

A False Accusation of Patripassianism Supported by Specious Scholarship

A Response to Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes' Defense of the "Open Letter" and Critique of the Christian Research Journal's Reassessment of the Local Churches

In their critique of Elliot Miller's article in the *Christian Research Journal*, which reassesses the teachings of Witness Lee and the local churches, Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes proffer three quotes as proof that the local churches teach the heresy of patripassianism¹:

Likewise, the LC's alleged repudiation of patripassianism (the heresy that the Father suffered on the cross) is unconvincing since they also claim (and CRI apparently supports) the view, based on the doctrine of coinherence, that both the Father and the Son are involved in each other's activities. They say, "no person of the Trinity goes anywhere or *does anything* apart from the presence and *involvement* of the other two persons." (23, emphasis added). If this were true, then the Father would have been involved in the suffering of Christ on the cross, which even they admit is the heresy of patripassianism. God was certainly present in His omnipresence, but God the Father is not God the Son, and the Father certainly was not involved in the experience of Christ's suffering on the cross. CRI claims that "what is distinctly the Son's actions...is likewise the Father's operation." They cite with approval the statement that "there is an intercommunion of persons and an immanence of one divine person in another which permits the peculiar work of one to be ascribed...to either of the other..." (22). But, again, this confuses the different roles and actions of different members of the Godhead. For example, the Father did not die for our sins, nor does the Father eternally proceed from the Father, as the Son does from the Father.

Dealing with the unfounded charge of patripassianism is the subject of a separate article.² This article demonstrates how Geisler and Rhodes' treatment of the three quotes in the paragraph above constitutes an example of poor and perhaps even dishonest apologetic writing.

Concerning the first quote—"No person of the Trinity goes anywhere or does anything apart from the presence and involvement of the other two persons":

1. Geisler and Rhodes present this as a statement made by the local churches. It is not. It is Elliot Miller's words, although we agree with it.
2. Geisler and Rhodes purposefully quote only part of a sentence and then attack that isolated fragment as heresy. Furthermore, they do not address the substantive point of Elliot Miller's argument, which was that by quoting eight words ("...the entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh") out of a 240-word paragraph, the signers of the open letter distorted what Witness Lee said. Miller wrote:

The context of the paragraph is clearly and exclusively the coinherence of the Trinity, and it is in this sense and this sense only that Lee wrote those eight words: because of their unity of being, no person of the Trinity goes anywhere or does anything apart

from the presence and involvement of the other two persons. When an author is indicted on the basis of an incomplete sentence it should raise a red flag for any discerning reader; in this case, further research bears out that the author was indeed taken out of context.

It is ironic that in attacking Elliot Miller's article, Geisler and Rhodes commit the very same error to which Miller was drawing attention. They repeatedly take fragments of statements made in the *Christian Research Journal* article and twist them to their own ends without respect to the authors' meaning or the original context.

3. Coinherence (and the similar term in Greek, perichoresis) refers to the mutual indwelling of the three of the Godhead. In the Gospel of John the Lord repeatedly told His disciples that He was in the Father and the Father was in Him (10:38; 14:10-11, 20; 17:21, 23). In both John 10:37-38 and 14:10, this coinherence is the basis for the Lord saying that He was doing the works of the Father and that the Father was doing His works through His abiding in the Son. This is the basis for and exactly matches Elliot Miller's statement. Geisler and Rhodes provide no explanation that reconciles the revelation of the Father and the Son's coinherence found in the Gospel of John with their apparent claim that the three of the Divine Trinity are carrying out completely independent works. Instead, Geisler and Rhodes say only that God was "present in His omnipresence," which refers to God's relation to His creation. Coinherence is the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son as these verses in the Gospel of John show. In fact, Geisler and Rhodes do not clearly state whether they accept the mutual indwelling of the three of the Godhead.³
4. Many respected Bible teachers—including Millard Erickson, Cornelius Van Til, Carl F. H. Henry, Gordon Lewis, Bruce Demarest, William Lane Craig, and Lorraine Boettner—have written statements that are similar to Elliot Miller's (see "Scholars Who Affirm the Working Together of the Three of the Divine Trinity"). Would Geisler and Rhodes accuse them of teaching patripassianism?

Concerning the second quote—"CRI claims that 'what is distinctly the Son's actions...is likewise the Father's operation.'":

1. Geisler and Rhodes attribute this quote to CRI. Their attribution, however, is again incorrect. As Elliot Miller's article clearly states, the quote is from a paper prepared by representatives of Living Stream Ministry's editorial section and of the local churches for a faculty panel at Fuller Theological Seminary.
2. Geisler and Rhodes destroy the meaning of the original statement by excising it from its context and inaccurately quoting only selected words. The original statement reads:

John 14:10 perhaps best captures the fine nuances of the manifest action and inseparable operations that we see in the Trinity: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works." Because the Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son—that is, because the Father and the Son

coinhere—what is manifestly and distinctly the Son’s action (“the words that I say to you”) is likewise the Father’s operation (“the Father who abides in Me does His works”).

In context the sentence Geisler and Rhodes criticize is an explanation of John 14:10. Here the Lord Himself clearly associates the matter of His coinherence with the Father (“I am in the Father and the Father is in Me”) with His speaking being the work of the Father who abides in Him. By stripping this quotation of its proper context, Geisler and Rhodes obscure the import of the Lord’s own words from John 14:10. If they believe this exposition of John 14:10 is in error, they should have addressed the issue squarely instead of miscasting it. Furthermore, to accuse Witness Lee and the local churches of patripassianism based on an exposition of the coinhering of the Father and the Son in John 14:10 is a considerable leap in logic.

Concerning the third quote—“They cite with approval the statement that ‘there is an intercommunion of persons and an immanence of one divine person in another which permits the peculiar work of one to be ascribed...to either of the other...’”:

1. Geisler and Rhodes give the impression that the statement cited with CRI’s approval was made by Witness Lee or the local churches. It was not. It was quoted in a paper provided by Living Stream Ministry (LSM) and the local churches to Fuller Theological Seminary, but the original quote is from Augustus H. Strong, a highly respected Baptist theologian. The complete passage from Strong’s *Systematic Theology* as quoted in the paper and subsequently in Miller’s article reads:

This oneness of essence explains the fact that, while Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, **as respects their personality, are distinct subsistences, there is an intercommunion of persons and an immanence of one divine person in another which permits the peculiar work of one to be ascribed ...to either of the other**, and the manifestation of one to be recognized in the manifestation of the other. The Scripture representations of this intercommunion prevent us from conceiving of the distinctions called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as involving separation between them. This intercommunion also explains the designation of Christ as “the Spirit,” and of the Spirit as “the Spirit of Christ,” as 1 Corinthians 15:45: “The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit,” 2 Corinthians 3:17, “Now the Lord is the Spirit....” The persons of the Holy Trinity are not separable individuals. Each involves the others; the coming of each is the coming of the others. Thus, the coming of the Spirit must have involved the coming of the Son.⁴ [boldface added to indicate the portion quoted in Geisler and Rhodes’ article; the rest was omitted]

2. Later in their critique, Geisler and Rhodes cite the same Strong quote with approval themselves, saying:

For Strong rightly says that “there is intercommunication of persons and an immanence of one person in another which permits the peculiar work of one to be ascribed...to either of the other....”

Their hypocrisy is stunningly overt. They misattribute and then condemn a quote in one part of their critique as proof of patripassianism and condemn CRI for citing it “with approval,” but then commend the exact same quote later in the same paper, this time rightly identifying the author. It seems that it is not the truth that one speaks that matters to them, but who it is doing the speaking. When a quote is attributed to Witness Lee or the local churches, Geisler and Rhodes condemn it; when it is attributed to a respected Baptist theologian, they approve it.

3. Furthermore their quotation of Strong is not even accurate. Strong says there is “an intercommunion,” not “intercommunication,” and Geisler and Rhodes inexplicably leave out the word “divine.” This is a further evidence of their carelessness and cavalier treatment of both the subject matter and the words of others. Moreover, they omitted a substantial portion of Augustus Strong’s words as they appeared in both the *Journal* and in the response to Fuller which the *Journal* article quoted. The portion they left out specifically comments on 1 Corinthians 15:45 and 2 Corinthians 3:17 in nearly identical language to that which Geisler and Rhodes condemn as “modalistic-sounding” when used by Witness Lee.

Conclusion

In this brief analysis of three quotations from one paragraph, we have seen that each quote is misattributed and misrepresented. What Elliot Miller said is attributed to the local churches. What LSM and the churches wrote is attributed to CRI. What Augustus Strong said is first misattributed to the churches and attacked and later properly attributed to Strong and defended. The mishandling of these three quotations should cause readers to question whether or not Geisler and Rhodes’ analysis can be accepted as trustworthy and authoritative.

¹ When Geisler and Rhodes speak of “the LC’s alleged repudiation of patripassianism,” they expose either their own ignorance or a callous disregard of facts. The local churches have never espoused patripassianism, and Living Stream Ministry published a booklet in English exposing its errors as early as 1976 (see Ron Kangas, *Modalism, Tritheism, or the Pure Revelation of the Triune God According to the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1976), pp. 3-4, 23-24).

² See “The Error of Denying the Involvement of the Father in the Son’s Work” on this site.

³ This is discussed in greater detail in “The Error of Denying the Involvement of the Father in the Son’s Work” on this site.

⁴ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1960, c1907), pp. 332-333.