, of the Son’s future subjection to the Father, has

implications for what we may say about the being of God eternally, and would seem to suggest a subordination of *taxis*—of ordering within the divine life—but not one of deity or regard. It is as truly divine to be the obedient self-giving Son as it is to be the Father who sends and the Spirit who renews and perfects.⁵

We are enabled to see here something of what constitutes the beauty, the wisdom, and the goodness of the relations among the Trinitarian Persons when we see the Son at work accomplishing the will of the Father. It is the nature of God both to exert authority and to obey in submission. And since this is the eternal nature of God, we may know that it is beautiful and it is good, and because of this, we are prompted to marvel a bit more at the glory that is our Triune God. Indeed, then, the Son's identity is wrapped up essentially with his being the Son in submission to this Father.

Finally, listen afresh to the interchange Jesus had with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt 16:13-17).

The identity of Jesus, the Christ, is impossible to comprehend or account for apart from his relationship with the Father.

The Identity of Jesus and the Spirit

In addition, the identity of Jesus as Savior is inextricably tied to his being the Spirit-anointed Messiah, whose very Person requires the indwelling and empowering Spirit for him to be who he is and to accomplish what he has come to do. Consider some of the biblical teaching supporting this contention:

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:30-35).

"I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water." John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God" (John 1:31-34).

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21).

But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (Matt 12:28).

You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him (Acts 10:38).

Jesus is none other than the Spirit-anointed Messiah. His very conception as the God-man is supernaturally accomplished by the power of the Spirit (Luke 1:35). His life is lived and his mission accomplished through the leading and empowerment of the Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14). If he casts out demons by the Spirit of God, then we know that the kingdom of God has come (Matt 12:28). None other than a Messiah who brings with him the Spirit is the true Messiah long-ago foretold (e.g., Isa 11:1-9; 42:1-9; 61:1-3). When he comes into Nazareth and announces his true identity to the townspeople of his upbringing, he selects from the prophet Isaiah, not Isa 53, but Isa 61. The Spirit of the Lord upon him demonstrates his authentic messianic identity. And, as the Spirit-anointed Messiah, he will then live his life and carry out his mission in the power of this Spirit (Acts 10:38). As Bobrinskoy writes, "Henceforth, Jesus will live our entire human existence with its anxieties, its temptations, its struggles, its sufferings and its joys. But it is in the Spirit that He will live His humanity as the Son of God in an unceasing, free obedience to the Father."⁶

The very identity of Jesus as the Christ is inexplicable apart from his relationship with both the Father and the Spirit. The Father is the Father of the Son, and as such he commissions and sends his Son into the world to be and do what he calls him to. The Son, though, cannot be

who he is apart from the anointing of the Spirit who brings him into being in the virgin conception within Mary, and then abides with him as the necessary presence and power of his messianic identity and ability.⁷ *Cur Deus Trinus?* Must God be triune for Christ to be our Savior? Yes indeed. The Trinity is necessary for the identity of Christ as Savior, and we will explore in the next section the necessity of the Trinity also to the efficacy of his atoning death.

The Trinity and the Efficacy of Christ's Atoning Death

The identity of Jesus as Messiah and Savior is tied, both historically and of necessity, to his relationships with the Father and Spirit, respectively. In addition, it is clear upon reflection that the efficacy of his atoning death is tied, both historically and of necessity, to the work of the Father and the Spirit, along with and through the Son, to effect our salvation. Just how is salvation dependent upon the saving God being triune? Consider the work of the Father, and of the Spirit, respectively, in relation to the question of the efficacy of the atoning work of Christ.

The Efficacy of Christ's Atonement and the Father

The efficacy of Christ's atoning work is inextricably tied to his accomplishing the work that the Father sent him to do, a work designed by the Father and carried out through the obedience and faithfulness of the Son. But when you ask, "Just whose work ultimately is this work of salvation?" or "Who designed the plan of salvation that is carried out historically in and through the cross and resurrection of Christ?" the answer from

Scripture, clearly, is that the Father is the grand architect, the wise designer, of our salvation, brought into actuality by the Son he commissioned and sent. Consider some of the evidence of the Father's role as grand architect and wise designer of the salvation wrought in Christ.

One of the clearest passages that indicates that the Father in fact has designed and regulates all of creation and its history is Eph 1:3-14. Consider how Paul begins his praise to God by specifying the Father as the ultimate source from which all our blessings come: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph 1:3). Among the blessings, a very telling statement occurs in v. 9. Ephesians 1:9-12 says,

He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.

And similarly, notice how in Col 1:12ff Paul says that he is

giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Of course, Paul continues the same line of thought indicating that creation (Col 1:16) and ultimate reconciliation (Col 1:20) are

done "by" or "in" or "through" the Son as he carries out the will of the Father. It is clear, then, that the Father is said to have worked through the Son in creation, redemption, and ultimate reconciliation of all things to himself.

Along with the clear indications that the work of the Son is designed by the Father, we also have an abundance of statements from the Son himself that he was not here to do his own will, or accomplish his own work, but to fulfill the will and work of his Father. Of the many texts we could consider, look carefully at this one:

"I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and *the things which I heard from Him, these I speak* to the world." They did not realize that He had been speaking to them about the Father. So Jesus said, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and *I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.*" "And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for *I always do the things that are pleasing to Him*" (John 8:26-29; emphasis added).

There is not a hint in Jesus' self-understanding or teaching that differs with the themes announced here. From beginning to end, he came to do the will of his Father. All the way to the Garden of Gethsemane, when in agony he cried "not my will but Yours be done," he accomplished, in every word spoken, every action performed, every attitude and motive of heart, always and only the will of the Father. Indeed, it is only because of his absolute obedience that it can be said, as Paul declares in 2 Cor 5:21, "God made Christ who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him." Or, as stated in Phil 2:8, Christ "was obedient to the point of death, even death on the

cross." So verse 9: "Therefore, God highly exalted him . . ." We conclude, then, that the efficacy of the atoning work of Christ is dependent upon the Father's design of our redemption, his commissioning of his Son to come and accomplish the salvation he planned, and on the Son obeying, every moment of every day of his life, always and only the will of his Father. Indeed, the efficacy of the atoning work of Christ is impossible without Christ's relationship to the Father.

But one further point must be seen and stressed if we are to understand the necessary relationship of the Father to the efficacy of Christ's atoning death. It is only by the work of the Father that his (i.e., the Father's) own justice against our sin, in Christ, is met. That is, Christ's death could not have atoned for sin had not the Father judged our sin in his Son. This, I take it, is the heart of what Rom 3:23-26 is about:

[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The Father displayed Christ as the satisfaction for sin in his blood, to be received by faith. The imputation of our sin to Christ (2 Cor 5:21) and the judgment of our sin in Christ (Rom 3:25) was the work of the Father, without which the death of Christ could not have accomplished the atoning benefit that it has, through faith in him.

The Efficacy of Christ's Atonement and the Spirit

The efficacy of Christ's atoning work is inextricably tied to his being the Spirit-anointed Messiah, whose very obedience, miracles, and fulfillment of the Father's will requires the indwelling and empowering Spirit for him to accomplish what he came to do.

One must ask the question, "Why is so much emphasis laid throughout the Scriptures on the identity of the Messiah being Spirit-anointed?" As we saw previously, Jesus' self-understanding, and the OT prophetic tradition, laid emphasis on the true Messiah as none other than the Spirit-anointed Messiah. But, why this Spirit? Since Jesus is fully God, what possibly could the Spirit of God add to him? Certainly, the Spirit of God cannot add to or assist or empower the divine nature of Jesus, *per se*. But, Jesus came as the second Adam, the Seed of Abraham, the Son of David, and as such, he lived his life as a man. In living his life as a man, what could the Spirit of God add to the human nature of Christ? Answer: So very much!

One very telling text is one we considered also earlier. Think again about Matt 12:28: "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." Although Jesus was God incarnate and as such possessed full divine power and authority to cast out this demon by the resource of his own divine nature, yet he specifically indicates that he cast out this demon by the power of the Spirit. Precisely because he was the Spirit-anointed Messiah, shown here by performing this miracle in the power of the Spirit, he then can affirm that this action testifies to the fact that the kingdom of God has now come. Since the King of

this kingdom would be none other than the Spirit-anointed Messiah (e.g., see Isa 11:1-5 and Luke 1:32-33), and since Jesus' miracle showed him acting in the power of the Spirit, this miracle demonstrated that the long-awaited kingdom had come. But all this requires, then, that Jesus act in his human nature, empowered by the Spirit, rather than act by his divine power and authority. The Spirit, then, adds supernatural power and enablement to this Son of David, the long-awaited human king of Israel.

How was Jesus, in the end, able to accept the will of the Father "for the joy set before him" and endure "the cross, despising the shame" and sit down at the right hand of the throne of his Father (Heb 12:2)? The writer of Hebrews had already answered this earlier. Hebrews 9:14 says, "how much more will the blood of Christ, who *through the eternal Spirit* offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (emphasis added). Yes, Jesus lived his life and performed his miracles and fulfilled the will of his Father, all through the empowerment of the Spirit. Hawthorne is correct when he writes, "It was as the Bearer of the Spirit that he consciously stood as the champion of God in the battle with Satan."⁸

Lest you think we are extrapolating beyond the data, consider just how comprehensive is the empowerment of the Spirit in enabling Jesus to perform his miracles and fulfill the work the Father had given him to do. Listen again to the statement of Peter to Cornelius, summarizing the whole of Jesus' life and ministry:

You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing

all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him (Acts 10:38)

If Peter chooses to summarize the life, work, miracles, and ministry of Jesus as being done by the power of the Spirit, it seems to me we should learn from him and follow suit.

Conclusion

The very efficacy of the atoning work of Christ is inexplicable apart from his relationship with both the Father and the Spirit. The Father is the Father of the Son, and as such he commissions and sends his Son into the world to be and do that to which he calls him. The design of salvation is the Father's, and the justice brought to bear against our sin was executed by the Father. The Son, though, could not accomplish the obedience and perform the works that he did apart from the anointing of the Spirit who abides with him as the necessary presence and power of his messianic identity and ability. *Cur Deus Trinus?* Must God be triune for Christ to be a Savior? Indeed, the Trinity is necessary for the identity of Christ as Savior, and the Trinity is necessary also for the efficacy of his atoning death. The God of salvation, then, can be none other than the triune God of the Bible.

ENDNOTES

¹Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 2.6.

²All Scripture is cited from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 updated edition, unless indicated otherwise.

³Karl Rahner (*The Trinity* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1970], 22) has famously stated, "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity, and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity." Most interpreters of Rahner have understood him to mean that we only know

the immanent trinity through the experience of God in the economy of his revelation, thus reducing the immanent to the economic trinity. For insightful discussion of Rahner, see Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of The Immanent Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 83-124, 167-196; and Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004), 55-71.

⁴St. Augustine, *The Trinity* (trans. Edmund Hill; vol. 5 of *The Works of St. Augustine*; Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 4.27 (italics added).

⁵Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991, 1997), 197.

⁶Boris Bobrinskoy, *The Mystery of the Trinity: Trinitarian Experience and Vision in the Biblical and Patristic Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1999), 88-89.

⁷See Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: the Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Dallas: Word, 1991); and James M. Hamilton, "He is With You and He Will Be In You: The Spirit, the Believer, and the Glorification of Jesus" (Ph.D. diss.; Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003).

⁸Hawthorne, *Presence and the Power*, 172.

In his interpretation of the idea of God, Arius sought to maintain a formal understanding of the oneness of God. In defense of that oneness, he was obliged to dispute the sameness of essence of the Son and the Holy Spirit with God the Father, as stressed by other theologians of his day. For Jesus Christ, as the divine Logos become human, moves thereby to the side of the creatures—i.e., to the side of the created world that needs redemption. How, then, should such a Christ, himself a part of the creation, be able to achieve the redemption of the world? The redemption of humanity from sin and death is only then guaranteed if Christ is total God and total human being, if the complete essence of God penetrates human nature right into the deepest layer of its carnal corporeality. Christ sends the Spirit, but the Spirit proceeds from the Father: so the Bible teaches, and so Orthodoxy believes. What Orthodoxy does not teach, and what the Bible never says, is that the Spirit proceeds from the Son. An eternal procession from Father and Son: such is the western position. An eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father alone, a temporal mission from the Son: such was the position upheld by Saint Photius against the west. Such in outline are the positions taken up by either side; let us now consider the Orthodox objections to the western position. The filioque leads either to ditheism or to semi-Sabellianism (Sabellius, a heretic of the second century, regarded Father, Son, and Spirit not as three distinct persons, but simply as varying “modes” or “aspects” of the deity).