



A MINISTRY SCHOOL OF THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF THE UPPER MIDWEST

God the Holy Trinity, Part I

The Triune Shape of Christian Theology

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I. **Getting Our Bearings, Gaining Momentum**

If Jesus Christ is the Lord and *Logos/Logic* of Christian theology, then it is with Jesus—our one and only mediator, the Alpha and Author of all things—that knowledge of God and the gospel truly begins. Our Anglican Catechism tells us just this by naming Part I “Beginning with Christ” (*To Be A Christian*, 19 ff.). Yet we certainly don’t mean this in any sort of myopic, reductionistic way. Quite the opposite!

For Jesus tirelessly impressed on Peter and his fellow disciples that Jesus is Son to a heavenly Father—that Jesus can be truly known only in relation to his Father, and that this sublime knowledge can only come through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the one Christ-reality that Jesus opens to us is not one-dimensional but three-dimensional, in that it is a thoroughly trinitarian reality. To know the truth of God and the world in Christ is to know that he is the ever-beloved Son of the Father by the illumination and inner witness of the Spirit. To experience new and eternal life in Christ is to experience the life-giving, reality-altering truth of God the holy Trinity.

In sum, it is none other than Jesus Christ who put the triune name of Father, Son, and Spirit forever on the heart and lips of the church. Vladimir Lossky is gloriously correct: “All that we know of the Trinity we know through the Incarnation.” ~*Orthodox Theology*



II. The Very Heart of Our Confession—and for Good Reason

- a. The most basic and momentous thing we can say about God is “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” In other words, God’s chief attribute is that he is Trinity, and this attribute informs all others.
- b. The doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates how doctrine grows organically out of the life and worship of the church, out of the experience of the triune God of the gospel opening his inner life to us through the Son and Spirit (John 14:16-20 >> Gal. 4:4-6 >> Rom. 8:15), so as to meet the challenges presented to the church from without *and* within (i.e. heresy).
- c. The doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates the connection between Scripture and doctrine, as the technical language of trinitarian doctrine—*perichoresis*, *homoousia*, or even *Trinity*—is not found in Scripture, though trinitarian faith and thinking are manifestly present throughout Scripture.
- d. The doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates the connection between doctrine and mystery. The doctrine of the Trinity *articulates* (not solves!) the mystery of God’s three-in-oneness. Yet in so doing, it does not explain away mystery, but rather safeguards the sheer God-ness of him who infinitely transcends our conception and imagination, who for ever eludes/defies all misguided attempts of being tamed, managed, or domesticated.

“No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illuminated by the splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole.... I cannot grasp the greatness of that One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the Rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light.”

~Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations*

“Each are in each, and all in each, and each in all, and all in all, and all are one. Let him who sees this, whether in part, or through a glass and in an enigma, rejoice in knowing God; and let him honor him as God, and give thanks.”

~Augustine, *On the Trinity*

If the triune God is truly “the love behind all love, the life behind all life, the music behind all music, the beauty behind all beauty, and the joy behind all joy” (Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*), then knowing God is of inestimable value. What is more, to know the Trinity is to know the God of infinite beauty, interest, and fascination. This is a far cry from Immanuel Kant’s assertion that “absolutely *nothing can be acquired for practical life* from the doctrine of the Trinity” (*Werke*, emphasis his), or from well-intended yet ill-advised attempts to liken the Trinity to an egg, the three states of H₂O, and so on!



- e. The doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates the inner connections between doctrine and doctrine, as the doctrine of the Trinity touches on and informs virtually every other facet of Christian confession.

“It is not just that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity must be accorded primacy over all other doctrines, but that properly understood it is the nerve and centre of them all, configures them all, and is so deeply integrated with them that when they are held apart from the doctrine of the Trinity they are seriously defective in truth and become malformed.” ~T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*

- f. The doctrine of the Trinity demonstrates the connection between right doctrine and right worship. Let us recall that while the term *orthodoxy* is often used to mean right doctrine, it actually means right worship. The two are of a piece, thus we must never presume that they can be separated, or exist independently of one another!

“If you want to know what Christian theology really means by the word ‘God,’ therefore, you have to direct your attention in worship to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You can’t really say what Christians believe in without using some version of that three-fold name, as is done throughout Christian worship as well as in the Creed.” ~Phillip Cary, *The Meaning of Protestant Theology*

“Blessed be God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” ~The Acclamation, *Book of Common Prayer*

“The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God...and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always.” ~The Blessing, *Book of Common Prayer*



III. A Working Definition...and Food for Thought

Gregory of Nazianzus famously proclaimed, “When I say ‘God,’ I mean Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” (*Orations*). Our Anglican Catechism says likewise: “Who is God? God is one divine being eternally existing in three divine persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the Holy Trinity” (*To Be A Christian*, 35). Thus the word “Trinity” means *tri-unity* or *three-in-oneness*, neatly encapsulating in theological shorthand the teaching of Scripture that God is three persons, yet one God. We must not fail to grasp these momentous implications:

- The Trinity is not merely a way of thinking and speaking about God, an intellectual construct that gives us a “handle” on God. Rather, God is actually and intrinsically triune. In other words, the structure of the Trinity is the structure of God, not simply our self-styled structure of thinking and speaking about God.
- Thus if God is actually and intrinsically triune, then God cannot be truly conceived of except as triune.
- There is no shortage of talk about “God.” But unless said confession is freighted with trinitarian content, such a “God” is actually and intrinsically different from/other than the God of Scripture—the triune God of the gospel.

“Between the Trinity and hell there lies no other choice. This question is, indeed, crucial—in the literal sense of that word. The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought.”
~Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*

IV. The Hebrew Scriptures and Monotheism

The main contribution of the Old Testament to the doctrine of the Trinity is its emphasis on the oneness of God. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4). Theologically, why is the affirmation that God is one so terribly important, both then and now?

- The point is not, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is a mathematical singularity.”
- It accents the folly of polytheism/religious pluralism, and so the scandal of particularity.
- It accents the truth that God is ever the only proper object of faith and adoration—the one God worthy of our affections, and worth loving with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.



V. The Hebrew Scriptures and the Implicit Complexity of Monotheism

Despite the Old Testament's prevailing emphasis on monotheism, there appears to be significant intimations of the Trinity.

- Genesis 1:26 (cf. Genesis 3:22; 11:7; Isaiah 6:8). Are these plurals of majesty? Address to the angels/angelic host?

"Indeed, it is the great consensus of the church that the mystery of the Trinity is set forth here." ~Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*

"Christians...properly contend, from this testimony, that there exists a plurality of Persons in the Godhead." ~John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*

- Psalm 45:6-7 (Note this text's apostolic interpretation, found in Hebrews 1:8).
- Psalm 110:1 (Note this text's interpretation by Jesus, found in Matthew 22:41-46).

VI. The New Testament and the Trinity

In the New Testament there is no concisely comprehensive statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, yet trinitarian witness is both pervasive and overwhelming.

- John 13-16; Matthew 3:16-17; 28:18-20.
- 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2; Jude 20-21.