

## Trinity

One year, midway through a confirmation class on the Lord's Prayer, a middle school student raised her hand and asked a question she obviously thought she shouldn't be asking: "Dr. Sinclair, if Jesus was God, who did he pray to?"

Summoning thirty plus years of theological training, I launched into a nuanced explanation of the Trinity; which, within seconds, drew a thoroughly unmistakable middle school look.

"Jesus was not praying to himself," I explained. "Jesus revealed God and was God, but he wasn't praying to himself. God is one and God is three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

The student looked at me as if to say, "My dear fellow, let's get you some help."

The problem is universal. Conversations about the triune God often dissolve into pretzel logic. Listen to Douglas John Hall, a well known North American theologian. Writing about the Trinity, Hall observes, "The Trinitarian *problem* presented itself, not at the edges of belief but at the very center; for as soon as Christians claimed that a thoroughly human and historical person manifested the very character of God, the monotheistic matrix of all biblical thought was challenged." *Monotheistic matrix?*

Actually, Professor Hall makes an important point. My seventh grade student made the same point only more concretely: "Who did Jesus pray to?"

Careful readers of the Bible are met by perplexing questions not the least of which is the claim that God became human in Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish rabbi; who, according to John's gospel, was not only with God in the beginning but was also the One through whom "all things came into being." To be human is to be limited; to be human is to be finite. God is both infinite and unlimited. How can Jesus be limited and unlimited; finite and infinite?

The *problem* (and it is a problem, as Hall rightly terms it), might be less of a problem if Jesus had not also said "the Father is greater than I." How can Jesus be God, if the Father is "greater?" Jesus professed ignorance about the end of the world saying "only the Father" knows. If Jesus is God, how can he not know something? Likewise, Jesus prayed from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If Jesus is God, what does his prayer mean?

The problem of the Trinity is not resolved when Jesus' humanity is dissolved into God's divinity as if Jesus was a kind of superhero with superpowers—not really human, only half-human, a kind of divine man. Likewise, understanding is not advanced by dissolving Jesus' divinity into his humanity, as if to say Jesus was a very good man, a holy man, a great teacher, healer, or prophet but not God himself. The New Testament claims both—Jesus was God and Jesus was human or as one of our Presbyterian confessions puts it: "In the person and work of Jesus, God himself and a human life are united but not confused, distinguished but not separated."

The New Testament does not neatly resolve the questions it raises. Moments ago we heard the Great Commission: "Go into all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Whenever we baptize we use this ancient confession. Every Sunday we sing praise to the triune God using the *Gloria Patri* and the *Doxology*. We routinely invoke the Trinity at the close of worship with Paul's beautiful

benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Or, consider again the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, written to the churches of Asia. While the language is less familiar, the writer clearly thought in Trinitarian terms: “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on the earth.” The Bible declares rather than explains that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Given the Bible’s lack of explanation, it’s little wonder the church wrestled with the notion of Trinity for three-hundred years before resolving at Nicaea to profess the classical formula: “one God in three persons.” While that ancient confession settled immediate issues, it did not close conversation for all time.

Twelve hundred years later, a Flemish artist depicted a young boy sitting on a beach. According to legend, the painting was inspired by Augustine, the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century theologian, who one day noticed a boy digging in the sand. The boy was pouring water into the hole. When Augustine pointed out the futility of the boy’s play, the boy replied, “With all due respect sir, don’t you realize that writing about the Trinity is impossible too?”

Augustine spent ten years writing about the Trinity—fifteen books in ten years. Writing and thinking about the Trinity is something like pouring water in a hole at the beach. Perhaps that’s not such a bad thing. Perhaps the image hints that “God’s ways are not our ways.” God is greater than our imagination, greater than we can imagine.

During his years at West Point, General Douglas MacArthur was introduced to Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. MacArthur, known as a brilliant student, found that he was unable to comprehend Einstein’s theory, so he memorized it. One day MacArthur’s professor asked him about the time-space continuum. MacArthur reeled off what the book said. The professor looked puzzled, “Do you understand this theory, Mr. MacArthur?”

“It was a bad moment for me,” MacArthur confessed, “but I did not hesitate, “No sir, I do not.”

The room was deathly quiet. “You could have heard a pin drop,” MacArthur recalled. Expecting a scorching rebuke, MacArthur said his professor instead, in low, measured words, told the class, “Neither do I Mr. MacArthur. Section dismissed.”

I sympathize with MacArthur. I don’t understand the Theory of Relativity. I’m also certain I don’t understand the Trinity, but I do *stand under* it. “Standing under” a theory is not the same thing as “understanding” it. I don’t understand electricity. I don’t understand computers. I don’t understand cell phones. But I do stand under cell phone technology—I use it all of the time. I also use computers and electricity. I stand under those things every day. They are a working part of my world. I can’t tell you how these technologies work, but I rely on them every day. I could say the same about the Trinity. I don’t understand it, but I stand under it every day.

The Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle to be solved, but a way of talking about a God who is infinitely more wonderful and mysterious and powerful than we imagine or can imagine; not a God we “understand,” but a God we count on; not a God we figure out, but a God worthy of our love and devotion and service.

Shirley Guthrie has a wonderful turn of phrase about the Trinity that I find very helpful: “all of God is involved in everything God does.” The Greeks had a wonderful expression for that—*perichoresis* (perry-ko-ray`sis) or dancing around. The image suggests that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each and all partners in creation, redemption, sanctification. “[A]ll of God is involved in everything God does.”

No image can finally “explain” God which is not the point anyway. We celebrate the triune God on this Trinity Sunday not because we “understand” God but because we “stand under” the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We stand under the One who created us; who provides for us; who establishes justice; the One who invites us up higher, the One who sends us to love as we are loved. We stand under the One who suffers and sacrifices to redeem creation. We stand under the One who makes all things new, who is present inspiring faith; the One who creates hope out of nothing; the One who inspires love when love is not to be found. We stand, all of us, under the One who invites us to dance; to live fully and freely with the One who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever. Amen.