

Sermon notes/follow up 6/7/09

Trinity Sunday is the hinge of church year, when we move from proper time to ordinary time. The first part of the year tracks with the life of Jesus; with Trinity Sunday, the church year becomes more “generic.” “Generic” in this case means there are no specific themes or festivals being celebrated as in the first part of the year. But it is by no means a boring season. It is a season for focusing on the Spirit’s ongoing work in and through the church (*in* the church = community; *through* the church = mission). David Cassidy describes it this way:

Today marks the end of the Festal Season of the Church Year, the time in which we follow from Advent’s preparation for the Lord’s coming to his Incarnation and Birth at Christmas, his life of miracles and teaching celebrated in Epiphany, his substitutionary death on the cross, his Resurrection, Ascension, and the outpouring of the Gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. The outcome of these events, this great work of redemption, is not only the salvation of individual sinners, but the creation of a new humanity, the covenant people of God, the Church. Our salvation, planned by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and actualized for each of us through the Holy Spirit, is a fully Trinitarian salvation. That is why our baptism, which ushers us into the salvation God offers, is in the name of the Trinity, and makes us members of the Church. The Society of the Trinity gives birth to the Society of the Church – Created by the Father, Redeemed by the Son, and Sanctified by the Spirit. This community of Faith is no optional extra but the actual goal of Christ’s saving work: he came to die for the Church; he came to make us his own Bride (Titus 2:11ff; Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27).

One of the hardest parts of being a pastor/preaching is finding fresh ways to put the same truths week after week, year after year. How many different ways can you present the gospel or the Trinity? And yet the problem is with us – our tendency to get in ruts, to talk about the same comfortable things in the same comfortable ways again and again. The problem is NOT that God’s self-revelation in Scripture is lacking in some way. God’s Word is infinitely rich, but sometimes we lack the energy (spiritual and otherwise) to mine its depths.

This is one reason why preachers need other preachers. We need to feed off of one another’s work. In preparing to preach on the Trinity this year, I was helped by the work of several others. Glen Scrivener’s sermon on the Trinity was

extremely influential in my own presentation this time around. Glen's sermon may be found on his blog:

<http://christthetruth.wordpress.com/2008/12/17/trinity-sermon/>

I don't know Glen, and don't even know how I stumbled on his website, but he should be thanked.

I was also helped by a 4 part lecture series by Mike Reeves at the Theology Network:

<http://www.theologynetwork.org/>

Of course, Darrell Johnson's book *Experiencing the Trinity* is one I consult every time I preach on the Trinity because it's so warm and practical. In the background, my long term reading of the Torrance, Letham, Moltmann, Macleod, Wright, Grenz, Weinandy, Edwards, Calvin, Warfield, Butin, etc. are all helpful and inform everything I say about the Trinity. Tim Chester's book *Delighting in the Trinity* deserves special mention for its attempts to make the doctrine practical (especially missional). The influence of the social Trinitarians on me is great, though I'm not able to follow them at every point.

I also want to make special mention of Tom Smail's book *Like Father, Like Son*, which is a superb work of Trinitarian anthropology. You can see Leithart's review here:

<http://www.leithart.com/archives/002723.php>

I want us to be a church where when our members hear the word "God," they think "Trinity." One of the best things about classical liturgical forms is that they are deeply Trinitarian. They do not talk about God in the abstract; they speak of the Father, Son, and Spirit in concrete, relational terms. In fact, even before the church ratified the doctrine of the Trinity in creedal form, the church was already worshipping God and praying to God as a Trinity in her corporate, public liturgical gatherings. (This is a great illustration of the *lex orandi, lex credendi* principle.)

As I said in the sermon, the Trinity is an incomprehensible mystery – but it is a mystery of brightness, not darkness – "tis only the splendor of light hideth thee," as the hymn puts it.

As believers, we share in God's inward facing love, the love Father, Son, and Spirit have for one another. God is three persons in loving communion (and that loving communion is not a "fourth thing" – rather it is the mode of existence and

life for the three persons; there is no divine “substance” that exists prior to or apart from God’s threeness). As God’s missionaries, we also share in his outgoing, outward facing love to the world. God has opened up his life to invite the world in; we are his chosen agents to deliver that invitation.

Probably the most controversial aspect of the sermon was the part on God’s suffering. If you have been at TPC for a while, you know that I am both a “classical Christian theist” (e.g., I believe in the absolute sovereignty of God and all the “omni-“ attributes) as well as a thorough-going theopaschite. I have addressed theopaschism in the past and will not repeat all that here. I will paste in a recent blog post from Mark Horne that deals with the issue quite well (<http://www.hornes.org/mark/2009/04/21/god-suffers/>):

God suffers

Posted: 21 Apr 2009 08:52 PM PDT

God has always suffered ever since the point that humans began suffering and sinning.

The whole point of **telling people not to grieve the Holy Spirit** is because **there are actions that cause God grief**. Furthermore, **when God’s people are afflicted, then God is afflicted**. In fact, the idea that humans experience frustration and emotional painful pangs due to circumstances while God is above such things is precisely backwards, if the Bible is true. The reason we groan “in the pains of childbirth” waiting for the resurrection world is **precisely because God allows us to participate in his own frustration**. God is engaged and affected by fallen reality. If it were not for His presence with us, we would be detached stoics.

Of course, God’s suffering takes on a new dimension in the incarnation. Through the humanity of Jesus God suffered, **bled**, and died in a new way—one that accomplished our redemption.

But the important point here is that the incarnation did not obscure God’s nature, but perfectly revealed the character of God. If God were incapable of suffering then the incarnation would be misleading. That is totally backward. And even though Jesus has entered resurrection life ahead of us, **he still suffers with us**. Jesus did not suffer *instead* of God. They are not two persons. Rather, God the Son, Jesus, suffered *through* the humanity that he assumed.

This fact is both revealed in the Bible, and part of the unique offense of Christianity. All the Christological heresies of the early church were attempts to protect God’s “transcendence” from being vulnerable to physical reality. The whole doctrine of the incarnation is intended to cut off these non-christian metaphysical delusions.

The only way that theologians have found to evade the Bible's clear teaching is to come up with a way of saying that the Bible teaches false doctrines that require a sophisticated theologian to correct (**see Gerstner, for example**). Contrary to John Calvin, God does not "lisp" and require us to read the *Institutes* to correct his lisping. God reveals himself clearly. You should put your faith in Him.

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The bottom line is that what happened on the cross is the deepest revelation of God that we have. The atonement is an event in the life of the Triune God. God the Son in the flesh gave himself unto death for our sakes. In the death of the Son, the Father also died (think of the grief any father goes through when his son dies!). If the persons of the Trinity are constituted in their identities relationally, for the Son to die necessarily involves the death of the father. The Son is who is by virtue of his relationship with the Father (and vice versa) – the cross must be understood as a mysterious interruption in that relationship. Furthermore, the Spirit, as the one shared by the Father and the Son, as the bond of love between the Father and Son, suffered as well when the fellowship of Father and Son was momentarily broken.

If we are a godly (= godlike) people, we will live as God lives – in this kind of love, humility, willingness to suffer for others, etc. The Trinity is ANYTHING BUT an impractical abstraction. Indeed, it is painfully practical!!

The Trinity will always seem like non-sense to those who do not see their need for a mediator to approach God. The Trinity can only be accepted with a childlike faith. We only know the Father through the Son if the Father reveals the Son to us. This knowledge has been hidden from the Feuerbachs, Freuds, Dawkins, etc. of the world, but given unto us as a free gift!

In our religiously pluralistic cultural environment, it is important to stress that the Trinity alone is the true God. Sure, some one could trust Christ unto salvation and have only the faintest notion of the Trinity. Intellectual comprehension is not the issue. But when the Trinity is denied outright, you may be sure the person is talking about a different god. Of course, the reason idolatry has plausibility is because false gods and false religions are not completely false. Lies only work if they are mixed subtly with elements of the truth, and so we can always find points of contact between the true faith and other religions. But if their presentation of God is not Triune, it is warped and distorted. Thus, when Paul

sums up human idolatry in Romans 1, he says the pagan's minds have been darkened so that they worshipped that which is not God.

Of course, Paul not only critiques the idols – he also shows us that we are only rescued from idolatry by the grace of the Triune God.

In John 17, Jesus offers up his so-called High Priestly prayer to the Father. This prayer is not only rich with insights into church life, it is also perhaps the most stunning piece of Trinitarian theology in the Bible. It goes about as deep as we can go. Just as the High Priest wore the breastplate with 12 stones representing the people of God when he entered the tabernacle, so when Jesus goes to the cross, he has his people in his heart. Jesus prays we would not only *imitate* the communion that exists between Father and Son, but that we would *share* in it. And this community is to be a means of witnessing to the world. So it's all there in a few short verses – salvation, community, mission.

The new atheists have gotten a lot of attention in the media – Hitchens, Dawkins, etc. If I were to sit down and chat with them, the first thing I would do is ask them to describe for me the nature of the god they deny exists. Given their descriptions (god as bloodthirsty tyrant, god as self-centered egomaniac, etc.), I would proceed to tell them I do not believe in that god either. And from there I would go on to show them what the true God is like by contrast. Not that I think I'd convert them – but I do think this is a good way to start conversations with atheists in our culture.

We should not reverse the Trinity-humanity relationship. Sometimes we use analogies to explain the Trinity, like God as family, God as band, God as society. But it is important to note that our various forms of human community are the copies of which God is the original, not the other way around (cf. Eph. 3:14). God is the archetypes; the created analogy is the ectype.

In the future, I would like to address the way the Trinity bears upon male/female relationships (especially marriage), politics/society, work, and so on. One area I wanted to develop in the sermon, but simply ran out of time, is the way the Trinity should shape church life. In brief, here are some thoughts:

Church life should be modeled on the unity and diversity of the Trinity. Paul says there is one body, but many members; one Spirit, but diverse gifts; like the three persons, we are several, but we share a common life. I think TPC is an appropriately diverse body – not that we couldn't grow in that diversity, but we

are by no means a homogenous church. In fact, we lack the very “affinity groups” that often serve as catalysts to church growth (as any church growth guru would tell you!). But our diversity has had a sanctifying, maturing effect, as we have had to negotiate a number of thorny issues in a way that preserves peace and does justice to a number of perspectives and backgrounds.

To say the church is a Trinity-shaped community does not give us the right to be annoying busybodies or meddlesome intruders in one another’s lives. But it does give us the obligation to care for another as family.

The NT makes it clear we enter this family in baptism in the Triune name. Indeed, the baptismal formula in Matthew 28 is the single most explicit Trinitarian statement in the whole Bible. Baptism is so crucial because it is the objective sign to ourselves (and others) that these things are true for us, that we belong to God and he belongs to us. In baptism, we come to own the gospel and the Trinity for ourselves in a special way.

What does baptism do? A baptized person has a relationship with the Father, Son, and Spirit, and should seek to cultivate his relationship with each person of the Trinity. (See e.g., Smail, ch. 5, as well as John Owen on communion with God for some thoughts on cultivating these specific relationships. Paul always describes the Christian life in Trinitarian categories – see, e.g., Thomas Weinandy’s *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship*.) Baptism make you a new you. In baptism, you become a new person. This is because baptism is the rite by which Father, Son, and Spirit claim you as their own. Your destiny is no longer tied absolutely to your biological origin, your national citizenship, or your family history. (And this is truly liberating – some people need to be rescued from those identities because in their case they are so oppressive!!) Baptism is the watery tomb of the old man and the watery womb of the new man. In baptism we are brought into a new family – the Triune family! We are brought into a new network of relationships, which means we have a new identity. As the BCP prayer says about the one having been baptized, “may you live your whole life according to the good beginning made in baptism.” Not everyone does that – but that’s the prayer we should make!

The whole Christian life is a participation in the life of the Trinity. In union with Jesus, we have all the same privileges and rights that he does. By the Spirit, we have the same access to the Father as Jesus (cf. Eph. 2:18). We were once orphans, but have been made heirs of God in Christ and through the Spirit. Life in the church is privileged life, indeed! Membership has its privileges!

There are other academic matters of the Trinity that would be wonderful to take up, e.g., perichoresis, differences between Eastern and Western doctrines of the Trinity, the Trinity and covenant, the Trinity and creation, the Trinity and deification, etc. But these matters will have to wait for another time (although if you would like to read up on them, I can provide you with extensive bibliography).