



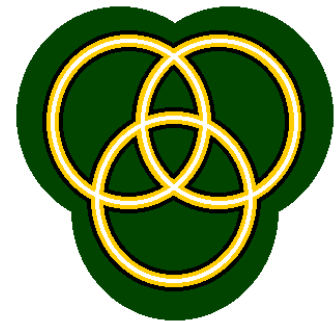
Please, won't you join the Dance?

John 17: 20-26  
Galatians 4: 4-7  
I John 4: 7-16

In the cycle of the Christian calendar, today is Trinity Sunday. Trinity comes the week after Pentecost, and traditionally was one of the high holy days of the church, along with Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost. Trinity Sunday is when the Church intentionally affirms again its belief in one God, made known to us as three persons, namely the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Yet this doctrine of the Trinity is probably the most difficult of all Christian beliefs to explain. Perhaps that is why the Trinity and Trinity Sunday is often overlooked in preaching.

My friend, John Ross, once wrote in a book on the Apostle's Creed that trying to get the vastness of who God is into his tiny brain was like trying to squeeze the Pacific Ocean into a tea cup. No less a theologian than J. I. Packer insisted that we really couldn't say anything more than that God is three persons in one being, and must leave the rest as mystery. After all, any god small enough for us to comprehend fully would be far too inadequate to be the God of unconquerable grace, hope and love that we so need.



Despite our inability to fully comprehend how God is both one yet three, the Trinity remains one of the most essential beliefs of the church. It is important, not only in order to reconcile the various biblical statements about God, but also to keep a balanced understanding of God's initiating, intimate and all empowering work in our salvation and growth in faith. When we lose sight of any of the Persons of the Trinity, we end up with a distorted gospel. Too often, in the evangelical church, for instance, the Trinity gets re-aligned as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Bible! Worse, we lose sight of the essential relational nature of who God is. To diminish the Trinity is to lose sight of the mystery of God's invitation to us, sacrifice for us and empowering of us in his holy, saving, sanctifying love.

While the Trinity may be difficult to explain, that hasn't kept theologians and preachers from trying. St. Patrick taught the Irish about the Trinity by holding up a shamrock, with its three leaves. Others have used the image of an egg, which consists of yolk, white, and shell. Frederick Buechner offered a human analogy of looking in a mirror. He suggested that there is: a) the interior life known only to yourselves and those to whom you choose to communicate or share it – the heart and soul of who you are; b) there is your visible face or

persona which in some measure reflects your inner life or inner person; and c) there is the invisible power or capacity that you have by which you can communicate your interior life in such a way that others do not merely know *about* you, but come to know you deeply and intimately and are allowed, as it were, to enter into your heart and have your hearts become a part of who they are. Yet as you stand looking at yourself in the mirror, at every moment you are clearly and indivisibly the one and only you. Thus with the Father, who is the mystery beyond us; the Son who is the mystery among us; and the Spirit who is the mystery within us, yet which are all the one and same mystery we call God.

One of the challenges for us as we look at the doctrine of the Trinity is that there is no place in scripture that specifically speaks of the Trinity, *per se*. The term, Trinity, as applied to God only arises in the latter part of the second century in the writings of Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, or second generation of apostles of the gospel. The doctrinal definition of the Trinity was then only affirmed by the church with the adoption of the Nicene Creed in 325 AD.

So, what does scripture say? There are only three places in scripture where we find what could be called the Trinitarian formula. The most apparent is in the great commission in Matthew 28 where Jesus sends his disciples to win a world for him, with the instruction that they should baptize disciples in the name of "the Father, and of the son and of the Holy Spirit." In the final benediction of the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul bade the Corinthians: *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.* And in the greeting of the first letter of Peter we read: *to God's elect... who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ.*

The book of Deuteronomy makes clear that there is only one God, but Jesus essentially claimed to be God or to be one with God. In John 5:18, the gospel writer explains that the Jewish leaders began to seek all the more to kill him because "he was calling God



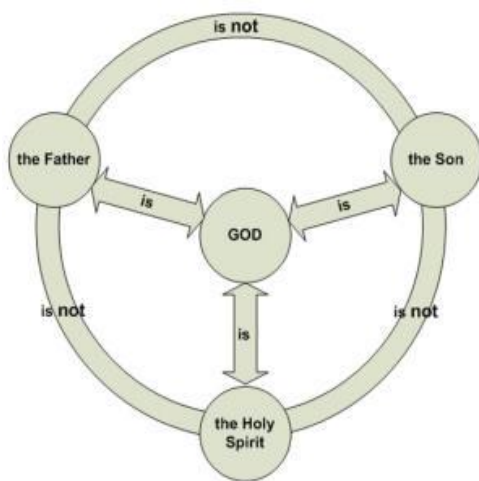
his own Father, making himself equal with God." Further in the same chapter, Jesus says that as the son, he only did what he saw his Father doing, and that whatever God did, so too was he doing, including giving life to whoever he was pleased to give it. Jesus called himself the One to whom the Father had entrusted the authority to conduct final judgment upon all. John reports that Jesus said before Abraham was, I AM, which was to claim the unspoken and unspeakable name of God as his own rightful name. And certainly, in the prayer Jesus raised to God on that last night

before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus would affirm that he was in the Father and the Father was in him and that he and the Father were one. Then he prayed that he wanted those the Father had given him, that is his disciples, to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

This same claim to or affirmation of divinity is found in the synoptic gospels. Think of the story of the healing of the paralytic in which Jesus spoke the word of forgiveness to the man before healing him. The flummoxed and angry Pharisees ironically asked who could forgive sin but God alone. Well God alone could forgive sins, and God himself, in the

person of his Son, was doing just that. Indeed, for Matthew, Mark and Luke, all the miracle stories are a reflection of divine power resting in and upon Jesus not by mere casual or temporary bestowal, but as his by essence of who he was as messiah and Son of the Lord God most high.

The Holy Spirit is also identified in scripture as being one with God and one with Jesus. In Genesis, it is the Spirit of God who is involved in creation, and Joel promises the day in which God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. In II Corinthians 3: 17-18, Paul says *the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* In Galatians, Paul identified the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ while in John, Jesus (15:26) said he would send the Counsellor, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father and goes out from the Father.



As one writer said, "so, the Father is God and Jesus the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God and there is only one God; so we have three and we have one and somehow those are both true at the exact same time and that's God." But it is not enough to nod with indifferent agreement to the truth of this mystery we can never fully explain; we need actually embrace it with the hearted because, as I said earlier, it really is at the core of our understanding of our Christian faith.

What the doctrine of the Trinity expressly reveals is that God is relational within his very nature. Western theology, from the time of Augustine on, tended to focus on the image of the Trinity in abstract formulations, or worse, in hierarchical ones – the Father as the general, the Son as the captain and the Holy Spirit as the lowly corporal, with the result that through much of the history of the western church, the work and person of the Holy Spirit was virtually ignored. Only in the Reformation came a renewal of celebration on the work of the third person of the Trinity and fresh yearning for the empowering, outpouring and leading of the Spirit.

It was eastern, or what we might call Greek Orthodox theology, that never lost a holistic and healthy balanced view of the Trinity, and particularly in terms of this issue of the relational nature of God revealed by the Trinity. We glimpse this especially when we look at the first letter of John, in which the apostle said that God is love. He did not say that God is loving, though indeed God is. No, John wrote that God is love, and that anyone who does not know love cannot know who God is. Writing about this passage, Peter Kreeft says: *Love is God's essence. Nowhere else does scripture express*



God's essence in this way. Scripture says that God is just and merciful, but it does not say that God is justice itself or mercy itself. But God is love,... [his] very essence. Greg Boyd adds: As Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God eternally exists as perfect love. Each divine person within the godhead ascribes ultimate worth to the others. Another writer (Rob Harrison) explains it this way: the persons of God exist in eternal relationship with each other – relationship that consists of pure, unflawed, unadulterated love. We can say that God is love because he, God, exists eternally in love among themselves.

But here is where the real mystery and glory of the Trinity touches us. God's very nature is love, as scripture says, but it is radiant love, self-giving love, extending love. That is, the very nature of the Trinity is to be a community of love together that seeks to reach out and draw within itself all creation. God did not create this universe and us because he was lonely, or because he needed someone to love or someone to love him. That already exists in his very nature as the Triune God. Rather, it is very creative, life-giving nature of love, which God is, that brought creation into being. God created us to expand the circle of divine love by inviting and including us within it, because that is what love simply does. It gives itself away.

Or as Greg Boyd puts it: God's own inherent worth is expressed in the worth he ascribes to humanity, and it is truly breathtaking. God didn't just send us a holy book or commission an angel to die for us. We were worth more than this to God. While we were yet sinners, Christ, who is God himself, died for us. God expresses unsurpassable love for us and ascribes unsurpassable worth to us by sacrificing the One who has unsurpassable value on our behalf. And this unfathomable expression of love to us displays the perfect love that the divine persons have for one another: God is toward us as he eternally is within himself: God is love!

In the eastern orthodox tradition of the ancient church, the Trinity was described using the term *perichoresis* which is a combination of the words, *peri* which means circle and *resis* which means dance. Those early theologians were well aware of the familiar style of dancing at Greek weddings or celebrations, where there were not two dancers, but three, who went in circles, weaving in and out of intricate and beautiful patterns and motions. They would go faster and faster, all the while staying in perfect rhythm with each other, so that after a while, they seem just a blur, their individual identities distinct but part of the larger dance. And then, as the celebration continued, the threesome begin reaching out to the people standing around them, pulling them into the dance, into the rhythm, and into the joy.

That, the early church fathers suggested, is what the Trinity is like – the *perichoresis*, the dance of love, and it is very nature of that creative, self-giving love to reach out to us and all creation. The Trinity is this most perfect, harmonious set of relationship with perfect mutual giving and receiving, perfect sharing in love and honour, happiness, joy and respect. And it is



into this eternal dance of love from and with God that we are invited to enter, simply for love's sake, and joy's sake.

There is something very significant and important in this picture. Remember, I said, God did not create us because he was lonely. God is complete in themselves as Father, Son and Spirit. Nor God does need us or need anything we can give him, as if he were lacking. God is everything and has everything complete in themselves. That means that God is never out to get something from us, trying to manipulate us for his own benefit, in order to fill a hole or gap in God's being. Rob Harrison put it this way: *God simply loves us because he is love, and he delights in our love for the same reason. He takes delights in us when we delight in him, when we trust his grace, when we seek his presence. Everything we can give God is purely extra – that's why he takes so much pleasure in what we give him.*

This is why the gospel seems so outrageous to all who think we have to earn and beg and strive in order to wrestle a miserly drop of love from God. The truth is that God does not love us because of what we have done, or because of what we might do. He does not love us



because we have prayed the right prayer, because we have passed some rigorous test of faith and hold to some correct formula of faith, or because we have adequately repented or paid enough tithes to the church or, like some diligent boy scout, helped enough old ladies across the street. There is absolutely nothing we have done that would make God love us less and there is absolutely nothing we can do to make God love us more. The lavishness of his scandalous grace and love is given to us simply because that

is who God is and that is why he made us, so we could be drawn into the dance and glory and wonder of his love. Thus he loves us; thus does he love this whole world.

Here is the good news. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depths, nor anything else in all creation that will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Here is the challenging news: Jesus Christ formed the church to be set apart in order to become all inclusive. God's goal for the church is God's goal for the whole world. God wants everyone to join the dance. The church exists to be the dancers in rhythm with God's extravagant and inviting love, who, while rejoicing that the Lord has drawn us into the rhythm, never stop reaching out to everyone till standing around, outside the party, and never ever stop trying to pull them into the dance and into the joy.

Will anybody dance?

Let us pray:

Holy Lord, it is your plea, it always has been, for us to respond to the inviting melody of your love and let ourselves be drawn into the dance. You don't seek to draw us into a religion, nor into the church as an end in itself; You want to draw us into life, and into your love. Lord, too many of us have been content to be wallflowers, afraid to believe that such vast, wild, wonderful love would seek after us with such delight just because we are yours. Lord, conquer us our doubt, our fear; make our feet start to tap with the sheer beauty and glory of the life and love you want us to know. And then drawn into the fun and energy, may we be relentless in hauling in others and everyone, that none would be left without. For your love's sake. Amen.