THE TRINITY DOESN'T DANCE

Posted on December 5, 2016 by Eddie

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Category: Observations

There are lots of blog posts and articles and books which paint a touching picture of the Trinity dancing; Father, Son and Spirit weaving together in the eternal music of heaven. It's a image of beauty and harmony and sometimes, the author will extend the picture by saying that we humans, or even the whole of creation, is drawn into the divine dance. The basis of this idea is in an old Greek word that the Church Fathers used to describe the Trinity - *perichoresis* - from which we get our word choreography.

It's a beautiful image, isn't it?

Except thatÂ it's a complete modern fabrication!

Though *perichoresis* may sound a bit like choreography, there is no relationship between the two words at all. Choreography is derived from another Greek word,Â *choreuo*, which (strangely enough) means 'to dance'.Â *PerichoresisÂ* is derived from two different words, and essentially means 'indwelling'.

So why does this matter? Why am I getting all heated about an obscure bit of Greek etymology? Don't I have better things to do on a Monday morning?

Why, if people find the image of a dancing Trinity helpful, should I allow a bit of linguistic sophistry to get in the way?

There are threeÂ things here. Firstly, Christianity is a revealed religion. We are simply not free to go around making up our own images and ideas about God, just because we find them helpful. There is nothing in Scripture that suggests God dances. What we have done is taken a Greek word that aims to capture the complexities of the Triune relationships revealed in Scripture, imagined that it actually means something that it doesn't, added a large slice of post-modern wish-fulfilment and ended up with an image of God which appeals to us. I'm not saying that this is heretical, but it is certainly the way that heresies are developed.

Secondly, if a writer says thatÂ *perichoresis* means dancing they are showing that they can't even be bothered to check a Greek word in a dictionary, or even on wikipedia. Why would you trust someone like that for your theology of the Trinity?

Finally, when Christian writers say things that fly in the face of fact, we are in all sorts of trouble. In a world where politicians and advertisers spin and lie, the church needs to be a place that people can turn to for truth and accuracy. If we can't even speak accurately about the God we believe in, can we be trusted on other issues?

This rant has been inspired by this review of Richard Rohr's new book, the Divine Dance.

Edit: a number of people on Facebook seem to be getting annoyed because I am criticising Richard Rohr. I'm not. The writer of the Gospel Coalition blog criticises him and if you have issues with what he writes, please take it up with him and not with me. I've been meaning to blog on this subject for ages but

it was only when I read this review (which I came across because of an interest in Trinitarian theology) that I was inspired enough to actually write something. The point of this postÂ is a geeky one about the misuse of language.