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# 'Bones to Philosophy, but milke to faith' – Celebrating the Trinity

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## I Trinity and Faith

Theological discussions of the doctrine of Trinity have, in recent years, centered on the relationship between the three divine persons. In those discussions, theologians tend to focus on explicating the threeness/oneness relationship in God. Some theologians start from the oneness of God, which they take as given, and they go on to say how one God is three persons.<sup>1</sup> Other theologians start from the three persons of God, which they take as given, and they go on to say how three distinct persons are one God.<sup>2</sup>

The impression one gets from some discussions that the Trinity has been reduced to being a forum for theologians to explore the logical relationship between the oneness and the threeness of God. Thus, Neal Plantinga says, 'Trinity doctrine in fact bristles with problems and questions. But dwarfing all others in things Trinitarian is the central conceptual problem of threeness and oneness.'<sup>3</sup> One cannot help but feel that some contemporary theologians see the Trinity as a mathematical puzzle or a logical riddle to be solved via clever analogies or thought-experiments.<sup>4</sup>

Failing to see how Trinity applies to Christian life, some may concur with Immanuel Kant who says:

The doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, has no practical relevance at

all, even if we think we understand it; and it is even more clearly irrelevant if we realize that it transcends all our concepts. Whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the Deity makes no difference.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, F. D. E. Schleiermacher says: 'Our faith in Christ and our living fellowship with him would be the same even if we had no knowledge of any such transcendent fact [as the Trinity] and even if the fact itself were different.'<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner adds that some find the Trinitarian faith irrelevant to the way many Christians live. 'Despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere monotheists.'<sup>7</sup>

But the biblical teaching that God is Trinity of persons has nothing to do with mathematics or the logic of relations. Rather, the Bible reveals that God is a Trinity in order to spell out how each divine person worked our salvation and to reveal the fullness of God to us. We know God is Trinity because the Bible says so. Our salvation is the gracious indivisible work of three divine persons. We are saved by God the Father through the Son, Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Bible does not use the term Trinity in the way the Lateran church councils used it, early Christians were aware that the Trinity is at the heart of biblical revelation about God. As the church put its faith in Jesus Christ and thanked God for our salvation from sin, it knew that our salvation is from the Father, through the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the church affirmed the Trinity and taught Christians to embrace the Trinity.

Not only did the church believe that Jesus Christ spoke truthfully when he said that he and the Father are one and that he is in the Father and the Father is in him, but it taught that in speaking so, Jesus Christ was attesting to a unique relationship of equality between him and the Father. This is why Jesus Christ avers: 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My father will love him and *we* will come to him and make *our* home with him' (Jn. 14:23; my italics).

However, Jesus Christ did not limit this relationship to himself and the Father; rather he extends it to the Holy Spirit. Thus, Jesus says: 'But the counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send, in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you' (Jn. 23:26). It is evident from these passages that Jesus Christ wanted us to know that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Instead of showing how the Trinity applies to our Christian lives, theologians have dwelt on the relationship that

<sup>1</sup> Famous theologians in the western Church such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas can be named here. Modern theologians that take this position include Karl Barth, Wolfhart Panenberg, and Brian Leftow.

<sup>2</sup> Famous theologians in the eastern Church such as Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil can be named here. In modern times we can include such theologians as Jürgen Moltmann, Neal Plantinga, and Richard

Swinburn.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Plantinga Jr., 'The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity', *Calvin Theological Journal* (23:1 April 1988): 38.

<sup>4</sup> Plantinga Jr., 'The Threeness/Oneness Problem', 37-53. Brian Leftow, 'Anti Social Trinitarianism', *The Trinity*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203-249.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 264.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 741.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1977), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Philip W. Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding*

*of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 26-94; Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 197-212.

holds between the three divine persons and the implication of Trinity on the oneness of God. The church developed the language of Trinity to account for biblical references to plurality in God. While that language of Trinity effectively explains Old Testament references to God in the plural (such as Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Is. 6:8) it failed to adequately apply the Trinity to our Christian lives.

The language of Trinity effectively explains the mysterious trio that visited Abraham at Mamre (Gen. 18:1-22) and other references to three, such as angelic appearances and the three disciples who formed the inner circle of Jesus. But clearly, these references fell short of stating hypostatic distinction in God, which grounds the doctrine of Trinity. It is at the baptism of Jesus Christ that we clearly see that God is a Trinity of persons. So we shall start our discussion of the Trinity from the baptism of Jesus Christ.

## II Trinity and Baptism

At the baptism of Jesus Christ we encounter the ultimate reality that God is Trinity. We hear the Father testifying about Jesus Christ, saying: 'This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased' (Mt. 3:17) and we see the Holy Spirit descend like a dove on Jesus Christ at baptism. These events convinced John the Baptist that Jesus is the Christ (the Messiah) of whom he proclaimed that one greater than himself was coming to take away the sins of the world.

The testimony of the Father about Jesus Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus Christ reveal the true identity of God as Trinity of co-

equal persons who work together to save us from sin. The convergence of the Trinitarian persons at the baptism of Jesus Christ makes us know without a doubt that God is Trinity.

Our baptism recalls the convergence on the Trinity, so Jesus instructs his disciples on how they should baptize believers saying:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you (Mt. 28:18-20).

Baptism links us in a unique way to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism symbolizes that our salvation is through the Trinity. Thus, Peter describes the baptized as: [Those] 'who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Holy Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood' (1 Pet. 1:2).

Similarly, Philip W. Butin says that baptism convinces us that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God. Only after the church sealed its faith in Trinity would it make sense for theologians to explain how three distinct divine persons are one God:

This is where the path toward the full recognition of God's Tri-unity begins. In the New Testament and the early church, baptized followers of Jesus struggled for adequate terminology to express their growing awareness that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each genuinely divine and also intimately united with one another, both in God's own

divine reality and in God's work in human lives and in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Baptism brings believers into perfect fellowship with the three divine persons and makes them participate in the life, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension and enthronement of the Son in heaven.

No wonder then that Jürgen Moltmann characterizes baptism as the event that puts us into the life of the Trinity and makes us stop thinking of the Trinity as a mathematical or logical problem to be solved by smart theologians. The Trinity becomes real to us in baptism and baptism makes us participants in the history of the Trinitarian persons.<sup>10</sup> By participating in the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we gain a new identity as God's children and co-heirs with the Son.

## III Trinity and Salvation

Our salvation is essentially a Trinitarian affair. It is precisely for the sake of redeeming us from sin that the Father sent the Son to suffer and die on Calvary. Paul attests:

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as God's sons and daughters. Because you are his sons and daughters, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out,

'Abba, Father'. So you are no longer slaves, but God's children; and since you are his children, he has made you also heirs' (Gal. 4:4-5).

Through the work of the Holy Spirit God restores us to perfect fellowship with God and we cease to be enemies of God. We are now children of God in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit we are the glory of God on earth. By the empowering of the Holy Spirit, Christians all over the world are one before God even though they are many.

Already by c. 190 A.D. Irenaeus taught all believers to confess faith in Trinity in order to be saved:

The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation and in the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

But the need for a statement of the church's belief about the Trinity became evident when theologians and churchmen put forth conflicting theories about the identity of God and about the relationship that holds between the three divine persons.

The first set of disputes were about the identity of God, which arose with Marcion who had broken with the church (in the second century) in

<sup>9</sup> Philip W. Butin, *The Trinity* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2001), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 95.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Philip W. Butin, *The Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2011), 18. Romans 10:9: 'If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead then you will be saved.'

teaching that the Old Testament God was different from the New Testament God. The church rejected Marcionism by affirming the oneness of God who created all things and who sent his Son to save the world from sin. One and the same God revealed himself in the Old Testament and through Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Another dispute was over the salvation that God gave us through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit and it was tagged Gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that salvation consists in the enlightenment of the soul or a religious awakening of the soul towards Christ. Gnosticism denied that Jesus Christ was the true saviour of the world or the restorer of our communion with God. Against Gnosticism, the church reiterated its faith in God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church affirmed that Jesus Christ alone is the saviour of the world. No level of enlightenment could save humans from sin. Rather, salvation is a free gift of God to humans that costs God the death of his only begotten Son.

Praxeas took the opposite direction by blurring the distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Praxeas taught that making personal distinction in God amounts to polytheism or a rejection of God's perfect oneness. To avoid polytheism, therefore, Praxeas denied Trinity. In response to Praxeas, Tertullian observed that there is difference between that in which God is one—*Substance* and that in which God is three—*Person*. Tertullian said that Christians believe in one God who is three distinct divine persons. The three divine persons are distinct, but

not separate and this preserves God's oneness.<sup>12</sup>

The other set of disputes were over the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The first disputed view was *subordinationism*, which taught that the Son and the Holy Spirit are below the Father. The second disputed view was *modalism*, which taught that only one divine person exists and he revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are names for different modes of the one divine person.

The church rejected subordinationism for ranking the Son and the Holy Spirit below the Father. Also, the church rejected modalism for blurring the distinction between the three divine persons. At the Council of Nicea, 325, the church reiterated its faith in the equality of the Trinitarian persons (contra Arius) by teaching that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have one divine substance. Thus, Nicea describes Jesus Christ as: 'God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not created, of the same reality as the Father, through him all things were made'.<sup>14</sup>

The church summed up its faith in Trinity saying: 'We believe in one God the Father almighty ... And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God ...

12 Tertullian, *On Modesty*, 21; see, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendricksen Publishers, 1994), 4:99.

13 Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., 'Trinity', in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, General Ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1988), 914-921.

14 Nicene Creed (325).

And we believe in the Holy Spirit the Lord, the giver of life'.<sup>15</sup> The Athanasian Creed begins with this preamble:

Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic faith. Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally. Now this is the catholic faith: 'That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence...'<sup>16</sup>

The Apostles' Creed states its faith in Trinity from a personal point of view: 'I believe in God, the Father almighty ... I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord ... I believe in the Holy Spirit'.<sup>17</sup>

Later, during the Reformation, the church developed texts such as the Heidelberg Catechism in question and answer form to teach the basic tenets of Christianity and to prepare new converts for baptism and communion. In moving word it says, '[We] belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to [ourselves], but to [our] faithful saviour Jesus Christ', and then it explains the content of what we believe around the three articles of the Apostles' Creed, showing how the entire faith is trinitarian.<sup>18</sup>

The Trinity is thus at the heart of Christian faith and worship of God. We

worship God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is the triune God who saves us and restores us back into fellowship with God. Salvation brings us into perfect and loving fellowship with the Father, through the atoning death of the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Father initiated our salvation, the Son saved us by his death on Calvary, and the Holy Spirit applies salvation into our lives.

Perceiving Trinity as the heart of Christian faith in God, Gerald O'Collins says:

Nowadays the widespread appreciation of the Trinitarian face of the whole story of Jesus—from his virginal conception and baptism right through to the resurrection, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and his coming in glory at the end—functions against such a failure to ground Christology in Trinitarian doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Jürgen Moltmann insists that we can understand the words and work of Jesus Christ for our redemption only from the point of view of the Trinity. In the life and death of Jesus Christ, we see and appreciate the full inner-Trinitarian drama that saves us from sin and restores us back into fellowship with God.<sup>20</sup>

Essentially, thinking about the Trinity from the point of view of baptism and salvation links us directly to the Trinity. Thus, the Trinity ceases to be a mere doctrine that generates math-

15 *The Nicene Creed* (325 A.D.), cited in *Trinity Hymnal* (Swanee, GA: Great Commission Publication Inc., 1990), 846.

16 *The Athanasian Creed*, cited in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988).

17 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles' Creed: in the Light of Today's Questions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972).

18 *Heidelberg Catechism* Q. & A. 1.

19 Gerald O'Collins, SJ, 'The Holy Trinity: The State of the Questions', in *The Trinity*, 3.

20 Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981).



ematical problem of numbers or logical problem of relations in God. Instead, the Trinity becomes a potent means by which we express our vibrant faith in God the Father who saves us through the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

#### IV Trinity and Benediction

In the Scriptures, the fellowship or communion we have with the Trinity was expressed in benediction. Benediction is a short prayer for God to bless believers and for the commune with God to never cease. In the benediction, the Apostle or Pastor asks God to dispense special gifts of grace, love, and peace to believers. Believers are to remain connected with God the Father, through the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Although believers are different people, they are made one in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Knowing that God is a Trinity of persons shapes our relationship with God. Thus Jeremy Taylor says that Christian prayer is always to the Trinity:

God being one in nature, is also three in person; expressed in the Scripture by the names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The first person is known to us by the name of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The second person is called the Son and the Word of the Father. The third is the Spirit and promise of the Father. And these are three and one after a secret manner which we must believe but cannot understand.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Taylor, 'The Golden Grove', in *The Whole Work of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor* (15 vols., London: Moyes, 1928), XV. 12-33.

For Taylor, prayer always expresses our worship and devotion to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Similarly, Lewes Bayly says that we can properly pray to God only if we believe that God is Trinity. 'In sum', Bayly says, 'a proper understanding of the Trinity removes idolatry, focuses prayer, and encourages true devotion and knowledge'.<sup>22</sup>

#### V Baptism and Burial

The Trinity is the driving force for the faith of the saints who look to the coming age and the end of time. The saints know that this age shall give way to another age in which we shall come before the throne of God to celebrate the victory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit over the kingdom of darkness. Looking forward to that celebration with the Trinity, the church buries saints (who die in the Lord) in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. At the burial of the saint, the minister packs sand but instead of saying dust to dust the minister says the words of baptism: 'I bury you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.' All the saints by the graveside reply, 'Amen'. In this way the church completes the circle of Christian walk that began at baptism in the Trinity and ends at burial in the Trinity.

The minister may close the burial ceremony with benediction. For in-

<sup>22</sup> Lewes Bayly, *The Practice of Pietie* (London: 1631), pp. 52; cited in Philip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 9.

stance, the burial form of the Christian Reformed Church ends with this benediction: 'The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. And may the blessing of almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, remain with you always. Amen.'<sup>23</sup> Here again we see that the Trinity is not just a doctrine that speaks about numbers in God. Rather, the Trinity defines our Christian life—it makes us a people called into new life with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—starting at baptism and ending at death. John Donne (1572-16331) states this view of Trinity best in the Litany of Saints:

O Blessed glorious Trinity,  
Bones to Philosophy, but milke to  
faith  
Which are wise serpents, diversely  
Most sliperinesse, yet most  
entanglings hath  
As you distinguish'd undistinct  
By power, love, knowledge bee,  
Give mee a such selfe different  
instinct  
Of these let all mee element bee,  
Of power, to love, to know, you  
unnumbered three.<sup>24</sup>

Donne's remark that the Trinity is to philosophers a difficult doctrine but it is a celebration of life to saints is quite incisive. The grave no longer has power over saints because it is conquered by the Trinity.

<sup>23</sup> *Worship Handbook: Creeds and Liturgical Forms*, eds. Timothy Palmer and Tersur Aben (Jos: ACTS, 2005), 126.

<sup>24</sup> John Donne, *Complete English Poems*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1994), cited in Philip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes*, 22-23.

The Trinitarian pronouncement at burial calls to mind God's total victory over death. As the writer of Hebrews says:

God shared in humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb. 2:14).

Saints face death with tranquility because they know that Christ has vanquished death. Thus, Paul asks: 'O death, where is your sting? O Grave, where is your victory?' (1Cor. 16:55).

Believers in Christ no longer tremble at the thought of death. Death is a means to get to see our Lord face to face. To be present with our Lord in his Father's house where he is preparing a place for us is the greatest expectation of the saints. Thus, Theophane Venard writes:

I shall be beheaded. Within a few short hours my soul will quit this earth, exile over, and battle won. I shall mount upwards and enter into our true home. There among God's elect I shall gaze upon what eye of man cannot imagine, hear undreamt of harmonies, enjoy a happiness the heart cannot comprehend.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Theresa of Avila expressed her longing for union with the Lord in heaven through death saying: 'Bridegroom and Lord, the longed-for hour has come! It is time for us to see

<sup>25</sup> Theophane Venard, *The Wisdom of the Saints: An Anthology*, ed. Jill Haak Adels (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 196.

one another, my Beloved, my Master. It is time for me to set out. Let us go.<sup>26</sup>

## VI Trinity and the Heart of God

This brief study tries to show how Christians apply the biblical truth that God is Trinity to their lives on earth as they look forward to the perfect, uninterrupted communion with God in heaven. I show that, for many Christians, the Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle or a logical enigma to be solved via clever analogies or thought-experi-

ments. Neither do they try to conceal the reality of Trinity under a thousand qualifications that basically present God as one person in three modes of being.

Rather, the Trinity is the heart of God's self-disclosure to and involvement with humans on earth. The experience of God by Israel from Exodus to Canaan concretizes God as personal. The experience of God from Incarnation to Eschatology concretizes God as three distinct divine persons. The mission of the church is thus to proclaim the gospel of salvation and the restoration of humans back to God, which the Son accomplished on Calvary and the Holy Spirit applied to believers at Pentecost.

<sup>26</sup> Theresa of Avila, *The Wisdom of the Saints*, 193.

# Appendix

## The Trinity in the Bible and Selected Creeds of the Church

Compiled by Thomas K. Johnson

### I In the Bible

This study assumes that the classical Christian teaching on the Trinity is consistent with the Bible, though this claim will not be documented at length. The reader who is uncertain that the Triune nature of God is taught in the Bible should carefully consider some of the many relevant biblical texts on this theme. Though the technical language of the classical Christian creeds is not used in the Bible, this careful way of speaking about God flows organically from the entire Bible. A few selected texts which the reader may want to consider:

- Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-13; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34
- Matthew 28:18-20
- John 1:1-18
- John 14:16, 26; 15:26-27; John 16:5-15
- Romans 1:1-6
- 2 Corinthians 13:14
- Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:14-22
- Colossians 1:15-18
- 1 Peter 1:1-2

Though the teaching about the Trinity comes mostly in the New Testament, there are many places where the Old Testament points toward understanding God as a Trinity. This is sometimes connected with descriptions of complexity within the Godhead, sometimes with clear distinctions between the work of God as Creator and as Redeemer.

Some of these texts are:

- Genesis 1:26-27
- Isaiah 43:10-11; 44:6; 48:16; 63:7-16
- Psalm 2
- Psalm 45:6-7
- Psalm 110

Our understanding of the Trinity is closely associated with our understanding of Jesus, the Christ, who is fully God and fully man, yet one Person. This classical Christian teaching is also assumed in this study, though it will not be defended