

## Book Review

*Father, Son and Spirit –The Trinity and John’s Gospel* by Andreas J. Kostenberger and Scott R. Swain, *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, editor: D.A. Carson, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008, 224 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8308-2625-4. Cost: \$24.00.

Kostenberger and Swain unite to present the content of the Gospel of John relating to the godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is a special study of a special topic. The book contains a series preface, author’s preface, abbreviations, introduction which outlines the approach to the book, table of contents indicating that the book is divided into three parts containing ten chapters, bibliography, index of authors, index of Scripture references and index of ancient sources. It is a part of a series: *New Studies in Biblical Theology* edited by D.A. Carson.

In the introduction, the authors state that the theological position which forms the faith of the church is derived not from a priori assumptions, but instead from interpretative principles, principles that were derived from a believing engagement with Scripture (21). The authors have attempted to begin with Scripture-the Gospel of John-and draw conclusions based upon the affirmation of Scripture. This is a good beginning point and is set in contrast to beginning with church creeds or quoting church fathers.

In Part One, the authors pursue John’s understanding of the trinity within the context of Second Temple Jewish monotheism. In Part Two, they attempt to form a characterization of God (*theos*), Father, Son and Spirit in John’s Gospel. Finally, in Part Three, they attempt a theological synthesis of the major themes concerning the trinity in John’s Gospel.

Part One contains only one chapter. It develops the historical context of John’s Gospel and Jewish monotheism. The authors affirm that John, the apostle, wrote the Gospel of John. They also believe that the gospel is based upon eyewitness testimony. John does not violate strict Jewish monotheism by portraying Jesus as *theos* and as pre-existent to becoming flesh. Rather, he understands that Jesus belongs to the identity and nature of God as the Son of God. Jesus is one with God. John affirms monotheism, but enlightens regarding the relationship between the persons that comprise the godhead. The fact that Jesus was manifest in the flesh was a stumblingblock to the Jews’ acceptance of Him as the Son of God. John’s Gospel is written to prove that Jesus is the Son of God. In proving this thesis, John also enlarges the understanding of who God is. At the same time, he affirms both the humanity and deity of Jesus. The authors quote Bauckham, “Nothing in the Second Temple Jewish understanding of divine identity contradicts the possibility of interpersonal relationship within the divine identity, but on the other hand there is little, if anything, that anticipates it” (37). Jesus reveals the identity, nature and mission of God because He is *theos* (John 1:1).

Part Two examines the biblical foundations for the trinity. It consists of five chapters and examines God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as found in the Gospel of John.

Chapter two focuses on God in John’s Gospel. God never appears in the fourth Gospel! The only words He speaks are ‘and I have glorified it, and will glorify it again’ (12:28). God is characterized by what Jesus says about Him (47). God is characterized by Jesus. Once one has understood the Gospel’s characterization of Jesus (who Jesus is) then he has its understanding of God (who God is). Nevertheless, God the Father and God the Son are distinct persons and must be considered individually. Chapter two focuses on all of the occurrences of *theos* in John’s Gospel whether they refer to God the Father or Jesus. The authors consider every occurrence of *theos* in the prologue, the

Book of Signs, and the Book of Glory. There are eighty-three of these altogether (58). Thirty-nine are found on the lips of Jesus. Twenty-one come from John. Nine from the Jewish leaders. Fourteen from John the Baptist, Nicodemus, and various disciples of Jesus (58). *Theos* refers to the God of the OT (Gen. 1:1 where it refers to the creator) (48). In John 1:1, *theos* is used of God set in relation to the Word. Clearly, two distinct persons are addressed by the same term. Calling Jesus God (*theos*) stretched the boundaries of first-century Jewish monotheism (49) but this is precisely what Jesus came to do—to reveal God (the triune God) to man. The authors make many good arguments from the scripture text refuting those who would deny the deity of Jesus.

In chapter three, the authors address the use of Father in John's Gospel. The Father-Son relationship is prominent in John. There are 136 instances of *pater*, of which 120 have God as a referent (61). The Father and the Son are intertwined. In nearly twenty instances, Jesus refers to God as "his Father." The authors survey the use of *pater* in the prologue, the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory. Then, they summarize this material.

The authors examine the word *Son* in John's Gospel in chapter four. The name Jesus is found 240 times in the Fourth Gospel (75). The term *huios* (son) is found fifty-five times in John's Gospel of which forty-one refer to Jesus (75). The term 'Son of God' is applied to Jesus eight times in this Gospel: by Nathanel (1:49); the evangelist (3:18); Jesus himself (5:25; 10:36; 11:4); Martha (11:27); negatively by 'the Jews' (19:7); and again by the evangelist (20:31) (75). Thirteen times Jesus refers to Himself as *huios*. There are eighteen references to Jesus as 'the Son' virtually always vis-à-vis God 'the Father' (75). John further develops the identity of Jesus by references to Jesus as the son of Joseph; the only begotten Son, Son of God, Son of Man and the Son. The authors explore the texts where each of these terms occur and their significance for the Fourth Gospel.

Chapter five explores the Spirit in John's Gospel. There are only four references to the Spirit in the first half of the Gospel. No reference is made to the Spirit in the prologue. The authors hesitate to give a word count for the use of *pneuma* in John's Gospel due to the variation in meaning of this term sometimes referring to the Holy Spirit and at other times referring to the human spirit (scholars disagree on individual uses). A survey of the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory is undertaken with careful analysis of the use of the term. The authors also investigate the farewell discourse and the commissioning scene at the end of the Gospel. The Spirit is referred to as: 'that Spirit'; 'the Spirit of Truth'; the 'Holy Spirit'; the 'helping presence' sent by Jesus from the Father (KJV-Comforter) who will continue Jesus' ministry and empower the disciples (103).

In chapter six, the authors summarize and synthesize the information gleaned in the previous study of the Father, Son and Spirit. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit accomplish different roles in man's salvation, but maintain a unity of being and purpose. As Jesus anticipates His ascension to heaven, He sends the Holy Spirit to His disciples to guide them into all truth. Thus, they carry on the mission of Jesus. "Thus not only is the ministry of the Son grounded in the love and commission of the Father, but the ministry of Jesus' followers is grounded in the love and commission of Jesus, and by virtue of Jesus' close relationship with the Father on the one hand and the Spirit on the other, also in the unity of Father, Son and Spirit among one another" (106). This unity is special and empowers for the work that must be accomplished.

Part Three consists of theological reflections. It is comprised of four chapters. Theology is born out of Scripture analysis and principle. However, theology involves interpretation and

herein lies its weakness. If we let the Scriptures speak, we attempt to eliminate personal bias and let God speak for God. But, human bias can taint the process.

Chapter seven focuses on Jesus' filial identity. The authors claim: "when it comes to understanding Jesus' identity and mission ('Christology'), John urges us to perceive Jesus' identity and mission in a Trinitarian light" (111). Jesus performs singularly divine acts (creation), bears the unique divine name ("I am"), and receives worship due to God alone. Jesus belongs to the identity of Israel's one Lord God (112). This is the first step in understanding the Trinitarian view in John's Gospel. The second step is to understand the distinctive personal way in which Jesus holds the unique divine identity in common with the Father as the Son of the Father (112). The filial identity is the relationship Jesus has to the Father as the Son of the Father. The authors explore this concept in the prologue and then the rest of the Gospel of John. They deal with two major themes in this chapter. First, Jesus' filial identity and divine agency. Second, Jesus' filial identity and the nature of salvation. They examine both the personal identity of Jesus and His mission. An important statement is made in this chapter regarding the distinct way in which the Son relates to the Father. "The Father enjoys personal priority in the *taxis* (order) of the triune life, not ontological superiority, for the Father and the Son hold all things in common: one divine name (17:11), one divine power (5:19, 21-22), one divine identity (10:30)" (123). This addresses the problem of the statements in Scripture that affirm both the equality of the Son with the Father and the submission of the Son to the Father.

In chapter eight, the authors develop the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit and Jesus' disciples and the Holy Spirit. According to John, the Spirit holds all things in common with the Father and the Son (John 16:15). The Holy Spirit shares with the Father and the Son in the unique divine identity of Israel's one Lord God (135). The Spirit's divine identity is shown through His participation in divine acts (3:8). The Spirit rules from above (3:3, 12). He gives life (6:63). He comes to dwell in the midst of God's people (14:17). He reveals the future (16:13). He ushers in the new creation (20:22). Consequently, the Spirit of God is God (deity). The authors affirm that the Spirit's way of relating to the Father and the Son follows a complex but consistent pattern: "*the Spirit descends from the Father to rest and remain upon the Son so that, through the Son, he may come to rest and remain upon Jesus' disciples as well*" (136). They pursue this thesis by examining the Spirit's relation to Jesus in the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory.

In chapter nine, the authors develop a Trinitarian mission theology. The mission of man's salvation from sin involved the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in different roles. These roles are defined in John's Gospel. Then, the authors show how the mission of Jesus becomes the mission of the church. "As the Father hath sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). The mission of the church is characterized in six statements: (1) mission is spiritual warfare; (2) mission aims at the redemption of creation; (3) mission proceeds in word and deed; (4) the shape of Jesus' mission determines the shape of the church's mission; (5) pneumatology must not override Christology in the church's missiology; and (6) the Triune God is the Alpha and Omega of the church's mission.

Chapter ten provides a summary of John's trinitarian vision. The author's use the high priestly prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17 to present some theological insights. The authors reveal their belief in the eternal Sonship of Jesus (168). The development of their Trinitarian theology in John's Gospel reveals that they hold to this view. The basic thesis the authors seek to establish is that the missional identities and order of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reflect the eternal identities and order (182-186). They summarize, "Father, Son and Spirit 'are not

three Gods, but one God'. Moreover, this one God eternally exists as three distinct persons: 'The Father is made of none, neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone, not made, nor created, but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son, neither made, nor begotten, but proceeding' (185).

The conclusion of the book contains a three and one-half page discourse on *the gift of life: knowing the triune God*. The authors focus on the primary reason John wrote his Gospel, i.e. to convince his readers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing they might have life through His name (John 20:30-31).

The bibliography is extensive. It is followed by an index of authors and an index of Scriptures.

There are a few criticisms that are worthy of consideration. First, the authors hold to the evangelical position of the eternity of the Son. Their explanation of how the Son is eternally begotten and yet is underived falls short of being convincing. To say that "divinity, by definition (Exod. 3:14!) cannot be generated and then to say the Father is the 'font' of the persons that are divine and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son is to use language that expresses contradiction. The key suggested by the authors is that "this assertion requires a firm grasp of the dogmatic distinction between *essence* and *person*" (184). The Son and the Spirit are "from the Father" (184). This indicates derivation. But, at the same time, they are "with the Father" in regards to His essential being (essence) and eternal. You cannot be eternal and derived at the same time and in the same place. Jesus was, prior to the incarnation, eternal and self-existent. But, after the incarnation (John 1:14) He is spoken of as the only begotten Son. He was "begotten" only in reference to His virgin birth (Luke 1:34-35) and His becoming flesh. Second, the role of the Holy Spirit in making us sons of God is expressed by the authors in these words, "...our experience of this vital union begins with our Spirit-enabled reception of Jesus and his word (1:12-13; 6:44-45; 15:3)" (187). The Holy Spirit reveals the truth. The human mind must receive the truth, believe it and obey it. There is no direct operation by the Holy Spirit upon the human mind that enables persons to receive the word of God. Paul indicates, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Third, the theological terms in the book will make this a difficult read for those not trained in theology. However, the book is part of a series on *biblical theology*. Let the reader beware.

As a special study of a special topic, I can recommend this book to those who have an interest in the doctrine of the Trinity. As always, read with a discerning mind.