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THE TRINITY & ECUMENISM

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ABSTRACT

The study of the Trinity is not simply an academic exercise; admittedly, it is a complex doctrine. The end of Christian theology is the beginning of doxology—a worship of the triune God. Our understanding of this doctrine has great consequences for how we apprehend who God is and how God works in history; it also has rich implications for how we understand who we are as God's creatures, who we are as a Church, and what Christian ministry, mission and spiritual life entail. In this paper, I would like to present the richness of the doctrine of Trinity with the hope to comprehend the utmost incomprehensive doctrine of Trinity and its role in promoting Ecumenism.



The twists and turns through which the Triune God migrated from the center to the periphery of Christian consciousness and back to the center again make a fascinating story of the Triune God. Trinity¹ is the distinctive doctrine which is heart of Christian faith. It is simply another word for—God. The Trinity is “One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”² It is what Christians worship, as the ancient hymn *Te Deum* asserts:

*Throughout the world the holy church
acclaims you;*

Father, of majesty unbounded.

*Your true and only Son, worthy of all
worship,*

*And the Holy Spirit, advocate and guide.*³

Indeed, “one is in danger of losing (one’s) soul by denying the Trinity and of losing (one’s) wits by trying to understand it.”⁴ The word, Trinity is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. It was defined as a result of continuous exploration of the biblical data. The concept itself is evident in the activity of God within scripture; ‘Scripture stands witness to a God who demands to be understood in a Trinitarian manner. The more we search the scriptures, the more we see a triune God. The more we reflect on this triune God, the more we are drawn back to where God reveals

himself, Scripture. This experience of the Trinity was thrashed out in debate and treatises, and was formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 ce. The divinity of the Son is affirmed by Nicaea (325) and that of the Holy Spirit by Constantinople (381).

WHY STUDY THE TRINITY?

The study of the Trinity is not simply an academic exercise; admittedly, it is a complex doctrine. The human quest to know how things look in light of the triune God is noble “faith seeks understanding” Christian life is most fruitful when it is informed and renewed by our knowledge of God. It is important to pursue the knowledge of God in order to know God more certainly and fully. The end of Christian theology is the beginning of doxology—a worship of the triune God. Our understanding of this doctrine has great consequences for how we apprehend who God is and how God works in history; it also has rich implications for how we understand who we are as God’s creatures, who we are as a Church, and what Christian ministry, mission and spiritual life entail.

THE DOCTRINE OF TRINITY

Christians more specifically ask: what is the significance of the story of Jesus for understanding God? The attempt to answer this question leads to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: God is the transcendent One who has become one with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ and through whose spirit we and the whole cosmos are being brought to fulfilment. Trinity affirms, “There is but one living and true God....., and in the unity of this Godhead there be three persons, of one substance,

¹ The word “Trinity” is from the Latin *trinitas*, itself a rendering of the Greek term *trias*. The words mean “threefoldness” and “threesome,” respectively.

² *Book of Common Prayer* New York: the church hymnal corporation and the Seabury press, 1979, p.852.

³ *Book of Common Prayer*, p.95.

⁴ Bruce M. Stephens, *God’s metaphor: The Doctrine of the Trinity in New England Theology*, Ann Arbor: Scholars press, 1981, p.75.



power, and eternity; the Father, the son, and the Holy ghost.”⁵ Because of the heavily psychological connotation of the word “person” in contemporary usage, it is a natural temptation to imagine that the Father, the son, and the spirit constitute three distinct consciousnesses, three centers of activity, three concrete beings. That is why theologians as Augustine, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner were reluctant to use the term “person” and coined other phrases such as *Seinsweise* (modes of being: Barth) or *Subsistenzweise* (manners of subsisting: Rahner) to refer to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.⁶

A better place to find the Trinity at work is at Jesus’ baptism. In this event we see all three members working, simultaneously. At Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, when Jesus came up from the water, the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove upon him. A voice from heaven said, “*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*” (Matthew 3:17.) This theophany of the Father, Son, and the Spirit reveals Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one, and the beloved Son of the Father.

The passage is clear that each member of the Godhead is a distinct person. Tertullian used to explain this phenomenon was ‘*persona*’ (from the Greek *hypostasis*). ‘Behind the plurality of roles lay a single actor...there was one God, who acted in a multiplicity of manners’⁷. The Holy Spirit falls on Jesus, anointing him in a manner

only befitting of God himself. Jesus is then addressed by the Father in a way only befitting of God. All three protagonists are God and all three are at work, simultaneously.

The data on the Trinity in the New Testament include numerous texts that speak of the relationship between Jesus and the Father, between Jesus and the Spirit, between the Father and the Spirit, and among the Father, Jesus, and the Spirit. Indeed, the literary structure itself of most New Testament books is arguably Trinitarian. In addition, the reality of the Trinity is present not only in certain New Testament formulations but also in the events of Jesus’ life and ministry, in particular his conception, baptism, transfiguration, and death and resurrection, and at the pentecost.

The idea of the Trinity is a clear case of the theological construction. The proto-Trinitarian trajectory in the New Testament begins with the logic of Paul, who presumes that God the Father raised his Son, Jesus, on Easter. “*If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you*” (Romans 8:11). Paul has also bequeathed to us the benediction, “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you*” (2 Cor.13:13). Although other Trinitarian passages in the New Testament play a part (See 2 Peter 1:2; Jude 20-21) perhaps the best recognized is the Matthean baptismal formula in the mouth of Jesus: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the*

⁵ Article I, in *Book of Common Prayer*, p.867.

⁶ Peter c. Phan. *The Trinity*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁷ McGrath, *Christian*, 250.



name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt.28:18-19).

Finally, it can reasonably be claimed that there are already intimations or adumbrations of the Trinity in the Old Testament such as the many names used for God (e.g., Wisdom, Word, Spirit), the “angel of Yahweh” figure, and some theophanies (e.g., the three men in Gen 18:1-2 or the threefold sanctus of Isaiah’s vision in Isa 6:3), in Genesis 1:1, the very first Hebrew name for God is Elohim. This is a generic name used to refer to other gods as well. When used with reference to Israel’s God, it is generally, but not always, found in the plural. Many see in this an implication of the triune nature of God. Furthermore there are several peculiar passages where God is revealed speaking in a plural form:

“*Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...*” (Genesis 1:26).

“*Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil...*” (Genesis 3:22).

“*Come, let Us go down...*” (Genesis 11:7.)

Then I heard a voice saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” (Isaiah 6:8).

By themselves, these examples may not mean very much, but coupled with the further revelations concerning God throughout the rest of scripture, they stand as clear examples of a plurality in the nature of the one God.

In his work “On the Incarnation of the word”, St. Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria (c.296-c.373), explains why God chose to approach his fallen people in human form. He writes:

“That mystery the Jews traduce, the Greeks deride, but we adore....because in His manhood He seems so little worth. For it is a fact that the more unbelievers pour scorn on Him, so much the more does He make His Godhead evident. The things which they, as men, rule out as impossible, He plainly shows to be possible; that which they describe as unfitting, His goodness makes most fit; and things which these wisecracks laugh at as “human” He by His inherent might declares divine. Thus by what seems His utter poverty and weakness on the cross He overturns the pomp and parade of idols, and quietly and hiddenly wins over the mockers and unbelievers to recognize Him as God.”⁸

JESUS AND HIS FATHER

The key to the Trinitarian doctrine is the Father-Son relationship. In Christian theology, God is symbolised as a divine Father primarily because Christ is symbolised as the divine Son. The Gospel of Mark describes Jesus as the Son of man and the Son of God. The contrast and connection are dramatically portrayed in the anguish of the Gethsemane prayer where Jesus begins: “*Abba, Father,*” he said, “*everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will*” (Mark 14:36). The untranslated Aramaic address to the heavenly Father, Abba, seems important. It marks a special relationship between Jesus and the holy One of Israel. From the Talmud

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<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/athanasius/incarnation.ii.htm>
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and writings from first-century Antioch we learn that *abba* meaning “daddy” and *imma* meaning “mommy” were terms used by small children when speaking to their parents. They connote close family relations and familiarity. “To a Jewish mind,” writes Joachim Jeremias, “It would have been irreverent and therefore unthinkable to call God by this familiar word.”⁹ Jesus sought to pass this intimate relationship with God on to his followers via the medium of prayer. Jesus teaches the disciples the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2-4; Matt.6:9-13). The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is significant here. The Holy Spirit empowers Christians to pray like Jesus and effects the same intimate communion in their lives. When we cry, ‘*Abba! Father!*’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom.8:15; Gal.4:6). The Father – Son relationship between God and Jesus becomes through the spirit inclusive of those who through faith are reconciled to God. As Jesus was a child of God, so also are his followers. As Jesus became heir to resurrection and new life, so also will they.

DIVINITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit, was present as a working member of the Godhead even as the world was created.¹⁰ However, this statement is too reductionist, for He has always existed—from all eternity—just as all the members of the triune Godhead have existed eternally. The complete term for the Holy Spirit occurs three times in its full form in the Hebrew Bible:(Ps 51:11), when

David prayed for forgiveness after his sin with Bathsheba, ‘Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me’, and in (Isaiah 63.10,11) where the Israelites had grieved the Holy Spirit by rebelling against him. Later, in this same context (63:14), this same Holy Spirit is referred to under, the preferred shortened title of ‘the spirit of God’. According to Averback,¹¹ ‘Spirit’ occurs about 94 times with that personal reference to the third person of the Trinity, out of the 378 occurrences of the Hebrew term *ruach* with its associated references to ‘wind’ and ‘breathe’.

Jesus spoke of the Father sending the Spirit as a comforter (helper), a guide, and a teacher (John 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7-8, 13). The Spirit is addressed as “The Spirit of God,” “The Spirit of the Lord,” “The Spirit of your Father” (Matthew 10:20), “The Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7), “The Spirit of Christ” (Romans 8:9), “The Spirit of His Son” (Galatians 4:6), and “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:19).

The Spirit has the attributes of personality as well. He can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30), quenched (I Thessalonians 5:19), He speaks (Acts 8:29), and He intercedes for the Saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:26). It would be unthinkable to equate all of these attributes to anyone or anything other than God. The only honest conclusion then is that the Holy Spirit is a person and is truly God.

⁹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* New York:Charles Scribner’s Sons,1965,p21.

¹⁰ Gen1:2.

¹¹ Averback,R.E., ‘The Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Bible and Its contributions to the New Testament.’ In wallace,D.B and Sawyer,j.(eds),*Who’s afraid of the Holy Spirit?* Biblical Studies Press,Dallas,2005,pp.16-18.



THEOLOGIANS INSIGHTS

The doctrine of Trinity is the foundation of Christianity. One cannot comprehend God's creation, salvation, the call to community, prayer, and many other expressions of the Christian faith without it. There are several considerations that Trinitarian Theology alone can make sense of. First, the nature of God is impossible to explain apart from Trinitarian Theology. The scripture tells us that God is God from all eternity. Before anything, He was there (John 1:1-2).

Richard of Saint Victor reminds us,

“Everything which is or can be either has being from eternity or begins to be in time, and again, everything which is or can be either has being from itself or it has being from something other than itself... it has been established that what holds the highest place in this universe of things cannot receive what it itself is from its inferior. Therefore some substance must exist which both holds the highest place and is from itself.”¹²

This means, that in order for God to be God, there had to be a time when He was all there is, otherwise He would not be God. God is a person, self-aware and personal. Yet, if God does not have plurality in His nature, self-awareness would be impossibility; creation would never have happened.

If God exists from eternity as one person, then there was a time when only that person existed. If that is so, there is no reason to

expect that He would have been self-aware. Creation would never have come about; much less the creation of self-aware, personal beings. The Triune nature is indispensable in making sense not only of God but of ourselves as well.

J. Scott Horrell writes,

“The doctrine of the Trinity is today being reaffirmed as having a central importance for our daily lives. The doctrine of the... Three-in-One provides a macrostructure of reality that makes sense of life, one that gives a remarkable basis for our perception of ourselves as persons, for our relationships in marriage, family, the local church and community and, in point, the role of the local church in mission... In God's own revelation, we encounter a Father, Son and Holy Spirit each loving the other, giving to the other, honoring the other, glorifying the other- this without confusing the high order of the Godhead, the roles that each divine person has fulfilled from eternity past... Christianity affirms that personhood is directly grounded in the three-personed God. It is in God himself that we find a basis for human reason and language, for our capacity to choose, for our profound diversity of emotions, for our appreciation of beauty, for our propensity of creativity, for our sense of morality and eternity, for our social nature desiring relationship with others...”¹³

¹² Richard of Saint Victor, *On the Trinity*, Translated by Jonathan Couser, 1999, pg. 6-9.

¹³ J Scott Horrell, “The Self Giving Triune God,” *The Biblical Studies Foundation*,



Jose Bonino agrees,

“The Trinity is not an enigma to be solved but rather the model on which all human relations, including the church should be structured. The Trinity has profound social implications: Neither the all embracing authority of one over others, nor an undifferentiated mass uniformity, nor the self sufficiency of the ‘self-made man’, but the perichoresis of love is our beginning and our destiny-as persons, as church, as society.”¹⁴

Rather than an irrelevant doctrine, which only purpose seems to be to emphasize the otherness of God, Trinitarian theology is incredibly important and practical. C.S.Lewis writes,

“You may ask, ‘If we cannot imagine a three-personal Being, what is the good of talking about Him?’ Well there isn’t any good talking about Him. The thing that matters is being actually drawn into that three-personal life... God is the thing to which He is praying... God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on... God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed... the whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on...”¹⁵

McCall advocates:

1. Trinitarian theology should be committed to monotheism.

http://www.bible.org/docs/theology/proper/selfgiving_god.htm,2003.

¹⁴ Jose Miguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism*, trans. Eugene L. Stockwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), Pg. 113.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pg. 142.

2. Trinitarian theology should insist on the full divinity of the distinct persons, and it should avoid whatever might compromise the full equality and divinity of the persons.
3. Trinitarian theology should insist on an understanding of persons ...who exist together in loving relationships of mutual dependence.¹⁶

Without such commitment, “God without Christ and the Spirit is remote and unavailing, Christ without God and the Spirit is a martyred saint, the Spirit without God and Christ is power bereft of form and direction. Faith lives from the interconnection of the three.”¹⁷

Biblical Monotheism and Trinitarian faith are inseparable.

TRINITY AND ECUMENISM

The Trinity is the foundation and framework for everything else that Christianity teaches regarding belief and practice. For the majority of Christians through ages, God has been understood to be a living communion of Three-in-One. Christian identity is grounded in this divine reality. The vast majority of Christians worldwide have literally been baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they entered the Christian community, the Church. In worship the vast majority of Christians pray to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Christian worship not only gives expression to the Trinitarian mystery. To a degree it reflects this mystery in its

¹⁶ McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?* pp.229-46.

¹⁷ Soulen, *Distinguishing the Voices*, p.4.



performance, and in the manner that it models many being together as one. At the heart of worship is a joyous celebration of the experience of communion. Communion is but another way to name the Trinity.¹⁸ The Trinity is a community of divine love and mutual self-giving. Each member not only loves the other, but acts for the well-being of the other in an effective manner. Those who would enter into the divine communion are expected to engage in ethical practices of love and mutuality, in the church as well as in the wider world.

Trinity calls for ecumenism, unity among diverse churches and love for one another. The term Ecumenism refers to the attempt by the various Christian churches to understand all Christians as belonging to the single household of faith. Encouraging the members of an ecumenical delegation of Finnish Lutherans to work towards unity among all Christians, Pope Francis said, "Ecumenism is in fact a spiritual process that is realized in faithful obedience to the Father, in fulfilment of the will of Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."¹⁹

The origin of the church is rooted in the plan of the Triune God for humankind's salvation.²⁰ God's plan in saving the world is carried out through the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit. This saving activity of

the Holy Trinity is essential to an adequate understanding of the Church. The importance of the Christian unity to the mission and nature of the Church was already evident in the New Testament. The doctrine of Trinity draws the attention of all the leaders, theologians and faithful of all churches to seek the unity for which Jesus prayed on the eve before he offered his life for the salvation of the world. "***that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me***" (John 17:21).

Understanding the Church in terms of *communio/koinonia* emerges from understanding the God of the Church who is communion. Trinitarian *koinonia* founds ecclesial *koinonia*.

The word "ecumenical" has been in common parlance among Christians since early times. Prior to the 20th Century, the word "ecumenical" (from the Greek *oikoumene*) designated "the entire civilized world" and was roughly equivalent to our concept "world-wide". As Christians held councils involving representatives of the major sees of the Christian community, these synods were called "ecumenical". The term *Oikoumene* occurs in the New Testament referring to the Roman empire (e.g., Luke 2,1) or to the whole world (e.g., Matt 24,14). Eventually the term designated the whole church as opposed to its divided segments, the faith of the world-wide church as opposed to that of a small section of it.

¹⁸ John D.Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*(Crestwood,NY:St.Vladimir's Seminary press,1985).

¹⁹ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/ecumenism-a-spiritual-process-rooted-in-the-trinity-pope-says/>

²⁰ Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as It is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed (381),Geneva-Eugene,WCC-Wipf & Stock,2010,216.



Since the 1910 meeting of the Edinburgh Missionary Conference,²¹ theologians have also been using the term “ecumenical” to refer to activities designed to promote and achieve visible unity or reunion among the divided Christian churches. In today’s usage the term refers to the Christian concern for the unity and renewal of the church, and the church’s relationship to God’s reconciling mission.²²

The Oxford Conference of 1937 gave the word broader currency and established its wider meaning. At the Oxford meeting it was stated: “The term ‘ecumenical’ refers to the expression within history of the given unity of the church. The thought and action of the church are ecumenical, in so far as they attempt to realize the *Una sancta*, the fellowship of Christians, who acknowledge the one Lord”.²³

The enormous contributions of the World Council of Churches to ecumenism cannot be missed here. Philip Potter, former general secretary of the World Council of Churches, once described the “ecumenical” movement as follows: “The ecumenical movement is, therefore, the means by which the churches which from the house, the *oikos* of God, are seeking so to live and witness before all peoples that the whole *Oikoumene* may become the *oikos* of God through the

crucified and risen Christ in the power of the life-giving-Spirit.”²⁴

The Church is one because God is one²⁵. In consequence, the apostolic faith is one; the new life in Christ is one; the hope of the church is one.²⁶ Jesus prayed that all his disciples be one so that the world might believe and sent the spirit to form them into one body (I Cor.12:12-13). Current divisions within and between churches stand in contrast to this oneness; “these must be overcome through the spirit’s gifts of faith, hope, and love so that separation and exclusion do not have the last word.”²⁷ Yet, in spite of all divisions, all the churches understand themselves as founded in the one Gospel (Gal.1:5-9), and they are united in many features of their lives (Eph.4; 4-7)

CONCLUSION

The fact that the Trinity is hard to explain, and the knowledge that whatever is said about the Trinity is inadequate and falls short of human understanding is a major stumbling block to many. Part of the challenge is using a limited linguistic tool to depict God, who is incomparable. The effort to reconcile unity and plurality in God is not a matter of solving a mathematical conundrum or a metaphysical puzzle of how one is three and three is one. However, what would one expect when one tries to give a definition of God? Something exactly like the mystery of the Trinity should emerge;

²¹ A gathering of mostly English-speaking protestant missionaries seeking to overcome in foreign countries the painful counter-sign of a divided Christendom.

²² M.Fahey, *Ecumenism.A Bibliographical overview*, Westport,CT,Greenwood Press,1992

²³ Visser T’Hooft, *History of the Ecumenical Movement* (n.1), p.740.

²⁴ Cited in M.Kinnamon— B.E. Cope (eds.), *The Ecumenical Movement.An Anthology of key Texts and Voices*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans; Geneva,World Council of Churches, 1997,p.55.

²⁵ John 17:11;I Tim.2:5.

²⁶ Cf. “Called to Be the One Church,” in *Growth in Agreement III*,607.

²⁷ *Ibid.*



otherwise God would not be God. How can the finite comprehend the infinite? How can the created understand the Creator? If the human mind can successfully comprehend God, would that not mean that the human mind was greater than God? If any definition of God loses the element of mystery, can it be a true definition?

God Himself said through the prophet Isaiah,

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

However, while it is true that the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery, yet it is not as though one can say nothing more about it. There is truth that we can comprehend about God’s triune nature; truth that He has revealed. It is true, that the word Trinity is not in the Bible. Trinity is man’s word, used to describe what God reveals about Himself. Philip Schaff tells us that doctrine, and the teaching of the triune nature of God that is part of every true Christian doctrine, is not God’s “word to men but a word of men to God, in response to His revelation.”¹¹ The doctrine of the Trinity is man’s response to God’s revelation of Himself. It is the only conclusion one can come to and hold faithfully all that God reveals about Himself. To teach anything else is to do injustice to some aspect of the revelation of God. The task of rediscovering the Trinity for faith, worship and life is a constant challenge and need. It is an essential part of the *cogitation fidei*, of thinking in faith about faith, to understand

more deeply what God has revealed about Godself, to correct errors about God, to retrieve what Christian tradition has taught, to promote ecumenism, to dialogue with contemporary cultures and religions, in communion with the body of Christ.

The love of the father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit is the source and goal of the unity which the triune God wills for all men and creation. We share in this unity in the Church of Jesus Christ, who is before all things and in whom all things hold together. The Lord who is bringing all things into full unity at the last is he who constrains us to seek the unity he wills for his Church on earth here and now. It is for such unity that we believe we must pray and work.

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