

The Trinity is not a Math Problem

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All Christians profess belief in the doctrine of the Trinity. However, not only do few understand the doctrine, few even *expect to* understand it. As many a perplexed, priest, parent and catechist has solemnly intoned, “after all, it is a *mystery!*” But you know, it really *isn't* a mystery. God is the one, truly incomprehensible Mystery. Church doctrine is supposed to help illuminate, in an imperfect way, something vital, something fundamentally “true” about that God who is Mystery. So when we dismiss any doctrine as a mystery, but particularly one as central as the Trinity, we are in effect robbing ourselves of an important opportunity to deepen our understanding of who this God is who comes to us as Word and Spirit. And yet, for so many, the human and social implications of this doctrine are lost behind a haze of speculation far removed from the daily lives of believers.

The doctrine of the Trinity has been neglected for so long in Christian life because in popular thought it has been viewed as an insoluble math or logic problem: how is it that $3=1$? In response, well meaning Christians have developed ingenious ways to explain how God might be three and one at the same time. Many are familiar with the example of the shamrock, but some prefer to use the apple which, while being one piece of fruit, has skin, meat and seed. Those with a science background might propose the three states of H_2O . Yet all of these images are concerned with the “numbers problem” and therefore use static images for God. Underlying all of these images is the dominant

understanding of the trinity as, in the words of one theologian, “two men and a bird” residing in heaven.

What we need is a more dynamic perspective that imagines God not as an individual, or three individuals bound together in some way, but rather as a pulsing divine movement toward us in love. Love is the key. We Christians believe that God does not just *have* a love relationship with us, God *is* loving relationship. The First Letter of John puts it well: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, *for God is love.*” Perhaps we would do better to use images that suggest God’s threefoldness as a movement toward us in love. Let me offer two related images.

In traditional trinitarian doctrine we speak of the three divine persons, as God (the Father), Word and Spirit. This suggests that one way to understand the Trinity is to understand God’s being as an eternal movement of self-communication. God wishes to communicate to us, not merely information about God’s self, but God’s very being. When you and I try to communicate ourselves to others, we use words also, but we often have a sense that our words limp, they fall short of the reality. We may wish to profess our love for someone but find that our words do not say all that we want to communicate. However, when God wishes to communicate God’s love, God utters a Word which is perfect and complete. So God speaks a perfect Word, a perfect expression of all that God is. That eternal Word of love has been spoken since the beginning of history in creation itself, through the law and prophets, and, in the fullness of time, as Jesus of Nazareth.

Let us reflect on this further. When we humans speak words to one another, it is our breath that bears those words to another. We could not speak if we had no breath.

Turning to God's communication to us, it is worth recalling that the Hebrew word for spirit, is *ruah*, which literally means "breath." When God speaks God's eternal Word of love to us, it is borne to us by God's "holy breath" or Spirit. Yet the Spirit not only brings God's Word to us, the Spirit also is God at work in our hearts allowing us to receive that Word. This is brought out in a second image.

Some medieval mystics spoke of the Holy Spirit as a kind of spiritual "midwife." Let us consider for a moment the role of the midwife. Long before there were maternity wards and "birthing suites" there were specially trained women who would come into the home and assist in the labor process. The midwife played a vital role, and yet she well understood that she was not at the center of the labor process; the child was. She would help bring the child into the world and then recede into the background as the parents focused all of their attention on the child. In a like manner, the Spirit is a midwife to the Word of God, bringing to birth the love of Christ in our hearts without calling attention to itself.

Note that both of these images are dynamic; they describe the triune life of God as an action or movement: God *communicating* God's self to us by the power of the Spirit as an eternal Word of love and God's Word being *born anew* in our hearts through the "midwifery" of the Spirit. Far from being a math problem, the doctrine of the Trinity helps us understand the eternal shape and movement of Divine Love. Therein lies the heart of the Trinity: When we abide in Love, we abide in God.

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