



The Trinity For The Rest Of Us

Many churches recently observed Trinity Sunday.

Perhaps most Canadian Christians were unaware. Vancouver theologian J.I. Packer put it very well some time back: "It is often assumed that the doctrine of the Trinity, just because it is mysterious, is a piece of theological lumber that we can get along without."

Even theology texts tell us the assertion of God's oneness along with his three-ness "bristles with difficulties." In fact, it took Christian thinkers almost three centuries to get a handle on what even the Bible admits is "the mystery of godliness" (1 Timothy 3:16)

But if the Christian teaching on the trinity is a mystery it is a revealed mystery. We cannot escape the biblical witness that while God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4), Christians are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19-20).

The great 20th Century defender of the faith, C.S. Lewis, sheds some light here. "If Christianity was something we were making up, of course we could make it easier...we are dealing with Fact....anyone can be simple if he does not have any facts to bother about."

For starters, the Trinity makes the Christian religion unique. Think of the awful concepts of God that men have evolved. They range from scary wolf-headed deities in ancient Egypt or God as a solitary isolated monad, not unlike Rodin's statue of the Thinker—aloof, detached, uncaring.

The Trinity undermines these false concepts by revealing lively and productive relationships inside the Godhead. God exists, yes, but as Father and Son living together in loving and mutual harmony. Add the Holy Spirit to that equation and we have a life-giving, out-flowing connection inside the Godhead essential for our salvation and one in which we humans are invited to join (John 17:20-24). Few pagans could conceive such a thing but some far-seeing Greeks came close when they wrote of a God "in whom we live, move and have our being (Acts 17:28)."

Understand now why the earliest terms employed to explain the Trinity come back to Greek descriptors. The canny Greeks articulated entities that could be distinct and yet unified, together and yet separate. This seems paradoxical, but Nature (we are learning) thrives on paradoxes—from matter being so much empty space (!), to light existing as both a wave and a particle and down to everyday household salt composed of two killer substances.

The mystical language employed by John the apostle "I in them and you in me" (John 17:23), only makes sense in light of a concept of God outside our traditional ideas of concrete space and time (for God is outside both). He even eludes human analogies of Father and Son.

Darrell Johnson of Regent College explains that this is all pretty tremendous, it means that "at the center of the universe there is intimacy, a deep abiding tender affection." And even more, a self-sacrificing love that circles back again to the simplest Biblical definition of what God is like—"God is love," (1 John 4:8).

Jesus obeyed his Father to the death and triumphed through the power of the Spirit (Romans 1:3-4). Here is a threefold working of God powerfully relevant to our salvation and illustrated at work in Matthew 3:16-17.

The Trinity touches on the true God's superabundant fullness of love, a teaching so foreign to the gods of the ancients, the monads of the other religions and the vague diffuse force of the New Ageds.

The Trinity—where would we be without it?

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