

The Simplicity of the Trinity

As a statement of mathematics the doctrine of the Trinity seems needlessly complicated. How can three be one or one be three? But who said the Trinity is about math?

Everyone can understand how a Father and Son love each other. Anyone can identify with the spirit of love that binds two people so closely together that the two of them, and their love, are united as one. Even if we've never experienced such intimate, loving relationship, we all long for it and can imagine how it might be. In fact, the less we've experienced such love and unity, the more we long to find it and be a part of it.

Math can be hard to understand, but relationship is something we all participate in and long for. That's why it's important to understand that the Trinity is about relationship, not math.

When we think that explaining the Trinity to others means trying to overcome their objections to the mathematical issue of counting to three, then we become reluctant to talk about the Trinity. After all, that math stuff makes it complicated and hard to believe.

On the other hand, when we know that explaining the Trinity is about telling others of the loving Holy Spirit through whom the Father and Son love each other, then we see the simplicity of the Trinity. God is the Father loving the Son in the love of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Son embracing all of humanity and including us in that loving relationship. That's simple. We're the ones who turn it into something complicated. The Trinity gets complicated when we try to impose our math, or our religion, or our faulty Biblical exegesis on the simplicity of the Triune Life.

A few years ago I finally had to address this question in my life and ministry: Am I talking to myself and others about the Father and Son who love each other in the loving communion of the Holy Spirit or am I talking about the omni-God? (What is the omni-God? The God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent but somehow never first and foremost Father, Son, and Spirit). When I answered this question I knew what I had to do. I had to stop letting myself complicate the Trinity and embrace its simplicity. What I've found since I've done that is quite startling. Even children can understand the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and their place in that life.

The Trinity really is that simple.

~ Jonathan Stepp

I Do Not Even Judge Myself

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God. ~ 1 Cor 4: 1-5 NRSV

It is not only tempting to judge others negatively, it is also easy to judge ourselves negatively! I've just gone through a set of trials with my family that literally turned our world upside down.

The trials resulted in our having to pack, place in storage, move and unpack all of our stuff TWICE in two months! They resulted in our two main cars breaking down and our needing two new ones. Our expenses increased by over \$1400 per month virtually OVERNIGHT while our income remained the same.

Our challenges led to us running all around the 7 cities in our region for months with our realtor. Every single house that "fit" fell through, sometimes just as we were on our way to visit the home. This happened more than once! We were finally forced to move our family of 4 into a small home with 2 other members of our local church (Praise the Trinity for His Love in His people!).

Meanwhile, "back at the farm" (literally in more rural Ohio where the only house we truly own is), the renter there left us "high and dry," not having paid her rent, and leaving the house tore up. When I say "tore up," I mean "Tore up from the floor up!" as they say, and with an infestation of fleas in every floor...*gratis!*

Yes, I not only screamed a couple of times, but one day I got so frustrated and mad that I screamed at the Trinity, yelling "I KNOW you hear me! Now, why aren't you answering me (the way I want you to)? You could fix all of this so simply! Good Grief!!"

Within minutes after that outburst, in the grace of the Spirit, I did have a good laugh with the Trinity, told Him I was sorry and that I knew He could be trusted. Not only did I go there, but along with other people (and the adversary), I was very tempted to think of all my sins (at least the many I was aware of) and wondering which one/s I was finally being punished for!

Sound familiar? That fallen mind sure has a way of rearing its ugly head at the most (in)opportune times, huh? I can imagine that some of you reading this have also been tempted in your trials and challenges to try and guess what sins the Father was punishing you for, too! And if you weren't, I am sure others of your friends were and perhaps shared those thoughts with you, as they did us! Ha-Ha! Not so funny at the time...really!

BUT then, while going through those difficult circumstances and pressing into more intimacy and relationship with the Father through Jesus in the Holy Spirit of Adoption, I happened to remember the set of scriptures at the top of this article. While reading those scriptures I was encountered by the Trinity in a very personal way. I was relieved, once again, of the load of trying to judge exactly why the trials had come. I was relieved of puzzling over what I or a family member had done to provoke the reactive, vengeful god of the fallen, sinful mind. I was prevented from some of the unfruitful guesswork about the exact nature of why God had allowed these particular

trials.

So in one sense, even though I don't have a clear answer to the question, "Why do you think God allowed you to go through all that, Pastor Tim?" as some have asked, I DO have a very clear answer in another sense. That answer is:

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy ~ 1 Cor 4:2.

Or in my way of putting it, the Trinity is clearly saying "You can trust Me, my sons and daughters!"

That, to me, is more of the real point of the matter behind any and every trial and challenge that the Trinity allows in our life, especially when we grasp more clearly the Revelation of the Son of God as Man. That Revelation began in Eternity with the Trinity deciding that, in order to have us in Their family, One of the Persons of the Three-in-One God would have to share Themselves with us in a unique once-for-all-way.

This would involve, in part, a crucifixory experience because of our sin. Having never been Incarnate (begotten as dirt!) before, but at the same time having always existed in a Relationship of trust with his Father in the Holy Spirit, we could say that one fundamental reason for Jesus' victory through His crucifixory experiences in our fallen flesh was His Unrelenting Trust in His Father, in the anointing of the Holy Spirit!

And if that is the way the Son was extremely victorious in our fallen flesh, and if He shares His exact trust in the Holy Spirit with us in our fallen flesh (Acts 2:17), then it stands to Trinitarian reason that the Son's trust in His Father is the most important lesson we can receive, participate in, and experience with regard to any trial.

Though I cannot say much more about the "WHY?" of our recent trials, I CAN say that not only am I glad that we went through everything we did (who would have thunk it?!), but if this renewed sense of trust in the Trinity was the only reason for the trials, it was worth it!

By the way, not only did our world get "rocked," but in a very incarnational way—and I especially mean the actions of the Father through fellow like-minded believers in the Spirit of Adoption—the Lord has become even more "our Rock and our Salvation, whom shall we fear!"

So if you are going through "rocky" times right now, please receive the encouragement of the Spirit through the Apostle Paul:

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.
~ 1 Cor. 4:5

And please notice that the word in the last sentence is "Commendation"—Praise!—from God, NOT "condemnation" from God. Ha-Ha!!

~ Tim Brassell

Asking the Right Question

My heart lurched and tears pricked my eyes as I watched the local news story about a little girl, Kaylee Halko, age 7, who was granted her birthday wish to sing onstage at Walt Disney World with Belle from the children's movie "Beauty and the Beast" by the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Northwest Ohio.

Kaylee has progeria, a disease which makes her age about ten times faster than normal. The result of a genetic mutation, this disease affects one in four to eight million children. It is not typically passed down from parent to child; rather, it is the result of an extremely rare, chance gene change. Children with progeria suffer from progressive heart disease and other afflictions associated with the elderly. There is no known cure and most children with progeria only live to their early teens.

I watched the Disney cast, especially the character of Belle, sing along with Kaylee, obviously showing such love and admiration for this girl. Kaylee did steal the show, performing the song as if she had sung onstage all her life, with sweeping arm gestures and big smiles. She clearly was having the time of her life, but I couldn't help but ask God why this little girl was having to endure such pain, disfigurement, and suffering. Why would a loving Father let such misery happen?

As I thought more about Kaylee's story, another story came to mind, this time about a young man born blind.

In John 9:1-2, we read about Jesus' and his disciples' encounter with a man who had been blind since birth. The disciples were quick to ask the same question we all would ask: "Who's to blame? Who's at fault?" Specifically, they had narrowed it down to the possibilities that either the parents had sinned (which seemed most plausible) or the young man had somehow sinned in the womb.

Notice what Jesus says in verses 3-5:

Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world's Light." (John 9:3-5—THE MESSAGE)

Jesus was telling the disciples that, in their attempt to blame someone for the young man's blindness, they were asking the wrong question. Instead, Jesus told them that there was no cause and effect at work in this situation. They needed to be more concerned about what God wanted to do for this young man, and then join His efforts with everything they had.

Jesus, who was always in tune with the Father, knew exactly what the Father wanted done in this young man's life. He made a paste of spit and clay and put it on the man's eyes. He told the man to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. The man did, and he became able to see.

I believe that the Father was involved in Kaylee's Make-A-Wish visit to Disney. I could see His love and affection for this little girl reflected in the faces of her cast mates onstage. I could feel His joy and pride over one of his children being blessed and honored and made to feel special. No incurable disease could stop the Trinity's love from being expressed in a tangible way to this little girl. And if that's true for Kaylee, it's also true for all of us. No matter what difficult situation we face, the Trinity's love for us will seek to express itself through our circumstances and especially through other people.

Let's stop asking the wrong questions when we see situations we don't understand. Our fixation on "WHY?" distracts us from paying attention to what the Father, Son, and Spirit are whispering in our ear, and it keeps us from participating in the tangible expression of love the Trinity wants to give a person who is hurting. Instead, we need to look for what God wants done, and then energetically work to allow the expression of the Triune love through us.

~ Nan Kublman

Is the U.S. a Christian Nation?

This question is significant for what the answer tells us about how we, as Christians in the U.S., are going to relate to the culture around us. The answer to this question depends on what you mean by "Christian Nation."

It is certainly true that for most of its history the culture of the United States was religiously dominated by a Christian world view. The vast majority of people in the U.S. have traditionally identified themselves as Christians and attendance at churches has always far outnumbered the attendance at synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship.

But was Christianity enshrined in the political foundations of the U.S.? The answer to that question is clearly "No."

The Declaration of Independence, for example, only mentions God once when it makes reference to "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" in the opening sentence of the document. Who or what is "Nature's God"? The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit I know, but I can't tell for sure whether "Nature's God" is this same Blessed Trinity whom I know through Jesus. Perhaps it is in the eye of the beholder. The primary author of the document, Thomas Jefferson, once said of the Trinity:

When we shall have done away with the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; when we shall have knocked down the artificial scaffolding, reared to mask from view the simple structure of Jesus . . . we shall then be truly and worthily his disciples . . . ~ "Letter to Timothy Pickering, on a Sermon by Doctor Channing", in *A Library of American Literature: From the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time, Vol. III.* , pp. 283-284.

So clearly, when Jefferson said "Nature's God" he did not mean the Father, Son, and Spirit. Jefferson's Deism led him to go so far as to put together his own version of the Gospels in which he cut out all the miracles and references to Jesus as the Son of God and reassembled the text to portray Jesus as a good moral teacher. The University of Virginia has a copy of his version of the Gospels online if you'd like to have a look at it:

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefJesu.html>

We know the signers of the Declaration ran the gamut, from devout Christians to devout Deists such as Jefferson. So I think it is entirely possible that some of the Christians who signed the document would have read "Nature's God" to mean the Trinity revealed in Jesus. What is significant, though, is that they all signed the document. The Christians present were comfortable signing a document with only one, ambiguous reference to a general Deity and with no specifically Christian statements about that Deity.

Eleven years later, when American political leaders gathered to draft a Constitution they created a

document that didn't even mention "Nature's God." In fact, there is not a single reference to God in the U.S. Constitution.

Compare this to the Constitution of Ireland, for example. The Irish Constitution begins with the words "In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity . . ." The U.S. Constitution begins with the words "We the People . . ." The Preamble to the Irish Constitution goes on to mention ". . . our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ . . ." while the U.S. Constitution, of course, makes no mention of Jesus at all.

Is Ireland a Christian Nation? Their founding documents would seem to say "Yes." Is the United States? Our founding documents say "No."

So there are two key facts here:

A large number of Christians were present for, and participated in, the drafting and adoption of the U.S. Constitution.

Yet the document provides no special place for Christianity in our nation and makes no reference to any Christian understanding of God.

These two facts make it clear that the founders of the United States had no intention of founding a Christian nation. They founded a nation intended to function with people of many different religions, or no religion at all, living in peace together.

This is highly significant for us as American Christians when we seek to interact with our culture. What message does it send to atheists, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus when we Christians say things like "America is supposed to be a Christian nation" or "America needs to turn back to God"? The message it sends is that Christians are included and all others are excluded—or, at best—Christians are first class citizens and everyone else is a second class citizen somehow.

Is that the gospel? Is the gospel a message about doctrine and morality which says to other human beings "You aren't included but you can be included if you believe what we believe and act the way we act"? I don't believe that is the gospel.

The gospel is the good news that the Son of God has included everyone in his relationship with his Father. The gospel is the good news that we all belong, whether we believe it or not. Just as Christian and Muslim citizens of the U.S. are all full citizens, so also are all Muslims and Christians fully adopted children of the Father.

The structure of American polity, which says that people of all religions are equally included in our national life, offers us Christians in the U.S. a profound opening to preach the gospel. The very structure of our government enables us to show non-Christians the acceptance and inclusion that the gospel itself preaches.

The Scripture says "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free" (Gal. 5:1), and that freedom includes the freedom to not believe or to believe wrong things, and even the freedom to build houses of worship dedicated to wrong ideas. Jesus has never thrown down a lightning bolt from heaven to stop the construction of a mosque, yet here where I live in Tennessee, hundreds of people who call themselves Christians are trying to take freedom away from others and stop the construction of a mosque.

I think American Christians need to take a step back from the fiery political rhetoric of our current culture and ask ourselves “What is the core message that we really want non-Christians in America to hear from Christianity?”

An intersection of political interests has formed in the U.S. where economic conservatives, evangelical Christians, and Mormons are finding common political cause in resisting changes in American society. However you may personally feel about the changes in our society (from gay marriage to a greater role for government), I want to encourage you to think carefully about how this marriage of economics, politics, and religion can impact our ability to share the gospel.

We are surrounded by a non-Christian culture that perceives Christians (especially evangelical Christians) as mean, angry, and moralistically judgmental. They perceive the Christian message as a message of morality and doctrine: *Do what we say, and believe what we say, and God won't roast you over a fire for all eternity.*

When we use our email, our Facebook accounts, and our conversations to publicly ally ourselves with the elements of American political life that say “America is a Christian nation” and “America needs to turn back to God,” we are only reinforcing this distasteful image of the gospel in the minds of our non-believing friends, family, and neighbors.

I think we need to be focused on one core message to everyone we know:

You are the Father's beloved child in Jesus Christ. Believing or non-believing, Muslim, Hindu, or Jewish, straight or gay, good or bad—you and I are part of the same world and the same Triune Life. We are all Americans and we are all the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Only then will those who do not believe in their adoption begin to really understand how much their Father in heaven loves them.

~ Jonathan Stepp

The Emancipation of All Humanity

We're sometimes asked “are you sure that everyone is included in Jesus? I thought only those who believe in Jesus are included in his life with the Father.” So we find it helpful to print quotes from theologians throughout history who have spoken of how Jesus is the inclusion of humanity in the life of the Trinity. In this quote Athanasius of Alexandria describes how the incarnation of the Word as the man Jesus means the emancipation of all humanity:

God being good and Father of the Lord, in pity, and desiring to be known by all, makes His own Son put on Him a human body and become man, and be called Jesus, that in this body offering Himself for all, He might deliver all from false worship and corruption, and might Himself become of all Lord and King. . . the Father in making Him man (for to be made belongs to man), did not simply make Him man, but has made Him in order to His being Lord of all people, and to His hallowing all through the Anointing. For though the Word existing in the form of God took a servant's form, yet the assumption of the flesh did not make a servant of the Word, who was by nature Lord; but rather, not only was it that emancipation of all humanity which takes place by the Word, but that very Word who was by nature Lord, and was then made man, hath by means of a servant's form been made Lord of all and Christ, that is, in order to hallow all by

the Spirit. ~ *Against the Arians*, Discourse II, 15.14.

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