

Background reading for this post:

- [An Excellent Question from the Mail Bag](#) by James White [question #3]
- [James White, in Polemicizing Against Catholicism \(the Papacy\), Asserts a Statement that Logically Reduces to a Denial that the Holy Spirit is God](#) by Dave Armstrong
- [Greetings from Toronto! \(Armstrong Update\)](#) by James White
- [Defending James White](#) by Cory Tucholski
- [Personality Cult Apologetics](#) by Cory Tucholski
- [Is this Blog an Example of "Personality Cult Apologetics"? \(Cory Tucholski\) / Observations on "Polemical Humor"](#) by Dave Armstrong
- [Press Release: DAPCS Has Officially Commenced Operations. Join Today! Don't Delay!](#) by Dave Armstrong

The venerable apologist James White has this to say about Dave Armstrong:

I normally try to avoid DA when I write, since he seems to have no end of time nor any interest in actually focusing upon any one topic in his writings. In fact, he has written so much that it seems to be approaching critical mass, and may soon crash the internet due to all of his self-congratulatory self-citation. Anyway, if you dare mention him you will get a minimum of ten times the amount of text in return (witness this situation), and there is simply no end to the verbiage that can be pounded out on a keyboard connected to one of today's high-speed computers.

Compiling this reply has taken so long due to a combination of family issues and the truth of the above statement. Dr. White has hit the nail right on the head: DA seems to have unlimited time to write, his writings are verbose, and his replies tend to be off-topic. Streamlining all of the unnecessary blog extras and reducing the font size still produced eleven pages for Dave's article with the unbelievably wordy title "[James White, in Polemicizing Against the Catholicism \(the Papacy\), Asserts a Statement that Logically Reduces to a Denial that the Holy Spirit is God.](#)" Like the title, the article itself is laced with many unnecessary details that distract from the central issue.

A single example should suffice. DA used three different online dictionaries to define the word "vicar." He was adamant that "vicar" equated to "substitute." However, he only made a passing reference to "substitute" being equal to "disciple," and never pursued the thought. His implication was that by saying the Pope is the Vicar of Christ, which is a substitute for Christ, that actually makes the Pope a disciple of Christ. This was never pursued for the obvious reason that [it is indefensible](#).

This means that in constructing my counter-reply, I have sought to apply the principles gleaned from actual study of how to write well. DA could benefit from a similar such study. I will limit this reply to the central issue, and I will do my best to eliminate the fluff that surrounds it. First, DA does not follow the logic of Dr. White's argument correctly. Though I do not subscribe wholly to the idea that the Holy Spirit is the Vicar of Christ, I do believe that using the title is blasphemous for other reasons outlined [here](#). I will expand on those reasons in this article.

Second, DA is using a dishonest definition of the title of "vicar." He supposes that a dictionary definition will do. This is not the case. Since we are dealing with Roman Catholic theology, a definition that comes from Roman Catholic canon law is required for the argument. Merely pointing to three secular dictionaries is not sufficient to make the case without looking at what Roman Catholic law says about the identity and authority of a vicar.

Finally, DA devotes a large section to perichoresis, which is a peripheral issue at best, and wholly irrelevant at worst. Perichoresis, the mutual indwelling of each divine person within each other divine person, does not detract from the individual ministry of each other person. It is a necessary consequence flowing from God's identity as a Trinity. This should never be used as DA does: to reinforce the argument that the Spirit has no unique ministry. Reinforcing that notion is a shallow attempt at minimizing Dr. White's elevation of the Holy Spirit to a sufficient teacher and guide who

speaks through believers without the benefit of a mouthpiece in Rome.

Let's begin with DA's restatement of the logic of the Protestant logic of this position.

- 1) "Vicar of Christ" means "a substitute for Christ" or "another Christ."
- 2) It also means "a substitute for God" or "another God."
- 3) The only one that can be "a substitute for Christ" is the Holy Spirit . . .
- 4) Therefore, God the Holy Spirit can substitute for God the Son, Jesus.
- 5) But according to #1, substituting for Christ also means "another Christ."
- 6) Therefore, the Holy Spirit is "another Christ" and the Persons of the Trinity are thoroughly confused with each other. Now there are two Christs in the Holy Trinity: Christ #1 and Christ #2? The Holy Trinity thus becomes as silly as *Let's Make a Deal*, where you choose the proper door? Or maybe the *Dating Game*?: "Bachelor #1, will you please come out and show yourself?"
- 7) According to #2, "vicar of Christ" also means "another God."
- 8) Therefore, the Holy Spirit, as "vicar of Christ" is "another God."
- 9) Ergo, now we have bitheism: The Father and the Son are One God in Two Persons (the "Binity"?) but the Holy Spirit is "another God" and so this nonsense reduces to Jehovah's Witness or Mormon-like polytheism.

This is not the logic that is employed. "Vicar of Christ" does not mean "substitute for Christ" in Catholic theology. That means the rest of the logic is built on a faulty premise, and therefore is irrelevant. Just what does "Vicar of Christ" mean, then? From the Catholic Encyclopedia entry on "Vicar of Christ:"

In the course of the ages other vicarial designations have been used for the pope, as Vicar of St. Peter and even Vicar of the Apostolic See (Pope Gelasius, I, Ep. vi), but the title Vicar of Christ is more expressive of his supreme headship of the Church on earth, which he bears in virtue of the commission of Christ and with vicarial power derived from Him. ([source](#))

So, it is not just a figure of speech. Calling the Pope the "Vicar of Christ" carries full vicarial power. The Catholic Encyclopedia says that a vicar is "the representative of a person clothed with ordinary ecclesiastical jurisdiction" according to canon law. But it goes beyond simple representation, and extends to authority. DA puts stress on the idea of a vicar being a deputy, which I can't argue with. The Catholic Encyclopedia is clear on that: ". . . vicars have ordinary jurisdiction, their rights and duties in general are the same as those of other ordinary prelates, but their particular obligations must be learnt from the office they hold." Which means that DA is correct in asserting that "The Holy Spirit can be neither an 'agent' nor a 'substitute' of God the Father (or the Son), for then He would not be God. The whole notion seems to imply a lesser representing a far greater."

The issue here, however, is the authority derived from this representation. The Catholic Encyclopedia, in a related entry on "vicars-general," expounds a little bit on this authority:

[A vicar-general is] [t]he highest official of a diocese after the ordinary. He is a cleric legitimately deputed to exercise generally the episcopal jurisdiction in the name of the bishop, **so that his acts are reputed the acts of the bishop himself.** ([source](#),

emphasis added)

It is with this background in mind that "Vicar of Christ" is therefore defined. The Pope is exercising *Christ's authority*, the acts of the Pope are the *acts of Christ*. This is why we oppose that title for the Pope. It is an insult to the unique priesthood of Christ defined in the epistle to the Hebrews.

Two things should be noted at this point. First, the vicar's (Pope's) power is defined by canon law and cannot be limited by the ordinary (Christ). Again, to the Catholic Encyclopedia:

According to the present discipline, the vicar-general is deputed by the bishop to exercise the latter's jurisdiction **with a certain universality of power**. Bishops could not of themselves be competent to establish officials with the same ordinary faculties which they themselves have, and consequently the office of vicar-general rests on powers communicated by the pope and common law. The bishop, therefore, cannot concede to the vicar-general any jurisdiction except within the bounds allowed by the law or legitimate custom, or express Apostolic indults. The jurisdiction of the vicar-general is necessarily universal in the whole diocese, both for persons and causes, with a universality, however, not absolute, but moral, and therefore, though the bishop can restrict it both as to places and causes, **he cannot so limit it that it ceases to be general, at least morally. It is in the discretion of the bishop to constitute a vicar-general for his diocese, but he cannot suppress an office instituted by common law.** ([source](#), emphasis added)

Second, DA contends "It's not a matter of how I define it [vicar], but how the standard dictionaries do. Since it is not a biblical word, all we can go by is dictionary definitions. Or does White wish to argue that dictionaries are irrelevant to define words?" Obviously, no one is arguing that. But the assertion is nothing less than a distraction. Since the title "Vicar of Christ" is a title from Catholic theology, then it is a matter of how canon law and Catholic theology define the term. DA never once explores the canon law definition.

Perichoresis is used by DA in his argument to downplay the unique ministry of the Holy Spirit. No one is denying that, through the wonder of perichoresis, the Father and the Son are present also within believers. But each member of the Trinity has His own unique ministry to fulfill, and the triune indwelling of all three is merely a consequence of God's existence as a Trinity. DA's own source material states very clearly that perichoresis does not denigrate the individuality of each Person, but strengthens each One.

It may be helpful to see the unique roles that each fulfills. Through perichoresis, each Person of the Trinity is present within and around each other Person, and therefore each member is present wherever another member is. Each, however, still has a unique role. Without that individuality, the great mystery of the Trinity disintegrates into Oneness Theology.

The Father "dwells in an unapproachable light," no one has (or can) see Him (1 Tim 6:16; cf. Jn 1:18 and 1 Jn 4:12). The Son is seated at His right hand (Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 8:1, 12:2). "If then you have been raised with Christ, **seek the things that are above, where Christ is**, seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1). Hebrews 8:1 reads "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a High Priest, **one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of majesty in heaven.** . . ."

These verses speak with clarity of the location of the Father and the Son: they are in heaven. I'm bringing this up because DA's contributor, Jordan Potter, argues that part of the problem with our position is that the Father and Son are present on earth. They are present through the Holy Spirit--in perichoresis--but the Bible teaches that they are in heaven.

As for the Holy Spirit, He is the Helper and Comforter that Jesus says He will send to the disciples. He comes to convict the world of sin (Jn 16:8). He comes to guide us into truth (Jn 16:13). The Holy

Spirit will live within us (Rom 8:11). We will become a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who dwells with us (1 Cor 3:16-17; Jn 14:16-17; Rom 8:9, 11; 1 Cor 2:12; 1 Cor 6:19; Gal 4:6).

DA argues that the Father and the Son also indwell believers. Through the mystery of God's identity as a Trinity, this is very true. Perichoresis, the idea of each Person of the Trinity enveloping the other, means that each is present in the actions of the others. This is a necessary extension of God's existence as a Trinity, and in no way bolsters DA's argument. As near as I can tell, DA's argument does more to diminish the unique ministry of the Holy Spirit and to denigrate His work than does James White's assertion that the Vicar of Christ means the Holy Spirit. White is not trying to downplay the unique identity of the Holy Spirit. But DA seems to be doing just that.

DA presents an irrelevant statistical analysis and supposes that we will be impressed by the fact that the Holy Spirit is mentioned as indwelling believers 9 times; however, the mentions of the Father and the Son total 11 times. This is somehow significant to DA. However, as DA himself points out on another message board on an unrelated topic, the name of God is mentioned a grand total of zero times in the book of Esther. Statistical analysis of the number of times anything is mentioned does not impress me. Statistical analysis should exclude Esther from the Old Testament canon, yet no one makes that argument.

DA's own source material re-enforces the notion that perichoresis strengthens the individuality of the Persons of the Trinity rather than stripping them of it. For example:

The Father (as Father with His personal properties as not begotten nor proceeding) abides in the Son and in the Spirit. The Son (as Son with His personal properties as begotten and not proceeding) abides in the Father and in the Spirit. The Spirit (as Spirit with His personal properties as not begotten but proceeding) abides in the Father and in the Son. Thus the *perichoresis* is a logical implication of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and necessarily flows from it.

Also:

John uses certain verbs to describe the *perichoresis* of the divine persons: cleaving (OF 1.8, 14), abiding (OF 1.8), dwelling (OF 1.8) and indwelling (OF 4.18). He is insistent that there is no confusing, compounding, coalescing or mixing of the Persons in this most intimate union (OF 1.8, 14). The preposition of the *perichoresis* is not merely "with" but "in." **11** This "unity and community" in the Holy Trinity means that the three Persons "being identical in authority and power and goodness" have perfect "concord of mind" (OF 1.8).

And:

When reconciled with God, man and woman are infused with his personal presence. In some sense, the capacity of each person of the Godhead to be indwelt (*perichoresis*) by the other while remaining fully an individual is reflected in man as created in the image of God (cf. Jn 14:8-11,20,23; 15:4-7; 17:20-23,26). . . . While indwelt by the divine Other, human beings are both conformed to the divine character and simultaneously strengthened in their unique individuality.

No one is trying to argue that there is a mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Spirit within us. God's very identity as a Trinity makes that a necessary thing. But to try to use a beautiful mystery like

perichoresis to diminish the role of the Holy Spirit in order to denigrate someone else's argument is just plain blasphemous.