

6. THE TRINITY AND OUR IDENTITY AS ‘CHRISTIANS’

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We are justified to be puzzled whenever the “Trinity” is mentioned. The word “Trinity” is absent from Scripture, and whenever we hear explanations about it, they sound incomprehensible if not downright esoteric. And yet, every one of us was baptized “in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” – and since the name in Scripture is the person, this sentence means that we are “baptised, that is ‘plunged’ in the very life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”. We can safely leave talks, treatises, and controversies about the Trinity to theologians, but we cannot be part of whatever we do in church every Sunday other than thanks to the special relation with the persons of the Trinity that lies at the heart of our Christian identity.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”. (Deuteronomy 6:4f)

1. This is the fundamental statement of the faith of the Bible, both in the OT and in the NT. Jesus reiterates it himself
“One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mk 12.38-31)
2. Whatever the doctrine of the Trinity means, it cannot contradict the assertion that “The Lord is one”.
3. We believe that Jesus is God and that the Holy Spirit is God *in exactly the same way* as the Father is God. We have this belief because we find three voices in Scripture, three “characters” who say I, who act as subjects:
 - 3.1. The Father:
“God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am’” (Exodus 3.14)
 - 3.2. The Son:
““Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8.58)
 - 3.3. The Holy Spirit (especially in the Acts of the Apostles):
“Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it’” (Acts 8:29).
“While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them’” (Acts 10:19-20; cf. 11:12).
“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I₁

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have called them.’ ...So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit...” (Acts 13:2, 4).

“And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, ‘This is what the Holy Spirit says: “In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles”” (Acts 21:11).

4. The word “Trinity” is not in Scripture. I was used for the first time by Tertullian in the 3rd century and we have to wait the 4th century for the creed that confesses the full divinity of Father Son and Holy Spirit which we proclaim every Sunday during the Eucharist – especially
 - 4.1. The Council of Nicaea in 325
 - 4.2. The Council of Constantinople in 381.
5. The way in which the Church came to confess the doctrine of the Trinity can be summarized as follows
 - 5.1. Since the Resurrection of Jesus, nobody doubted that he was ‘divine’ but many wondered whether he could be considered as God exactly in the same way as the Father is God.
 - 5.2. Soon however theologians understood that one cannot be God just ‘a bit’ – so either Jesus was fully God or he was a creature.
 - 5.3. Initially the Holy Spirit was seen as a force, an activity of God – a divine entity, but not God. Seeing however that he acts as a subject in Scripture, theologians concluded that the Holy Spirit too could not be God just ‘a bit’ – if he was divine, he must be fully God too, just like the Father and the Son.
6. The historical account of the way in which faith in the Trinity developed might give the impression that the Church came to believe that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God despite the fact that God is believed to be one.
7. In reality, the Church came to believe that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God because it is the only way to maintain what the Scripture reveals about God, namely that
 - 7.1. God is ONE
 - 7.2. And that God is LOVE.
8. This appears especially in one of the oldest confessions of the Trinity, the final salutation of 2 Corinthians by Paul:

“May the **grace** of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the **love** of God, and the **fellowship** of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13.14)

 - 8.1. The **love** of God is a **gift (grace)** that creates **fellowship (or communion)**.
 - 8.2. The kind of **unity** by which God is ONE is the unity of love, gift, and fellowship.

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9. Let us start by trying to understand the OT and NT declaration that ‘The Lord is one’.
 - 9.1. Often we understand it numerically: there is only a single ‘specimen’ of ‘god’

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- 9.2. In reality, it should more be understood in terms of ‘uniqueness’ and of inaccessibility, unknowability: God is so ‘unique’, so ‘unlike everything else’ that we have no way of representing, grasping, comprehending him. Whatever we know, see, understand of him is not God:
“No one has ever seen God” (John 1.1)
“No one has ever seen God” (1 John 4.1)
- 9.3. And the reason why God is so unknowable is not that he is too remote but exactly the contrary:
i. that he is at the root of our existence
“In Him we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:28)
- 9.4. and that the only way of knowing him is loving him absolutely, totally, unreservedly:
“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”. (Deuteronomy 6:4f)
- 9.5. Because God is so ‘unique’ and because we owe everything to him, and we exist in him, we have to love him not just more than everything else but “with *all* our heart, with *all* our soul and with *all* our strength”!
- 9.6. The whole of Scripture witnesses to the fact that humanity has never been capable of this – time and time again it has shown that we are utterly incapable of such an absolute response to the uniqueness of God.
10. And we might add that such a requirement not only is impossible but is frightening: how do we feel about someone who tells us that we owe him not just something but absolutely *everything* – someone who claims not only everything we *have*, but everything we *are*?
10.1. We can hope this only is a hyperbole, a rhetorical exaggeration
10.2. That in reality he only wants us to do our best.
11. Thus, the fact that God is *one* means
11.1. That God cannot be known: knowing him can never become a human possibility
11.2. That God cannot be loved – not at least as he wants to be loved – with *all* our being: loving him is not something possible to us.
12. These assertions might seem a bit extreme – but they are just the flip side of the coin – there is the tail side which we find in the second half of the sentences quoted above:
No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known. (John 1:18)
No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. (1 John 4.12f)
- 12.1. God is so ‘unique’ that only God can allow us to *know* God and *love* God.
12.2. God the Son *knows* and *loves* God the Father as one of us.
12.3. God the Holy Spirit *knows* and *loves* God the Father in us.

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13. Here we have the Trinity:
 - 13.1. We need God (the Son) to become one of us to be able to know and love God (the Father) as one of us: only *Jesus loved the Father with all his heart!*
 - 13.2. But even when Jesus has done this as one of us, this is not enough for us to be able to know and love God like he did – we still need God to do it *in us* – and the God who knows and loves the Father is us is the Holy Spirit.

“No one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit”. (1 Corinthians 12:3)

“God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us”. (Romans 5.5)
14. But even when God the Son and God the Holy Spirit do this, the possibility to know and love God never become something we ‘possess’. Let’s take an example
 - 14.1. Human beings cannot fly. Planes allow us to fly, but flying does not become a human ability. We fly only as long as we remain in the plane and that the plane keeps moving.
 - 14.2. In the same way, we know God only if the Son keeps revealing the Father to us and the Holy Spirit keeps loving the Father in us – *at each instant, constantly.*
 - 14.3. Knowing and loving God never become a possession – but they are always a *life, an action, a gift received each instant.*
 - 14.4. Just as a river remains a river only because it keeps receiving water and letting it flow!
15. This might seem a limitation to us only as long as we imagine that the best way of making something ours is *possessing* it, *controlling* it, in such way that it is ours and ours only.
16. The fact that we can know and love God only as long as we *keep receiving* this ability from the Son and the Holy Spirit might seem to us a way for God to remain in control, to make us dependent on him – an expression of the fact that he is a God jealous of his power and of his uniqueness.
17. In reality, this is the only way in which we can know and love God, because constant *self-giving* and *receiving* is what God is.
18. Here we reach the heart of the mystery of the Trinity. It is revealed to us in a passage from Philippians:

“Jesus Christ, being God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped;
rather, he emptied himself
by becoming a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2.6ff).

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19. The first sentence is very important:
 - 19.1. Many understand it as meaning: “Jesus, despite the fact that he was God, did not grasp his divinity, but emptied himself”
 - 19.2. But the meaning of the sentence is the exact opposite: “Jesus Christ, because he was God, did not grasp his divinity but emptied himself”.
 - 19.3. Here we have the revelation of what truly “to be God” means
 - 19.4. For us “to be God” means to grasp, own, be in control.
 - 19.5. In reality, “to be God” means “not to grasp”, but “to be happy to constantly empty himself, **give all**, and wait to receive everything back as a **gift**”.
 20. If this is true, if divine life is *gift* given and received, the only way in which God can be one is by being Trinity:
 - 20.1. The Father never grasps his prerogative to be God but gives it to the Son
 - 20.2. The Son exists as the recipient of this gift – and he too does not grasp this gift jealously but the more he receives it, the more he gives it back to the Father.
 - 20.3. This gift given and received is what unites the Father and the Son – it is the Holy Spirit.
 - 20.4. Just as Paul says:

“May the **gift** of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the **love** of God, and the **fellowship** of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor 13.14)
 21. There is only *one* gift, *one* God, *one* divine life – but it is constantly given and received – gift is the way in which God is one.
 22. The word Trinity is not in Scripture – and we are not bound to it (it is not even in the Creed!).
 - 22.1. Instead of Trinity we can say “exchange”, “other-centeredness”, gift
 - 22.2. The principle is that if to be God is to be ‘gift’ than the unity of God has to be made of
 - i. A giver
 - ii. A receiver who becomes a giver in turn
 - iii. And a gift.
 23. So why the Trinity? Because it is the only way of confessing that
 - 23.1. God is *God* (one cannot be God just ‘a bit’)
 - 23.2. God is *one*
 - 23.3. God is *love*.
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24. These are the principles that have helped the Church to develop the doctrine of the Trinity over almost 4 centuries of hard thinking!
 25. Initially, many Christians thought that the only way of keeping the faith in God as *one* was to believe that the Son and the Holy Spirit are inferior to the Father
 - 25.1. But precisely because God is *one*, unique, there cannot be something which is God only a bit – it is either all God or it is a creature (God is God).

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- 25.2. If the Son -Jesus- is God, he is [*fully the one*] God.
- 25.3. If the Holy Spirit is God, he is [*fully the one*] God.
- 26. And what helped Christians to come to this conclusion was not first of all *thinking* but a *practice*, namely baptism. The last sentence attributed to Jesus before his Ascension in the Gospel of Matthew is
 - “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28.19).
- 26.1. The only way of being united with God is being ‘plunged’ in his life
 - i. We have to become *one Body* with Christ
 - ii. We have to receive the Holy Spirit in our hearts.
- 26.2. Being baptized is to be ‘plunged’ in the life of God, and if the Son and the Holy Spirit play a role in this, they have to be God exactly as the Father is God because
 - i. Only God can make us participants in the life of God, just as
 - ii. Only God can make us *know* God
 - iii. And only God can make us *love* God.