

## Is the Trinitarian God Merciful?

In his book *Mercy*, Walter Kasper demonstrates how mercy remains a crucial, yet neglected, idea for theology and ethics. In contrast to some traditional metaphysical accounts of God's attributes, Kasper argues, drawing from Scripture and various theological sources, that mercy is the most fundamental of God's attributes. Agreeing with this basic premise, I explore the topic of the Trinity in relation to mercy in Kasper's book, showing there are problematic issues that could be resolved by appealing to other perspectives current in contemporary theology.

In discussing his understanding of God, Kasper avoids an abstract and impersonal God of eternal attributes and begins with the God of revelation in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The topic of the Trinity itself, however, does not emerge until after this lengthy discussion of a biblical account of God. Here Kasper insists the Trinity is not a case of "supernatural mathematics" but a doctrine that emerges from the New Testament proclamation that "God is love" (91). The Trinity, therefore, is the way Christian theology talks about God as love. In the Trinity, an abstract philosophical account of God's being is "concretized and qualified," which is to say, "God's being must be defined more precisely as a Triune Being in love" (92). God's concreteness or particularity is revealed principally in the Christ event, and in particular, the incarnation and the cross. In these events, God's kenosis (or self-emptying) reveals the very nature of God's power as an "omnipotence of love." In a good summary of his position, Kasper writes the following:

The triunity of God is, therefore, the inner presupposition of God's mercy, just as, conversely, his mercy is the revelation and mirror of his essence. In God's mercy, the eternal, self-communicating love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is mirrored and revealed. We can go another step further in order to penetrate as deeply possible into the mystery of divine mercy. Thus far we said: mercy is not the actualization of God, but rather the mirror of the inner trinitarian essence of God. Now we must add: in mercy, God's trinitarian essence is admittedly not actualized, but it does become reality for us and get us in a concrete way." 93

This quote raises two interrelated questions? First, why is the Trinity not actualized in the divine works of mercy, and second, why is God's merciful works only a mirror of God's essence and not a revelation of God's actual being? As I understand the first issue, Kasper does not want to reduce attributes of God's being to God's own external works otherwise God's being is reduced to actions of self-becoming. If this is his argument, then I agree that it is right to distinguish God's being from God's works so that God's being remains free and not determined by God's works. God has freely chosen to express love in the Christ event, but is not compelled or determined from the outside. So far so good, but when he uses the word "mirror" to show how mercy, as God's work, is related to God's own triune being, we begin to see a problem.

Kasper says very little about the immanent trinity, probably because of he wants to distance himself from the traditional abstract metaphysical account of God, but by doing so, he has difficulty really speaking about "who" God is in God's triune being. Inasmuch as he wants to avoid an abstract view of God's being, however, he risks being absorbed back into this perspective. This is due to the fact that he neglects to discuss how the immanent trinity and economic trinity are related, that is, the God of being and the God of revelation. In contemporary theology of the Trinity, it is common to draw from the classical Eastern Orthodox perspective of the immanent trinity as *Perichoresis*, something that would greatly help Kasper's approach. *Perichoresis*, or mutual indwelling, allows theology to speak about the divine persons as distinct and related in unity, without collapsing into strict separation or identification. The separation of divine persons would lead to tri-theism and the strict unity of persons would lead to strict monotheism, so in either way, we don't have a triune God. It is unclear why Kasper is reluctant to talk about the community of love that exists within the intra-trinitarian divine persons. Better than saying that love and mercy are a "mirror of the Trinity," we can say that love and mercy *is* who God is because the three divine persons embrace and indwell each other in a relationship *of* love and mercy. Mercy is a fundamental reality of who God the Trinity is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By working out a more robust doctrine of the immanent trinity, Kasper would have a stronger argument for insisting, as he does, that mercy is the fundamental attribute of God's being.