

What Is the Trinity?
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For many people, the idea that God is three and one is the strangest thing Christians believe. Almost everyone wonders what it means. Some question its value. Others find it ridiculous. For Jews and Muslims, the idea of the Trinity is incompatible with true monotheism. For many Christians, the doctrine is simply part of the inherited tradition. They were told it was something they should believe, but never expect to understand. The more inventive view the triune godhead as a mathematical conundrum, and try to explain how something can be both three and one by invoking analogies like a triangle, which has three sides, or water, which retains the same molecular composition in three different states—as a solid, a liquid, and a gas. For many theologians, the concept of the trinity represents an embarrassing vestige of Hellenistic Christianity, whose framers lost the simple teachings of Jesus when they tried to express them in the thought-forms of late antiquity.

So, what *does* the “Trinity” represent? Is it a mathematical puzzle? A pagan belief that there are three gods instead of one? Or just another example of philosophy making simple ideas hard for us to understand?

The answer is “none of the above.” Like all important doctrines, the Trinity expresses a fundamental Christian conviction. And like all important doctrines the Trinity has a history, in this case a rather long and complicated history. The doctrine that God is three in one is one of the most important achievements of early Christianity. It developed in reaction to tendencies that would have fatally compromised the structure of Christian faith had they prevailed. (It is often said that heresy is the mother of orthodoxy, and this is nowhere more evident than in the development of this central article of the faith.) Before turning to these more distant developments, however, we should note that it took Seventh-day Adventists quite a while to embrace the doctrine, to the extent that they generally do.¹

¹ It would take a paper at least as long as this one to sort through the various pronominal candidates for divine reference, noting their respective pro's and con's. I am bowing to convention in using the masculine, not because I believe that God is male rather than female, but because the alternatives all seem to create as

Adventists and the Trinity

The view of God as Trinity emerged within Adventism through a process of gradual evolution. Even though it never crystallized as an “issue” that led to extensive discussion or precipitated official action, we find striking differences between the views of early Adventists and the church’s current thinking. As George R. Knight observes, so removed is the church’s position now from what it was at the beginning that “[m]ost of the founders of Seventh-day Adventism would not be able to join the church today if they had to subscribe to the denomination’s Fundamental Beliefs.”² Important early Adventists directly opposed the idea of the Trinity. For Joseph Bates it was unscriptural, for James White it was an “absurdity,” and for M. E. Cornell it was a fruit of the great apostasy that also included Sunday keeping and the immortality of the soul.³ In fact, C. Mervyn Maxwell concludes that early Adventists were “about as uniform in opposing Trinitarianism as they were in advocating belief in the Second Coming.”⁴

In contrast, Seventh-day Adventist thinkers today are as uniformly supportive of the idea. They use explicitly Trinitarian language to talk about God and they interpret the concept of Trinity with care and subtlety. For example: in an *Adventist Review* article entitled “The Mystery of the Trinity: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” Raoul Dederen, professor *emeritus* of theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, defends the doctrine of the Trinity as biblically based, even though, as he notes, the word itself is not found in Scripture. He also rejects all tritheistic or modalistic conceptions of God and urges us to respect the essential mystery of God’s triune re-

many problems as they solve. I employ the appellations, Father, Son, Spirit, however, not as a matter of convention, but in the attempt to remain faithful to the name of God that is central to Christian revelation.

²George R. Knight, “Adventists and Change,” *Ministry* (Oct. 1993): 11.

³Knight, 11. Knight cites Joseph Bates, *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Bates* (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Assn. 1868) 20-5; James White, “The Faith of Jesus,” *Review and Herald* (Aug. 5, 1852): 52; M. E. Comell, *Facts for the Times* (Battle Creek, MI: Comell 1858) 76. Knight also mentions two scholarly examinations of early Adventist anti-trinitarianism by SDA graduate students: Erwin R. Gane, “The Arian or Anti-Trinitarian Views Presented in Seventh-day Adventist Literature and the Ellen G. White Answer (MA thesis, Andrews U 1963), and Russell Holt, “The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination: Its Rejection and Acceptance” (term paper, Andrews University, 1969).

⁴“Sanctuary and Atonement in SDA Theology: An Historical Survey,” *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Theological Studies*, ed. Arnold V. Wallenkampf and W. Richard Leshner, (Washington, DC: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1981) 530; qtd. Bull and Lockart 56.

ality.⁵ The widely circulated commentary on the church's 1980 Statement of Fundamental Beliefs is equally explicit in affirming the Trinity and it, too, explores the meaning of the idea, albeit briefly. The Godhead comprises a relationship of love that comes to expression in the work of salvation, and most clearly at the cross of Christ. The Trinitarian differentiations within God correspond to the various saving activities of God.⁶

Most recently, a trio (!) of Andrews University scholars presents a strong case for the Trinity, arguing that the doctrine is biblically sound and asserting that it “forms the essential basis for the very heart of what is unique to Christianity,” namely, “the greatest of all biblical notions—God is love.”⁷

When and how did these transformation take place? I'm not sure we can tell. The earliest version of the Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists (1932) describes “the Godhead, or Trinity,” as consisting of “the Eternal Father,” “the Lord Jesus Christ,” and “the Holy Spirit.” The 1980 revision of the Statement curiously omits the word *Trinity*, but clearly affirms and further develops the idea. Belief 2 asserts, “There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit a unity of three co-eternal Persons,” and Beliefs 3, 4, and 5 deal, respectively, with “God the Eternal Father,” “God the Eternal Son,” and “God the eternal Spirit.”⁸

One of the church's most significant liturgical sources also points to a doctrinal transition over the years. Looking at the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* of 1985 alongside the

⁵Raoul Dederen, “The Mystery of the Trinity: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” *Adventist Review* (Aug. 26, 1993): 8-11.

⁶[P. Gerard Damsteegt *et al.*,] *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Twenty-Seven Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, DC: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1988) 17-25.

⁷Woodrow W. Whidden, Jerry A. Moon, and John Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding Gods' Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Review and Herald: 2002), 279. “The essential nature of Their divine unity is one of dynamic creative outflowing and self-sacrificing love” (278).

⁸In spite of the solid and growing support the understanding of God as Trinity has received from the church's official doctrinal statements and publications over the years, there have been rumblings of opposition along the way. In a 1968 paper discussing hermeneutical principles in the E. G. White writings, Arthur L. White, then Secretary of the Ellen G. White Estate, notes that Ellen White never employs the term *Trinity* and asserts that our denominational forefathers were consistently averse to the doctrine as defined in the church creeds. (They saw it as spiritualizing away both Jesus Christ and God.) He argues that Ellen White's early descriptions of God the Father and Son in heaven as having physical forms—the ones we cited above—should be taken literally and provide a lasting safeguard against the threat of spiritualizing the divine reality (Arthur L. White, *The Ellen G. White Writings* (Review and Herald, 1973], 156-61). So, the emerging Trinitarian consensus among Adventists has not been unanimous.

1949 *Church Hymnal* it replaced, we surmise that there were reservations among Adventists about the concept of the Trinity in the late '40s but that these reservations were largely overcome within the next three decades. The 1949 publication altered a number of familiar Christian hymns in order to remove their Trinitarian references. The 1985 publication restored the Trinitarian references to these hymns. Thus, the closing line of “Holy, Holy, Holy” in the 1949 hymnal—“God over all who rules eternity”—becomes in the 1985 hymnal “God in three persons, blessed Trinity!” The 1949 version of “Come Thou, Almighty King” deletes a stanza that begins with the words “To Thee, great One in Three, Eternal praises be.” The 1985 version restores that stanza. The 1985 publication also adds no fewer than ten new hymns containing straightforward Trinitarian language. Consequently, we can now sing the following lines: “Praise the Father, praise the Son, and praise the Spirit, three in One” (in hymn 2); “Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, three we name You” (in hymn 30); “The Trinity whom we adore, forever and forever more” (in hymn 148).

It is clear from all this that the SDA understanding of God has developed significantly over the years. Granted, our move toward Trinitarian orthodoxy has been gradual rather than abrupt, and subtle rather than dramatic. But it is a genuine and profoundly important change, nonetheless. It has brought our understanding of God into harmony with some of the earliest Christian thinkers. And it places us squarely within the circumference of orthodox Christianity. Our doctrine of God distinguishes us from other religious movements that originated about the same time Seventh-day Adventism arose and to which we are often compared. Unlike Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons and Christian Scientists, Seventh-day Adventists accept the view of God adhered to by the dominant stream of Christian tradition. However other doctrinal concerns may distinguish us from Christians generally, our doctrine of God shows that we are distinctive within rather than apart from Christianity at large.

The Trinity and the Christian concept of God.

In spite of its time-honored standing among Christians, not all who accepted the Trinity were very fond of it. For Emil Brunner, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity “did not form part of the early Christian—New Testament—message, nor has it ever been a central article of faith in the religious life of the Christian church as whole, at any period in

its history.” Consequently, says Brunner, “the ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity is not a biblical kerygma, not the kerygma of the church, but . . . a theological doctrine which defends the central faith of the Bible and of the Church.”⁹ In other words, Brunner seems to say, the doctrine serves an important defensive purpose, but it does not belong to the heart and soul of Christian faith.

In recent years, however, this attitude has given way to remarkable enthusiasm. Since the appearance of Karl Rahner’s slim volume on the Trinity in 1970 there has been a virtual flowering of interest in the topic. For theologians today the Trinity has significance for virtually every aspect of Christian faith—doctrinal, liturgical, ethical and spiritual.¹⁰

One of the most important features of recent Trinitarian thinkers is the way they connect God’s acts and God’s identity. As they see it, God’s acts in salvation history not only reveal God’s identity. They determine God identity. They determine what it means to be God. In other words, God’s acts not only disclose God’s reality, God’s acts are constitutive of God’s reality.

To appreciate the importance of this idea, we need to take a look at the history of the doctrine. Everyone knows that Christianity emerged from the encounter between biblical religion and the thought-world of late antiquity. But not everyone understands the nature of this interaction. Many believe that the truths of the gospel were seriously distorted when early Christians tried to express it in Greek terms and concepts. So, what we have in the doctrines of the early church represent a confusion of Greek and Hebrew ideas that unnecessarily complicated the simple truths of the Gospel. A number also feel that the doctrinal positions that developed during the early Christian centuries represented those in positions of power. In order to preserve their status and privilege, religious and secular leaders imposed their views on the church and condemned and persecuted those who held other convictions. From this perspective, the history of doctrinal development is the story of political force in ecclesiastical form.

⁹ *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (Westminster, 1941), 205, 206.

¹⁰ One of the most important contributors to recent thought about the Trinity is Robert W. Jenson. Jenson develops his views on the Trinity primarily in two major projects, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Fortress, 1982), and the two volumes of his *Systematic Theology* (2 vols.; Oxford, 1997-99), which are respectively entitled, “The Triune God” and “The Works of God.”

But there is a very different way to read that history. Instead of fusing the Gospel with Greek culture, a number of scholars believe, early Christian thinkers did exactly the opposite. They deliberately refused to mingle Greek and biblical ideas, and the doctrine of the Trinity is the fruit of their efforts. From this perspective, the doctrine of the Trinitarian view of God is not the *product* of Hellenic influence on Christianity, it is the product of *resisting* Hellenic influence.¹¹

The doctrine of the Trinity developed in reaction to two influential streams of thought: Gnosticism (3rd century) and Arianism (4th century). Both made a radical separation between God and the creaturely world and both presupposed the Hellenic depreciation of time. At its heart, Greek religion was a quest for something that could resist the flow of time, for an aspect of reality impervious to change. The gods' one defining characteristic was therefore immortality, immunity to destruction, and the true object of Greek religion was Timelessness as such. (Think of Zeus conquering Chronos.) Biblical thought could not have been more different. The Greeks insisted that divinity wasn't involved in time; the Hebrews insisted that it was. And instead of conceiving of eternity as abstraction from time, they viewed God's eternity as faithfulness through time.¹²

The Greek vision of things had a profound effect on early Christology. Christians who made the Hellenistic assumption that the divine is impervious to time were left with an enormous gap between God and the world, and this space is where they located Christ. Consequently, the Son, the logos, is inferior to God, an originated being, though nevertheless "God of a sort."¹³ Arius was motivated by the late Hellenistic need to escape time. Because he accepted Origen's concept that God is unoriginated and devoid of internal differentiation, Arius concluded that "the Son is not unoriginated, nor is he in any part of the Unoriginated." Accordingly, "There was once when he [the Logos] was not." And because Christ is involved with time he cannot really be God. The Logos may be God for *us*, but it cannot be God in himself.¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. *The Triune Identity*, 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59, 58.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

Trinitarian thought rejected the ideas that God is timeless and that the logos must be inferior to God. Instead, it affirmed that Christ is fully divine and that God is intimately connected to temporal, creaturely reality. As expressed by Athanasius and confirmed by the council of Nicea, God is inherently relational. The Father-Son relation is internal to God's being. And since God is God precisely in his relatedness, it is the Trinity as such, not the Father as such, who is God. Later in the 4th century, the Cappadocian fathers solidified God's relationality by eliminating subordinationism. Instead of placing the Son below the Father, they placed the two horizontally within the divine reality. In this way Father and Son could be one God without ranking them ontologically.¹⁵

More of this would take us too deeply into the intricacies of Trinitarian reflection than we can afford to go here, but the central point is clear. God is inherently relational. The expression, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," names the one God and identifies him as having deity in a complex and interactive way.¹⁶ Furthermore, the implications of this concept of God for our salvation are profound. For as God is thus conceived, there is no distance between him and us that needs to be overcome. "Each of the Trinitarian relations is an affirmation that as God works creatively among us, so he is in himself."¹⁷ God did not send another to save us. To the contrary, salvation is God's very own work.

This picture of God is both relational and temporal. Salvation history manifests the whole divine reality, all of which is involved in each great act. Unlike the Greek view that God's self-identity is immune to all outside influence, leaving him changeless and impassible, the Trinity imputes change, dynamism to God. Since God is something that happens to us, God himself is an event.¹⁸

If this is really what the Trinity is about, then why all the confusion that surrounds the doctrine? Because virtually all of the insights of the Eastern fathers were lost when the Trinity came to the West. Confused by their terminology, Western theologians employed what they thought were Latin equivalents (but weren't) in a way that not only obscured but distorted the Cappadocians' intent. And they set Western thought on a course that

¹⁵ Ibid., 89-90.

¹⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹⁷ Ibid., 107.

¹⁸ Ibid., 112.

renders the Trinity at best incomprehensible and at worst a distortion of the biblical portrait of God.

The central culprit in this story was Augustine, who attributed to God the very characteristics of Greek ontology that the Cappadocians sought to overcome. They wanted to show that God is inherently related to his temporal creation; Augustine wanted to show what God is in himself, apart from creation. For the Cappadocians, God is complex: it is precisely the togetherness of the identities that constitutes God. But for Augustine, God is simple; each identity possesses an abstract divine essence in exactly the same way, so the distinctions among them are lost.¹⁹ The Nicenes called the Trinity God *because* of the triune relations and differences; Augustine calls the Trinity God *in spite* of them.²⁰

With these moves, Augustine severed the Trinity from its anchor in salvation history and cast it adrift on a sea of philosophical speculation. When you think of God, Augustine maintains, you think “a greatest and highest substance that transcends all changeable creatures.... And so if I ask, ‘Is God changeable or unchangeable?’ you will quickly respond.... ‘God is changeless.’” Here is the essential distinction between creatures and God: “speak of the changes of things, and you find ‘was’ and ‘will be’; think God, and you find ‘is’ where ‘was’ and ‘will be’ cannot enter.” God not only does not change, he cannot; just so, “he is rightly said *to be*.” God, in other words, is being itself, “he who is.”²¹ Thus conceived, God is timeless and impassible, untouched and untouchable by the temporal world.

But let us return to our central point. Only salvation history gives meaning to the Trinitarian language of persons and relations. And if the mighty acts of God are constitutive of divine reality, we must conceive of God as inherently and essentially temporal. With this, the entire sweep of philosophical theism that insists on divine simplicity, impassibility, and timelessness gives way. Because the name “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” derives its meaning from God’s reality in time, the relations that constitute God are “either *temporal* relations or empty verbiage.”²²

¹⁹ Ibid., 119-120.

²⁰ Ibid., 118.

²¹ Ibid., 117-118.

²² *The Triune Identity*, 125-26 (emphasis his).

Among the many theologians who have contributed to the recent revival of Trinitarian thought, Karl Rahner is the author of its most famous statement. His assertion, “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity,” is a virtual mantra for Trinitarian thinkers.²³ But the most influential of all of them may be Karl Barth, whose exploration of the biblical portrait of God leads to sonorous declarations like these: God “is amongst us in humility, our God, God for us, as that which He is in Himself, in the most inward depth of His Godhead. . . . In the condescension in which He gives Himself to us in Jesus Christ He exists and speaks and acts as the One He was from all eternity and will be to all eternity.”²⁴

Similarly, for Wolfhart Pannenberg, God's actions in salvation history reveal that God's inner reality consists of “concrete life relations.”²⁵ Consequently, the Trinity is not derived from God's essence, the Trinity *is* God's essence. So, we never get behind the Trinity to something more basic or original. If God is truly love, there are relations in the very depths of God's being. God's fundamental reality is Father, Son and Spirit.²⁶

The Trinity: A simple statement of its meaning.

If all these heavy concepts are a bit off-putting, let us try to state the central insight of the Trinity as clearly and simply as possible. Early Christians developed the doctrine of the Trinity because they recognized that an affirmation of God's complex unity was the only adequate way to safeguard the central claim of Christian faith, “God was in Christ.”

Behind all their attempts to find adequate language for God lay one basic conviction—God is above all a God of love. Whatever God's other attributes—power, knowledge, immensity, eternity, etc.—love is the central, defining quality of God's being. Love is what makes God God.

Christians did not come to this conclusion through abstract thought, of course. It was their response to a specific historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth. In the life and death of

²³ *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (Herder & Herder, 1970), 22.

²⁴ *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley and Thomas Torrance [T. & T. Clark, 1956], IV/1,193.

²⁵ *Systematic Theology*, Volumes 1-3, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1991-1998), 1:335, 323.

²⁶ Although God's identity finds expression in his relation to the world, for Jenson God's identity does not depend on the world. God in himself, he asserts, could have been the same God he is had there been no creation, and no Trinitarian history (*The Triune Identity*, 139). Indeed, God could have been triune in some other way, even though we cannot imagine how (*Ibid.*, 141).

Jesus, they came to see, God's love took concrete personal form. Here as nowhere else in the universe, God showed us what he is. In the way Jesus treated people, in his willingness to forgive sinners, in his affirmation of the poor, the sick and the outcast, in his fellowship with human beings from every nation, race and walk of life, he demonstrated that God's character is one of infinite love. In fact, so powerful was Jesus' display of God's love that his followers found it natural to speak of him in language that was appropriate only of God himself. So, the conviction formed that Jesus was not simply a messenger from God, a manifestation of God, but truly God in human form. He was nothing less than "God with us."

The coming of the Spirit to Jesus' early followers at Pentecost was also crucial to their understanding of God. It was powerful evidence that Jesus was still at work in the world, still personally present to his followers, sustaining and guiding his people and seeking the salvation of all humankind. These two events, the coming of the Son and the Spirit, produced the conviction that God is at once the creative power that sustains us (along with everything else), a personal, historical presence among us, and a transforming, sanctifying power within us—in other words, that God is "Father, Son and Spirit."

The doctrine of the Trinity draws another conclusion from the history of salvation. It holds that God's saving work is a revelation of God's inner reality. God is in himself exactly what he has revealed himself to us to be. Therefore, God has always existed as Father, Son and Spirit. Accordingly, the threefold manifestation of God is not a temporary expedient, not a passing affectation. It shows what God has always been through all eternity.

Why does the concept of divine love lead to this conclusion? Because love never misrepresents itself. It always tells the truth. We have all met people who seemed thoughtful and generous at first but turned out to be selfish and inconsiderate when you got to know them. And, happily, we have all met people who seemed thoughtful and considerate and turned out to be exactly that way all the time. First impressions are sometimes correct. People are sometimes exactly what they seem to be. In a nutshell, that's what the Trinity says about God. The love we see in the history of salvation, in the life and death of Jesus, and in the sending of the Spirit, shows us what God is really like. It is a trustworthy portrait of God's very identity.

So, while the word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible, the idea is deeply imbedded in biblical thought. Jesus exclaimed, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus brings to expression the inner reality of God. That’s what the doctrine of the Trinity means.

Question: why didn’t early Adventists accept the doctrine?

There are probably several reasons why Adventists were slow to accept the doctrine of the Trinity. One is the fact that the word does not appear in the Bible. The doctrine developed in the post-biblical period, and early Adventists wanted to stay as close as possible to the thoughts and language of the Bible itself. Another is the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity developed during a period of church history when a lot of other ideas came into the church that Adventists have always opposed. These include the immortality of the soul, papal primacy, the veneration of saints and the change from sabbath to Sunday. Why would Adventists want to accept anything that was part of that package?

On the other hand, while we reject a good deal that many Christians came to hold during that time, there are other developments that we accept. One is the belief that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Granted, it took a while for Adventists to reach that position, but eventually they did so, and Adventists are orthodox Christians in that respect. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that the Christian canon developed during this same period of time. This list of New Testament documents just as we have it appeared for the first time toward the end of the 4th century. And Adventists have always insisted that the Bible is the final rule of faith and practice. To stand on the Bible, then, is to accept the judgment of the early church as to which documents carry the highest authority.

Something else to consider is the fact that Adventists have always had to make distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable convictions on the part of people we generally admire. The Protestant Reformers, for example, in spite of their invaluable recovery of the principle of salvation by faith, did not embrace the sabbath. Nor for the most part did they see the importance of separating church and state.

So, the doctrinal and ecclesiastical developments of the early church do not present us with a cluster of ideas and practices that are so tightly connected that it is impossible to

separate them. Here as always we should follow the apostolic injunction, “test all things; hold fast what is good” (1Th 5:21). The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the good things we need to embrace.

The trinity and the origin of the church

A trinitarian understanding of God has important implications for the entire range of Christian beliefs, but its connection to the doctrine of the church is particularly significant. It was the experience of God within the community of faith that gave rise to the trinitarian understanding of God. And a trinitarian understanding of God illuminates the origin and the nature of the church. It also has important implications for the practical life of the Christian community.

If God’s acts in salvation history express the true nature of God, the inner reality of God, then God has always been relational, from all eternity an everlasting community of love, and this has tremendous practical implications. It means that God creates out of love, he embraces the created world within the divine life, and from the moment of its existence, God made his relation to the world the center of his concern, not unlike the way a beloved child becomes the center of a home from the moment of its birth. God values the world he loves so much that he even takes his identity from his relation to it. (God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.) Moreover, God’s commitment to creation is permanent. He risks his own contentment—if not his own life—for its welfare.

If this is so, then salvation involves participating in the fellowship that defines God’s own life. Consequently, the experience of salvation is social as well as individual. It has horizontal as well as vertical dimensions. It involves a change in our relation to others as well as to God.

This also means that the purpose of the church is to reflect and project the care and concern for others that God shows, that God is. To the extent that the church, the Christian community embodies the love that radiates within the life of God, it provides the world the clearest manifestation of God’s nature and character, *and* the clearest evidence of God’s reality, evidence that is stronger than any philosophical argument could ever be.

This suggests that the cultivation of true community, the development of caring relationships among people in the church, is the most important work of the ministry.

According to an ancient formula, all of God is involved in the activity of each member of the trinity. And it is evident that God works through both the Son and the Spirit to bring the church into existence. In the words of a familiar hymn, the church has one foundation, Jesus Christ the Lord. And as Martin Luther asserted, “It is the proper work of the Holy Spirit, to make the church.”²⁷ This joint activity is sometimes described as “two divine missions”—the sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit. And these two missions are closely related.²⁸

The Spirit’s role in the events of the early church is well known. The book of Acts begins with the promise of the Spirit’s coming (1.5,8). Soon after, Pentecost empowered the early believers, enabling them to speak in other tongues and “proclaim the word of God with boldness” (1.32). Time and again Acts describes Christians as being “filled with the Holy Spirit” (2.4, 7.55, 31.52). The Holy Spirit directs Christians to travel and preach, the Holy Spirit fell on Gentile believers, the Holy Spirit convinced the leaders of the church what sort of obligations Gentiles should assume when they joined the Christian community. Ac 15.28. The sheer number of references suggests that the central character in the book is actually the Holy Spirit, rather than the apostles and the others who followed Jesus.

Although we think of the Holy Spirit as descending on Jesus’ followers after his earthly ministry was over, the Spirit’s activity in the early church was really a continuation of the Spirit’s activity in Jesus’ life. Indeed, the overall purpose of Luke and Acts (or Luke-Acts, if we think of them as parts of a single work) may well be to show that the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of early Christians is really an extension of the Holy Spirit’s work within the life of Jesus himself.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit binds Christ’s followers to him with ties that can never be broken. He lives in them (“Christ in you”); they live in him (“the life I now live I live by

²⁷ Quoted in Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*. (2 vols.; Oxford University Press, 1997-1999), 2:197.

²⁸ In the words of Karl Rahner, “The two missions may be understood as interconnected moments of the one self-communication of God to the world” (in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner [Seabury Press, 1975], 1760).

Christ”), and because of its connection to Christ’s ministry in the world the Holy Spirit receives a new identity. It is now the “spirit of Christ.” We can see these interconnecting ideas at work in the following passage: “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” Rom 8.9-10. As one biblical scholar puts it, “abiding in Christ ... is also abiding in the Spirit, or the abiding of Christ in us is also the abiding of the Spirit.”²⁹

The close connections among God the Father, the Son and the Spirit are evident in other passages, too. According to both Paul and John, the sending of the Spirit parallels the sending of the Son. And in John, sending the Spirit is attributed to both the Father and the Son.

But when the fullness of time had come, God *sent* his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has *sent* the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. Gal 4:4-7.

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the *Father* will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. John 14:26. (Cf. "When the Advocate comes, whom *I* will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf." John 15:26.)

The designations of those who send, “God,” “the Father,” and “Christ,” and of the ones who are sent, the “Son” and “the Spirit,” indicate that all of God—Father, Son and Spirit—is involved in salvation history. The community created by the Holy Spirit as the continuation of Christ’s mission to the world thus owes its existence to the salvific activity of the triune God.

The conviction that the founding events of the church, the missions of the Son and the Spirit, are manifestations of God’s own life leads to dramatic insights into the nature of the church. The close connection between the Christian community and the life of God becomes apparent in the “farewell discourses” of the fourth Gospel and in 1 John.

The various statements about love in these documents seem to follow a “fugal” pattern. They keep moving among the following themes, connecting them in more and more

²⁹ Eduard Schweizer, *pneuma, pneumatikos*, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (10 vols.; Eerdmans, 1964-76), 6:433.

complex relations: the love that church members have for each other; their love for God and God's love for them; and the love that unites God himself, namely, the love between the Father and the Son.

First of all, the distinctive quality of life within the Christian community is that of love. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Jn 13:35. Love is the essential feature that sets Jesus' followers apart from other human groups. Consequently; those who think they are part of the community and don't love each other are deceiving themselves. "[A]ll who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters." 1Jn 3:10. On the positive side, "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another." 1 Jn 3:14.

Second, it is not love per se, or just any sort of affection that identifies Jesus' followers. It is the specific love that Jesus has for them that sets the standard for their love to one another. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Jn 13.34.³⁰ "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." 15:12-13. Jesus' followers should be prepared to love one another to the end, just as he "loved them to the end." Cf. Jn 13.1.

Third, Jesus' love for the disciples expresses the Father's own love for them. "[F]or the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." Jn 16:27. The Father's love flows through the Son into the Christian community.

Indeed, Jesus' statements about his relation to the Father and his relation to his followers indicate that Jesus wants his followers to enjoy the same relation to God that he enjoys. Just as the Father comes to the disciples in the person of Jesus, therefore, Jesus brings the disciples to the Father. "Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (Jn 14.21). "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." (Jn 14:23).

³⁰ Compare Paul's exhortation: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." Eph 5.1-2

The idea that Jesus' followers enjoy a relation to God very similar to his own appears in a number of passages. "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" wrote Paul, "it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." Rom 8.15-17. In the opening words of the Lord's Prayer, "our Father," Jesus invites his followers to adopt his own form of address to God, and Jesus instructed Mary to "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Jn 20:17. It is thus by virtue of their relation to Jesus that his followers enjoy a close relationship to God.

Fourth, the love that Jesus has for his followers reflects the love that he and the Father have for each other. For his followers present and future, Jesus prayed, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.... The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." Jn 17.20-23. The author of 1 John brings together fellowship with one another and fellowship with God this way: "that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." 1Jn 1:3. The divine love that creates Christian community thus manifests and extends the love that constitutes God's own life.

This line of thought leads to a dramatic conclusion. The central dynamic of the Christian community not only resembles the essential dynamic of God's own life; its members actually share in that life. The love that flows between Father and Son flows through the church. The idea that the church participates in God's life flows naturally from Jesus' parting words to his disciples. In the life and ministry of Jesus, and its continuation in the community he founded, we truly encounter "God with us."

For many who share this conviction, the essential link between Christian community and the life of God lies in the work of the Holy Spirit. For one thing, it is the Holy Spirit that makes the church a true community. As Robert Jenson says, "the church exists

as a community and not as a mere collective of pious individuals,” because the Spirit unites the head with the body of Christ.³¹

It is also the Spirit that gives the church its distinctive identity. Every community that is not just an aggregate has a “spirit” of some sort—we speak of “team spirit” and “school spirit,” for example. But in the case of the church, this corporate spirit comes, not from the people who belong to it, but from the Spirit that creates it. To quote Jenson again, it is the church’s “founding miracle” that her communal spirit is “identically the Spirit that the personal God is and has.”³²

Finally, as many interpreters see it, the Spirit’s role in the church bears a close resemblance to the Spirit’s role within the trinity. The Spirit creates community within God’s own life. As Jungel describes it, “the Father loves the Son, the Son returns this love, and the Holy Spirit is the love itself between them. So, the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son constitutes the unity of the divine being as that event which is love itself.”³³

Such descriptions of the relations within God suggest ways for us to envision the church’s role in the divine life. Through the Spirit, as Stanley Grenz describes it, those who are “in Christ” come to share the eternal relationship that the Son enjoys with the Father. Because participants in this new community are co-heirs with Christ, the Father bestows on them what he eternally lavishes on the Son. And because they are “in Christ” by the Spirit, they participate in the Son’s act of eternal response to the Father.³⁴

To summarize, the church owes its existence to God’s salvific activity and derives its essential character from God’s own identity. Through the sending of the Son and the Spirit God enters the world in order to create a community that reflects and extends the love that constitutes God’s own reality. The central dynamic of Christian community thus corresponds to the essential dynamic of God’s own life. And participating in the Christian

³¹ Jenson, 2:182.

³² Jenson, 2:181.

³³ Jungel, 374.

³⁴ Grenz, 326.

community is nothing less than a participation in God's own life. The Holy Spirit makes us one, the Holy Spirit makes God one, and the Holy Spirit makes us one with God.³⁵

Practical implications of a trinitarian ecclesiology

“So what?” questions are always important for theology, and in the case of the trinity they are more important than usual. It is tempting to dismiss reflections on the trinity as speculative intrusions into the nature of God, even though the church's earliest trinitarian thinkers anchored their understanding of God firmly in the history of salvation. What practical difference does a trinitarian ecclesiology make? Why is it so important to ground the church in God's own life?

First, of all, it emphasizes the importance of the church to God. If God's acts in salvation history express God's true nature, then God has always been relational, from all eternity an everlasting community of love. It means that God creates out of love, he embraces the created world within the divine life, and from the moment of its existence, God made his relation to the world the center of his concern, not unlike the way parents place a beloved child at the center of their home. God values the world he loves so much that he even takes his identity from his relation to it. (God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.) Moreover, God's commitment to creation is permanent. He risks his own contentment—if not his own life—for its welfare. All this means that God places immense value on the church. It is that aspect of creation that attracts his particular attention. As Ellen White says, the church is the object of God's “supreme regard.”³⁶

If this is so, then salvation involves participating in the fellowship that defines God's own life, and one does this by participating in the community that God's love established. The experience of salvation is therefore social as well as individual. It has a public as well as a private dimension. It changes our relations to others as well as to God. This exposes the fundamental inadequacy of all individualistic interpretations of Chris-

³⁵ Theologians sometimes debate the organization of the Apostle's Creed. Does it comprise three articles or four? Does belief in the “holy catholic church” elaborate or add to belief in the Holy Spirit? Our reflections suggest the former. The church is the creation of the Holy Spirit, and the creation of the church is the Spirit's most important work. To appreciate the importance of Christian community, we must recognize its basis within and its intimate connection to the dynamic reality of God's own life.

³⁶ *The Acts of the Apostles*, 12.

tian faith. Salvation is not merely, or even primarily, a matter between an individual and God. It involves relationships with other people. It seeks social, not merely personal transformation.

This also means that the purpose of the church is to reflect and project the care and concern for others that God shows, that God is. To the extent that the church, the Christian community, embodies the love that radiates within the life of God, it provides the world the clearest manifestation of God's nature and character, *and* the clearest evidence of God's reality, evidence that is stronger than philosophical arguments could ever be.

If this is true, then the cultivation of true community, the development of caring relationships among people in the church, is the most important work of the church's ministry. Church growth is not merely, or even primarily, a matter of increasing size. It is a matter of developing among the church's members relationships of mutual care and concern, encouraging the manifestation of qualities embodied in Jesus' life. As the members of the church exhibit these qualities, their display of Christ's character will naturally attract new participants.

These reflections also suggest that corporate worship is the central act of the church's life. The gathering of the community to remember God's acts of self-giving love, to recommit its members to embody that love in all their relationships, is emblematic of the church's entire existence. It celebrates, crystallizes, realizes everything the church involves.

An appreciation for the trinitarian basis of Christian community thus helps us avoid inadequate and misleading concepts of the church. The church is not an organization preoccupied with expanding its membership and its budget. The church is not a collection of individuals who assent to the same set of beliefs. The church is not a group of people who gather to meet their emotional needs. The church is not a meeting of intellectuals who enjoy tossing around ideas. The church is not a multilevel marketing program, social club, recovery group, or academic seminar. The church is a fellowship created by the Holy Spirit, a community which extends the mission of Christ in this world, drawing

its members into a circle of love that is both characteristic of and constitutive of God's own life.

WHAT THE TRINITY DOES (AND DOESN'T) SAY ABOUT GOD

How the Bible affirms God's threefold nature *The coming of the Son, the coming of the Spirit*

- God *sent* his Son ... so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has *sent* the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. Gal 4:4-7.
- But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the *Father* will send in my name John 14:26.
- When the Advocate comes, whom *I* will send to you John 15:26.

→ What the trinity tells us about salvation. *Salvation is God's very own work.*

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ... 2Cor 5:19

Why the trinity was/is so important *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*

- "What was at stake was whether Christianity should become either Paganism or Judaism, or whether it should remain Christianity. We cannot be sufficiently grateful that the Fathers of the Church saw this danger, and that they did all that lay in their power to avert it. Had Arius conquered, it would have been all over with the Christian church." (Emil Brunner)
- "The historical significance of the victory of proto-orthodox Christianity, can scarcely be overstated.... [I]f some other side had won. ... there would have been no doctrine of Christ as both fully divine and human. As a consequence, there would have been no doctrine of the Trinity." (Bart Ehrman)

Why the trinity is so hard to understand

From the Cappadocians to Augustine → from clarity to confusion

→ What the trinity tells us about God *God's saving activity is a manifestation of God's inner reality.*

- "As God works creatively among us, so is God in himself." (Robert Jenson)
- "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity." (Karl Rahner)
- God "is amongst us in humility, our God, God for us, as that which He is in Himself, in the most inward depth of His Godhead.... In the condescension in which He gives Himself to us in Jesus Christ He exists and speaks and acts as the One He was from all eternity and will be to all eternity." (Karl Barth)
- "For God it is just as natural to be lowly as it is to be high, to be near as it is to be far, to be little as it is to be great, to be abroad as to be at home." (Karl Barth)

What the trinity tells us about humanity *And the Word became flesh and lived among us*

- Our idea of the intrinsic worth of all persons, which underlies human rights, stems directly from the Christian ideal of the equality of all men and women in the eyes of God. (Jurgen Habermas)
- "No previous Western vision of the human being ... so fruitfully succeeded in embracing at once the entire range of finite human nature [and] the transcendent possibility and strange grandeur within each person." (D B Hart)

→ What the trinity tells us about the church *The Christian community shares in God's own life*

- "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Jn 13:35.
- "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Jn 13:34. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." 15:12-13.
- "[F]or the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." Jn 16:27. "Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (Jn 14:21). "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." (Jn 14:23).
- "that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." 1Jn 1:3.