

Understanding the Truth of the Trinity

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Holy Trinity Sunday: June 7, 2009

On this Sunday when we celebrate the mystery of the great God we worship through the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, I thought it might be a good idea to identify some faulty interpretations that are sometimes drawn in trying to figure out what the Trinity means for God and for us. First of all, the doctrine of the Trinity is not just a fancy marketing slogan, like “Three, three, three gods in one!”, or “Get three for the price of one!” That sounds good, I know; but that’s not the point of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Some have suggested that the doctrine of the Trinity enabled Christianity to function, well, kind of like polytheism – many names but one God, a formula for embracing the great warrior gods of empire-building cultures, all the tribal gods of hero worship cults, and the *Great Spirit* of native religions. It was as if the church could say, “You can get it all with Father, Son and Spirit. We can elevate your personal favorite into the heavenly triumvirate of the impenetrable mystery we call the Trinity.” The very language of the Trinity seemed to allow for an in-principled polytheism with a monotheistic twist.

Finally, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a special-effects bonanza, a first-century rendition of the *Deep Space Nine* character who could change form to fit the occasion – the changeling called *Odo*: God in the form of Father at Creation, God in the form of Son when it came time for Incarnation, God in the form of Spirit when Ascension Day gave way to Pentecost, giving birth to the Church as the Body of Christ.

These are three historic heresies: one known as modalism (where we have one God who changes appearance through different forms); another, the age-old attempt to embrace polytheism by whatever means; and third, the problem that arises when we put the cart of effective outreach before the horse of divine revelation, where the Good News of the Gospel becomes what people want to hear rather than what God proclaims through the Incarnate Word made flesh in Jesus.

The doctrine of the Trinity became a challenge and a problem from the very beginning of early Christian reaction to the miracle of the Resurrection. Once the one who proclaimed God’s word became God’s Word, once the one who talked about God became the embodiment of the God we worship, there was no going back to a simple monotheism that could refer to God as a Great Spirit, or as the logical necessity of the term “greatest”, or as the revealed majesty of the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen. With the Resurrection, God in Christ broke through the bounds of death, shattering the boundaries that separate the divine and human, blurring the line between eternity and mortality, mixing up the distinctions between everything lasting from all things transient. Jesus not only proclaimed the truth about God, he became the truth of God. This is what Paul made

so very clear when he said, “We proclaim Christ crucified, a scandal to Jews, pure folly to Greeks, but to those who believe, it is the power of God’s love and the wisdom of God’s ways.” (1st Corinthians 1:23-24)

The doctrine of the Trinity was not officially formulated until the 4th Century of the Christian Era, documented, of course, for all to see with the Nicene Creed, which was introduced at the First Great Ecumenical Church Council in Nicea in 325 CE, and approved 56 years later at the Second Great Ecumenical Church Council that took place in Constantinople in 381 CE. The key words in this creed are found in its Second Article, namely, *begotten not made*, not created like a creature, but begotten from God Himself – God from God, light from light, true God from true God.

This language and these phrases, three hundred years in the making, were historically implied when the Resurrection, the signature event that confirmed the Good News that Jesus was not only speaking about God, he was speaking for God, and, even more than that, as God, with not an iota of separation between Jesus and God. The irony, of course, is that the great controversy surrounding the Nicene-Constantinople Creed focused on the “iota” that distinguished *‘omoi ousia*, a being very much like God, from *‘omo ousia*, one and the same being in every respect as God. The former had more Scriptural testimony, but the later was required by logic and need – the theo-logic of talking about God and Jesus, and the need for responding clearly and definitively in a culture that didn’t need the usual strategy of obfuscation, inherently vague language, where death by a thousand qualifications would reduce God-talk to meaningless mumbo-jumbo.

Again, it is important to remember that it was the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, being raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, the event that established Jesus as the Christ, God’s Son, our Savior, that gave rise to the problem that could only be resolved by the formulation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, One God, three persons, each unique, each distinctive yet indivisible, co-equal, co-eternal, sharing equally and fully in the divinity of God.

On the one hand, Father, Son and Spirit represent the God that we know through the witness of Scripture and the doctrine of the Trinity. On the other hand, Father, Son, and Spirit represent the triune nature of how we know God. Trinity, in this respect, not only describes who the God is that we know as Father, Son, and Spirit, it also describes the structure of what is required to know a God that is greater than anything we can conceive.

(1) How can we know a God that is unknowable by our limited capabilities of understanding unless this God takes the initiative to make Himself known? (2) How can God make Himself known unless He takes a form that our minds can grasp? That human form was the person of the Son. (3) How can we know that what was known through the Son was the glory of the Father unless God also gave our minds the capability to see the connection, to draw that conclusion? That is what we call the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit not only names the God we know, it describes how we know God. The unknowable object we worship as God the Father must take human form in God the Son, and then provide inspiration through the Spirit so that we are able to understand that it is – in fact and through faith – God the Father that we know through God the Son. This is what happened with the miracle of the Resurrection: God Almighty was revealed, made Himself known, through God the Son, Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified Christ. Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father that we might walk in the newness of life (Romans 6:4), where walking in the newness of life means being empowered by the Holy Spirit to understand the significance of the Resurrection and to live with the gifts of the Spirit abounding within us as believers and among us as the church.

It sounds awfully complicated, I know, almost as if we need to have a doctor's degree in philosophy before we can begin to understand what we believe. But it's much simpler than all that because it all begins with Jesus, not with the conclusions of philosophy, or theology, or logic by whatever name. Christians encountered the Resurrection and concluded, "The Risen Christ is the full revelation of God Almighty!" This was faith's keen awareness, first conclusion, and summary confession, as was evident in the way in which Mark began his Gospel account. "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Savior." (Mark 1:1). While the Incarnation may seem to come first in the life of Jesus, Resurrection came first with the birth of faith.

Credo's like the Nicene Creed don't start with philosophy. They start and end with Jesus. In the language of Scripture, Jesus was clothed with all sorts of images, names, and titles that identified what he did and who he was: Son of man, Son of God, servant of God, our Lord, and Savior, Good Teacher, Divine Healer, Living Word, Risen Christ, Alpha and Omega, Prince of Peace, King of Kings. *Jesus* and *Christ* stuck like a first name and last; yet, each of these titles was simply another way to describe the glory of God revealed in Jesus. So, it is with these philosophical terms we lift up today: *'omo ousia*, hypostatic union, co-equality, co-eternity, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresent and ubiquitous. The key to understanding these words and their meaning is not grounded in how much philosophy we know, but that we know Jesus. The key to understanding these words and their meaning is not found in following what philosophy can tell us about divinity, but by following Jesus, and listening to what Jesus tells us about God. It's that simple.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not telling us that we have to go to graduate school and beyond to understand anything about God. It is saying that we have to come to Jesus to see the glory of God. God comes to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus is one in whom the divine became human so that the human could see the divine, know the divine, enter into God's divine love, and share in the eternity of God's divine life forever. The Good News we proclaim today is that all of this is ours as we gather for worship and strive to live, plainly and simply, lovingly and faithfully ... in Jesus' Name. Amen