
**THE TRINITY APPLIED:
CREATING SPACE FOR CHANGED LIVES**

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Abstract: This essay borrows from the practical insights of Dwight Zscheile's preceding article "The Trinity, Leadership, and Power." I will outline some of the possible applications of a trinitarian theology and argue that Zscheile's strong summary of trinitarian theology and its implications for the faith community creates a foundation for examining how the Triune God acts in the human community for life transformation.

Several of us were watching the planes come in to Las Vegas at midnight from the roof of the VooDoo Lounge. Author Jim Gilmore stood with about a dozen large church pastors discussing his concept of the *experience economy*, that people are looking for life-changing experiences as demonstrated by the casinos we had just observed. Since society has shifted from commodities to goods to services to experiences, churches would need to wrestle with how to focus on creating space for the Spirit to do a similar experiential work in those we serve.¹ The next day, a church planter reaching casino workers described how they refuse to compete with the glitz of the casino but, instead, offered low tech interactions with other authentic God seekers. They provided a place to encounter the holy.

I find parishioners where I serve to be comparably inductive. In our portion of God's vineyard, we have Ph.D.'s and high school graduates. We have executives of

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¹ See *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

a global oil company as well as bi-vocational farmers. They are glad to learn the things of Scripture and the Christian life, but they appear to prefer experiences like engaging worship, study groups, and work teams over didactic catechisms. Theology is fine if it has a point. Faith is essential, but the preferred mode is living faith with a practical bent.

So consider some recent events from my calendar: consulting with an inactive church living off an endowment with fifteen people attending; meeting with a pastor grieving the loss of his parsonage and most of its contents due to a flood; challenging a congregation to mobilize its laity in the face of decline and praising a very strong congregation for its risk-taking mission. What does the Trinity have to do with these real-life ministry situations and people?

Trinity as Philosophy and Practice

To apply the Trinity to the everyday life of the Church assumes some degree of pragmatism. Flood victims, for example, are more receptive to seeing the community of God respond to their needs than the debate on *homousius*. *Perichoresis* as a technical term for what they are reflecting may not be as tangible as the idea of brothers and sisters making room for the temporarily homeless.

To locate the conversation, Miroslav Volf offers a helpful summary of Trinitarian analogies in his article “Being as God Is: Trinity and Generosity.”

As we venture into claims about God as Trinity, it is important to keep in mind that the terms *immanent Trinity* and *economic Trinity* do not designate two related but different aspects of a statically conceived divine being. Rather, their unity in itself comprises a movement – from *immanent Trinity* to *economic Trinity* and finally to the *Trinity in glory*, that is, the Trinity in the world to come when

the economy of salvation will have been completed and human beings' participation in God perfected.²

God reveals Godself in creation (economic Trinity) and, at the same time, God is apart from creation (immanent Trinity). God does not need creation to be Trinity, but God chooses to make known who God is and what God's heart is for all of creation, especially God's desire for all humanity to be in relationship with Godself for eternity.

God's interactions in creation draw us into the deeper apprehension of who God is beyond creation. In the same way, most laity learn of God through the worshipping servant community before apprehending God apart from that community and/or witnessing God's revelation in creation. Much like the tension between a philosophical understanding of God versus God understood in community, i.e., the Church, the Trinity as a theological concept often unfolds after one gains insight into the persons of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

This practical dynamic has historical precedence. Justo González notes the shifts made in understanding God when using the lenses of Platonic philosophy or rationalism as opposed to hearing the faith claims of the local congregation as it worships the Christ in whose name it has been baptized.³ God indeed may be omnipotent, omniscient, and immutable, but God also has come in the flesh, died for our sins, vacated the tomb, and now lives in us by the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit animates us to join in the suffering of the marginalized and oppressed.

The Councils of Nicea and Constantinople gave us the Nicene Creed. The western version, as one of the two historical creeds included in the most recent United Methodist Hymnal (1989) for example, describes for the

² In *God's Life in Trinity*, edited by Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker, pp. 4-5. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

³ Justo González, *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 71ff.

local church the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Creator, Savior and Life Giver God has established and inhabits the one holy catholic apostolic Church. These theological concepts become tangible when we experience the network of faith between a church in the Midwest and a young congregation in the African bush, for example. It appears early twenty-first century believers do not necessarily refine their theology before practicing it.

The Church as Kingdom Expression

Historically, the Church has taken form in versions as diverse as the monasteries of the eleventh century that preserved orthodoxy from the abuses of the papacy to missionary outposts of a very small group of believers attempting to penetrate a culture with no known Christian faith community. In twenty-first century America, traditional congregations tend to act more like the monastery than the outpost.⁴ The difference comes in the motivation for cloistering. The former movement resulted from the disintegration of the Church under corrupt leaders. The latter seems to be resulting from an insular existence resistant to new practices. Christ's lesson of the wineskins comes to mind (Luke 5:36-39).

Contrast an image of the Church as an expression of the Kingdom of God on earth.⁵

The truth that the Church is itself something sent into the world, the continuation of Christ's mission from the Father, something that is not as much an institution as an expedition sent to the ends of the earth in Christ's name, has been grasped with a new vividness. Among those who have reflected about these matters it becomes less and less possible to speak of the missionary task otherwise

⁴ For example, see the writings of The Gospel and Our Culture Network.

⁵ See the discussion of this concept in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, Lois Y. Barrett, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004).

than as the embassy of the whole people of God to the whole world.⁶

While the reign of God exists universally given God's omnipresent patience with a fallen world, local gatherings of Christians embody the human demonstration of God's reign. The body of Christ models communion with its Creator. Its body life reflects the perichoretic relationship of the Triune God in holy community with each other and society. It displays a clear sense of God's call on its life together and purposes to make the Kingdom of God visible. The people regularly seek opportunities to make room for others to join them on the faith journey through hospitality and outreach. They love each other toward interdependent community as a reflection of the Godhead.

The Christ-followers of such a church work for shalom in their fellowship and in society in light of the completeness of the Trinity. God's wholeness inspires them to want the same for all humanity, the restoration of the *imago Dei* in each person. Mission and justice mark their activities beyond the walls of the congregation. Their movement is beyond themselves in self-giving. In those places where structures and systems have become barriers to God's goodness, the church inserts itself as witness. At the same time, they pursue their own health as a dynamic faith community, calling each other forward in mature, fruitful ministry.

The creativity of the Trinity shows up in this Kingdom outpost as the church experiments with innovation grounded in Scripture and tradition. This may involve worship or outreach – ancient-future practices when gathered to glorify God – or fresh strategies for penetrating society with the Gospel. The generative love of God motivates them toward redemptive acts of sacrifice and charity. The mentality of *we-have-never-done-it-this-way-before* fades in light of the consistent sense that God has not cancelled their call. In fact, like the Apostle

⁶ Leslie Newbigin, *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, p. 12. (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1963).

Paul, they understand their mandate to complete the work of Christ (Col. 1:24-29). The Church is animated by the Spirit to connect people to the Creator through the grace of the Son to extend the work of Christ on the cross. At the same time, the Church acknowledges the mystery of it all:

Regardless of the pronouns or symbols we employ, the Church in speaking of the triune God has always known itself to be pointing to an enigma – the mystery of God’s presence, God hidden and God revealed, the way in which God works in our midst. We cannot fully articulate the presence we know; we cannot fully comprehend, although we can apprehend.⁷

Change as Choice and Growth

The Trinity does not change yet, in creation, God continues to reclaim what was lost. The generative love of God calls all of humanity back to relationship with the Creator. God has made room for any who, through Christ, respond with the help of the Spirit to God’s invitation. In this sense, humanity exercises choice. We can decide to change (*metanoia*)—more precisely, to be changed – when we acknowledge God’s sovereign grace at work in the world. We choose to give ourselves over to the gracious Trinity for God’s specific work in transforming us into Christ-likeness. Indeed, the Spirit reclaims the *imago Dei* via the *imago Christi*. We see God in Christ and choose to receive the gift of transformation, this change from glory to glory that Paul suggests is God’s first choice for us (2 Cor. 3:18).

This ongoing *metanoia* aligns our will with God’s as we respond to God’s wooing Holy Spirit. We begin to sync up with God’s heart for us and for creation. Our choices extend beyond our personal change to how we might join God in God’s redemptive work. Our relationships with

⁷ Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God, Systematic Theology: Volume One*, p. 224. (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1998).

others take on a different purpose. We now exist to love and glorify God in every conversation, every act.

As leaders, we recalibrate our decision criteria. We embrace the *missio Dei* quality of our enterprise. We find ourselves regularly converted toward God's redemptive work in our organization and people.⁸

The other side of this theology of change includes the growth process designed into our human existence. From the moment we are conceived, we grow. Our bodies, minds, and spirits morph (*morphoō*) in grace from infancy to death. This growth process assumes a maturing of who we are. Our growth frames our choices. Our choices impact our growth.⁹

Perichoresis as Creating Space for Change

The Christian leader's role is to model the Trinitarian quality of perichoresis by creating space for change. The three persons' relationship with each other—their mutual interrelationship—might be described as a type of *spirited dance* where each person of the Godhead makes room for the other in an elegant, beautiful movement. No controlling or stumbling over each other. No awkward missteps. The Trinity models perfect, creative relationship.

To go further, the mutual giving and receiving nature of the Godhead reflects “the reciprocal *interiority* of the Trinitarian persons. In every divine person as a subject, the other persons also indwell; all mutually permeate one another, though in doing so they do not cease to be distinct persons.”¹⁰ One person of the Trinity can not be separated from the others. To see the Father is to see the Son; to see the Son is to see the Spirit. They

⁸ For a discussion of this idea in a church context, see Darrell L. Guder's *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000).

⁹ See more on discipleship as *morphoō* in Greg Ogden's *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, p. 209. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998).

“interpenetrate” each other. Volf further observes: “From the interiority of the divine persons, there emerges what I would like to call their *catholicity*... The one divine person is not only itself, but rather carries within itself also the other divine persons, and only in this indwelling of the other persons within it is it the person it really is.”¹¹

For the Christian leader this implies a quality of interdependent community as the ideal for his or her enterprise. When human relationships approach that divine characteristic, transformation becomes inevitable. Our identity takes on a different integrity and our isolation fades into unity. This oneness is founded on the promise that we have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father of us all” (Eph. 4:4-6). In naming Christ as our reason for being, we fulfill the requirements of Christian community.

Two conditions of ecclesiality emerge from the church’s status as a congregation assembled in the *name* of Christ. The first is the *faith* of those who are thus assembled. The church is essentially *communio fidelium*, whatever else it may be beyond this. Without faith in Christ as Savior, there is no church... The second condition of ecclesiality associated with assembling in the *name* of Christ is the *commitment* of those assembled to allow their own lives to be determined by Jesus Christ... If the connection between faith and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) is to be preserved while simultaneously avoiding hypocrisy, it is better to speak about the necessary *commitment* of believers to take the path of *imitatio*. Without an *acknowledgement* of Christ as Lord, there is no church.¹²

One might extend this as a measure of Christian leadership. Is there an acknowledgement of Christ as Lord? Does the leader call for a modeling of the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, pp. 147-148.

communion *fideliūm* as the leadership context allows? Is there evidence of commitment of imitating Christ at least in the leader and, if a Christian organization, in the institution he or she leads? Does the leader seek to create space for God's transforming work in the name of Christ?

This committed faith community, and the Christ followers who imitate the Trinity, lives in the eschatological tension of the redemptive work of God in a fallen world. We mark time in the *chronos* stream of events and the *kairos* of God breaking into our existence. As we seek to create space for God's transformation, two questions might serve as guides: Where is God present in this moment? Given the chronological sequence in which we find ourselves (*chronos*), where do we see evidence of the Trinity? Secondly, where is God at work (*kairos*)? What signs is God providing to remind us of God's activity in the world and in our life situation?

For the lay person facing crisis, where is the Trinity present and at work? For the day-to-day existence of a Christ-follower, where are there signs of the *metanoia* and *morphōō* patterns? For the Christian leader, what role does she or he embrace to foster perichoretic community? For the Church, how does the committed faith community continue to be an outpost of the Kingdom of God?

In a pastors' seminar, many years ago, Peter Drucker was describing his formula for business success. First ask, "What is our business?" Then ask, "How's Business?" When Drucker invited the pastors to define their business, the usual theological phrases were offered. After a few moments, Drucker boiled it all down for them. "Your business is changed lives!" To summarize the language of this essay, God calls us to model perichoretic community by which God's Spirit can transform via the grace promised in Jesus Christ.