

MILESTONES

Turning from God's Economy

There is much in the Bible, especially in the New Testament, regarding the Triune God, but the presentation is not doctrinal. Rather, there is a revelation of this God in His relationship with man and in man's experience and enjoyment of Him for His eternal purpose. However, the very fact of heresies quickly arising, dogma evolving, theological schools appearing, and councils eventually formulating may indicate a departure—quite early in time—of the churches, and Christians in general, from this pure revelation of the Bible. Instead of simply receiving the Bible's revelation of the Triune God, in whose image man was created (Gen. 1:26), reaching man and entering man's spirit for experience, enjoyment, and expression, Christians soon gravitated to a decidedly mental-behavioral orientation. The contents of the Bible became objective items to be understood, explained, and obeyed. Hence, Christianity became another religion, with the Triune God becoming the distant *object* of belief, understanding, and worship, instead of the intimate source of supply. Rather than *aspiring* to subjectively experience and enjoy God as life and everything for the fulfillment of His purpose, some felt compelled to examine, explain, and systematize teachings en route to the *right* doctrine. Sadly but predictably, twisting the Bible to fit one's own position ensued with various heresies and divisions being the inevitable result. Orthodox clarification became the immediate need, but that fundamental deviation to an improper orientation still remained.

By divine revelation, the writers of the New Testament presented God as triune mainly for a relationship with man, for man to receive, experience, enjoy, and express Him. At the end of his Gospel (28:19), Matthew is the first to refer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together. They have one name—a matter relating to expression, and believers are to be baptized—an experience—into this name. John in his Gospel (14:16-20, 26) records Jesus' word which reveals the Father, Son, and Spirit as the three-one, abiding with and in the believers forever for them to know experientially.

When the contents of the Bible become only objective items to be understood, explained, and obeyed, the Triune God becomes a distant *object* of belief, understanding, and worship, instead of the intimate *source* of supply.

Then Peter, in his first Epistle (1:2), greets the believers as those whom the Father has chosen, the Spirit has sanctified, and the Son has sprinkled with His blood (see Paul in 2 Thes. 2:13-14). The issue is their enjoyment of multiplied grace and peace and the resulting corporate expression will be “unto praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:7). Finally, the apostle Paul, more than all, stresses God's being triune for our experience of Him. At the end of 2 Corinthians 13, in order for the believers to express God in rejoicing, in being perfected and comforted, in being at peace, and even in *thinking* the same thing (v. 11), Paul commends to them the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God (the Father), and

the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (v. 14)—not merely to know objectively but to joyfully experience. Galatians 4:6 declares that God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying there, “Abba, Father!” Here Paul emphasizes our life-relationship with God; we are His sons, His expression, and our sensation is deep and sweet! Gifts relating to the Spirit, ministries relating to the Son, and operations relating to the Father are “in all” of us according to 1 Corinthians 12:4-6—undoubtedly to be experienced for the Body of Christ (v. 12). Then in 2 Corinthians 1:20-22, within the context of there

being “glory through us to God,” Paul writes that God (the Father) has firmly attached the apostles with the believers to Christ, anointing and sealing them and giving the Spirit “in our hearts as a pledge.” The saints' relationship to and experience of the Triune God for His glorious expression are again the reason for His being mentioned here by Paul.

Of the many items in the Bible to focus on, this relationship is the central one. Paul emphasizes it again in Ephesians 1:3-14, testifying that the Triune God has a good pleasure which is the desire of His heart and which involves man. Issuing from this desire is God's will, according to which He made the “counsel of His will” (v. 11). From this determined counsel, God had a purpose which has become His “economy,” plan, or administrative arrangement. The fundamental importance of this

revelation cannot be overemphasized, for the Triune God is revealed primarily in relation to this economy throughout the New Testament. These verses in Ephesians 1 exemplify this, showing the Father purposing (v. 9), the Son accomplishing (vv. 6-8), and the Spirit applying (vv. 13-14)—for the ultimate heading up of all things in Christ, in whom we will be “to the praise of His glory” (v. 12). Yet with all this going on, the three still coexist and coinhere eternally in the Godhead. It is a glorious mystery which man cannot understand but can experience!

The way that man can experience and enjoy the Triune God for His heart’s desire is by the imparting or dispensing of Himself into His chosen and redeemed people, according to His economy. This wonderful impartation can be seen in the aforementioned 2 Corinthians 13:14. Here the dispensing is from the Father (love), in the Son (grace), and through the Spirit (fellowship). This Triune God as life and everything is, according to Paul, to be “with you all.” God’s dispensing also covers the entire span of the believers’ salvation. First, regeneration is experienced in the spirit; then, transformation takes place in the soul; ultimately, full redemption, the transfiguration of the body, is realized. Throughout this span, God’s dispensing continues on in the saints through the sealing of the Spirit (Eph. 1:13; 4:30) with a view to the ultimate consummation of the whole process: the accomplishment of His eternal purpose and fulfillment of His heart’s desire—the New Jerusalem.

The first group of believers produced through the apostles’ preaching on the day of Pentecost continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42). Many years later Paul charged Timothy to continue to be in, be nourished by, practice, and pass on to the brothers the “good teaching” which he had been closely following; this would be a salvation both to himself and those hearing him (1 Tim. 4:6-16). God’s economy was surely the center of this healthy teaching to which Paul refers. This is made clear at the beginning of 1 Timothy, where Paul purposely recalls his previous exhortation to charge certain ones “not to teach different things” and not to heed myths and unending geneologies, “which produce questionings rather than God’s economy, which is in faith” (1:3-4). Paul, seeing signs of a moving-away from the centrality of God’s economy, was struggling to keep it in focus. Peter expressed a similar concern at the conclusion of 2 Peter (3:15-17). Here he identified himself with Paul’s teachings, respecting them just as “the rest of the Scriptures,” and he warned the saints concerning those who might “twist” these things to their own destruction. Finally, John urged his readers to guard against any replacements for God (“idols,” 1 John 5:21), surely including replacements for God’s desire and His way to carry it out; he also charged them to watch that they do not “lose the things which we wrought” through the agency of some “deceiver” who “goes beyond and does not abide in the teaching of Christ” (2 John 7-9). The question

is, How did the generation that followed these apostles respond to their warnings? Did that generation continue in the apostles’ teaching or deviate into other realms? Was the New Testament’s revelation concerning the Triune God and His economy passed on, or did it pass away?

It is instructive to look into early, post-apostolic Christian writings, especially those of the Apostolic Fathers. Of all these, Ignatius of Antioch (died ca A.D. 117) mentions the Trinity together the most, making reference in four of his seven extant epistles. The letter “To the Ephesians” has some significant citations. In chapter nine, having just commended his readers for doing all things in Jesus Christ, Ignatius reminds them that, as fitted stones for the divine edifice of the Father, they are drawn up on high by the cross of Christ,

“making use of the Holy Spirit as a rope” (53). Next, in chapter fifteen, the readers are exhorted to follow the example of the Lord Jesus who first did and then taught things “worthy of the Father” (55-56); they should do all things as those who have God dwelling in them, as His temples, calling to mind Paul’s reference to the indwelling *Spirit* (1 Cor. 6:19). Then, the Trinity is directly mentioned again in chapter eighteen. The Son of God has been conceived, “according to the economy of

God,” by the Holy Spirit (57). In chapter twenty, the writer again uses this word *economy*, hoping for another opportunity to open up even more to the Ephesians on this matter “with respect to the new man, Jesus Christ” (57). In his letter to the same church in Ephesus, Paul had used both *economy* (1:10, 3:9) and *new man* (2:15; 4:24); moreover, in 2:18 Paul wrote, “For through Him [Christ] we both have access *in one Spirit* unto the Father” (italics added)—connecting the Trinity with this “new man.” Ignatius may have this in mind when he exhorts the Ephesians here in chapter twenty to come together through grace “in one faith, and *in Jesus Christ...the Son of man and the Son of God*” (58, italics added)—conceivably implying the pneumatic Christ. The remainder of this chapter is very instructive in assessing Ignatius’s over-all preoccupation and will be returned to below.

Despite Paul’s struggle to keep God’s economy in focus, was the New Testament revelation concerning the Triune God and His economy passed on, or did it pass away?

Ignatius's letter "To the Magnesians" contains this final salutation: "The rest of the Churches, in honour of Jesus Christ, also salute you. Fare ye well in the harmony of God, ye who have obtained the inseparable Spirit, who is Jesus Christ" (65). Here again the pneumatic Christ is mentioned (cf. Paul's identifications in 1 Cor. 15:45b and 2 Cor. 3:17-18). In chapter thirteen Ignatius had asked his readers to be established in the doctrines of the Lord and the apostles, in order to prosper in the Son, in the Father, and in the Spirit. Furthermore, they were to be subject to the bishop, and to one another, as the apostles were to Christ, to the Father, and to the Spirit. Next, Ignatius's letter "To the Philadelphians" opens with an acknowledgment of their being "the Church of God the Father," having been established "in the harmony of God"; then the writer reminds them that real joy comes from unity with the bishop, presbyters, and deacons, "who have been appointed according to the mind of Jesus Christ...and by His Holy Spirit" (79). In chapter seven Ignatius declares that, although it is possible to be deceived in the flesh, "the Spirit, as being from God, is not deceived"; shortly thereafter he testifies how the Spirit proclaimed that nothing should be done without the bishop, and that the believers should be "followers of Jesus Christ, even as He is of His Father" (83-84). Finally, in his letter "To the Smyrnaeans" Ignatius again mentions the whole Trinity, saluting his readers as "the Church of God the Father, and of the beloved Jesus Christ...through the immaculate Spirit and word of God" (86). His concluding salutation is in the name of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that they may fare well in the grace of God.

After reading the letters of Ignatius, one must admire his loving devotion to the Lord. He is determined to follow in the footsteps of the apostles and be martyred. One can hardly question the genuineness and sincerity of one who goes on to shed his blood. His march to Rome in chains is very inspiring, and his ongoing concern for the saints and the churches during this time is most touching. Ignatius also seems to be acquainted with the letters of Paul and to be mindful of them as he writes his own letters; there are numerous echoes and references. The letter "To the Ephesians" is perhaps the best example. In chapters eighteen and twenty Ignatius mentions God's "economy" as well as the "new man." However, exactly what God's economy is and how it might be carried out are not clear in his writings. He only hints that he would like to say more about it and to "further manifest" it to his readers "in a second little work," if the Lord wills (57). Perhaps he did see what Paul saw; but regarding the "new man," Ignatius simply identified him with Jesus Christ, whereas Paul in Ephesians 2:15-16 is speaking of the separated Jews and Gentiles being created in Christ, with the divine essence, into one new and corporate entity, the Body. Where Ignatius does mention church and Trinity together in the Ephesian letter, it is not an inner experience and activity that is presented. Rather, the

believers as already fitted stones are hoisted up by the cross of Christ and can make use of the Holy Spirit as a rope. The resulting glory is also somewhat outward in nature: to be "adorned in all respects with the commandments of Jesus Christ" (53). In chapter fifteen Ignatius does speak of God's indwelling the saints, but the emphasis again is on their outward doings rather than on God's inner working from spirit to soul to body, which will issue in God's eternal, glorious expression (cf. Paul's revelation of the Triune God's inner activity in Eph. 3:14-19).

Apart from arriving unhindered at Rome to be martyred, Ignatius's overriding concern is with the saints' obedience to the local bishop and to the presbyters and deacons under him. Every letter has multiple instances of this, with the exception—ironically—of the letter "To the Romans," in which the only bishop mentioned is himself, "the bishop of Syria" (74). The Trallians are urged to do nothing without the bishop, to be subject also to the presbytery, and to please the deacons. The Magnesians are exhorted to do all things in divine harmony, with their bishop presiding "in the place of God," the presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, and the deacons as ministers of Christ (61). In his letter "To the Philadelphians," Ignatius reports that the Spirit had proclaimed these words to him: "Do nothing without the bishop" (83-84). In the Smyranean epistle, within the framework of a hierarchy descending from the Father to Christ to the bishop to the presbyters to the deacons and to the laity, the saints are instructed to revere and honor the bishop, to be wherever he appears and to do nothing without his knowledge; doing otherwise would be to "serve the devil" (90). Finally, returning to the Ephesian letter, one finds that being subject to the bishop and the presbytery is needed to "in all respects be sanctified" (50). Also, with their presbytery "fitted as exactly to the bishop as the strings are to the harp," the Ephesians should run together in accordance with the will of their bishop (50). Ultimately, in chapter twenty where he speaks of God's economy and the new man, Ignatius strongly insists on obedience to the bishop and presbytery "with an undivided mind" and on the breaking of one bread, "the medicine of immortality" (58).

These selected examples demonstrate Ignatius's tremendous stress on obedience to a bishop-headed, ecclesiastical hierarchy (not at all evident in the New Testament). Whereas he demonstrates a true love for the Lord and a genuine concern for the saints and uses Pauline terms such as "God's economy" and "new man," Ignatius seems to always and everywhere mix in this emphasis on subjection to the local bishop, to the extent that it nearly overshadows everything else. And it is not surprising that this point was picked up by succeeding generations as crucial. Then, too, Ignatius stresses good, outward behavior of which obedience to the bishop is the pinnacle. Although there are many echoes of Paul, Ignatius's recurring emphasis on practicing

what one speaks (e.g., “Ephesians” 55-56; “Magnesians” 61) is more reminiscent of James (1:22ff). Martyrdom seems to be the ultimate extension of all this; by being “an imitator” of Christ’s passion, Ignatius hopes “to obtain pure light” and then “indeed be a man of God” (“Romans” 76). Even though Ignatius refers here to the indwelling Christ, his overall tone and orientation are somewhat outward and thus different from Paul’s who, writing to Timothy (already a “man of God,” 1 Tim. 6:11), expresses confidence in having finished his course and being about to receive the crown of righteousness—already reserved for him and indeed for all who have loved the Lord’s appearing (2 Tim. 4:6-8). In the final verse of 2 Timothy, Paul reveals his own secret, which is an inward reality: the Lord being with his spirit and a continual, inner enjoyment of Him as grace (4:22).

Sad to say, Ignatius embodies a shift—actually, a deviation—from the New Testament revelation of and emphasis upon the Triune God’s economy and dispensing for the realization of His eternal purpose to a *Christian religion* with undue emphasis upon good behavior within the framework of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, headed by a local bishop. Furthermore, through his writings the door is open for further divergences from the New Testament revelation, such as an extra-local bishop (Ignatius called himself the bishop of Syria, a province, in “Magnesians” 65; “Romans” 74), and a eucharistic sacrament with veritable life-giving properties (see “Ephesians” 57-58; “Smyrnaeans” 89-90). Rather than passing on the New Testament’s central revelation and emphasis, traces of which can be detected in his letters, Ignatius paved the way, perhaps unintentionally, for others who would boldly “teach different things...rather than God’s economy, which is in faith” (1 Tim. 1:3-4). What little there is concerning God’s being triune for the carrying out of His plan is not stressed and is precariously near being totally lost.

The writers of the New Testament realized that, according to His heart’s desire, God has an economy of which His believers can partake through God’s dispensing, the imparting of Himself into them. Indeed, the New Testament stresses God’s being triune for this economy and dispensing, although it also makes clear that the three wonderfully,

mysteriously, and eternally coexist and coinhere (see John 14:7-11, 26). The apostles did not emphasize the mental apprehension of such a mystery; instead, they constantly sought to shepherd their readers into the experience and enjoyment of the indwelling Spirit, the pneumatic Christ. They also warned that there was already a growing trend

among certain ones who would teach different things rather than God’s economy (1 Tim. 1:3-4). Nevertheless, God cannot and will not be defeated. His good pleasure, the desire of His heart, and the determined will and purpose which issued from it will consummate in the fulfillment of the divine economy. Each Christian must choose between two ways: the way of Ignatius and his numerous progeny, who have stressed noncentral items and thus divided the believers, or the way of the New Testament’s pure revelation, to experience and enjoy God’s dispensing of Himself for the building up of Christ’s Body, “the fullness of the One who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23). May the Lord enlighten many to “see what the economy of the mystery is” (3:9), so that all whom God the Father predestinated “unto sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will” (1:5), and who, believing in Christ, “were sealed with the Holy Spirit of the promise,” will ultimately be “to the praise of His glory” (vv. 13-14).

by Paul Onica

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