

WHY WE SHOULD STUDY THE TRINITY by Matt Sanders

*Wherefore, since we desire to understand the eternity, and equality, and unity of the Trinity, as much as is permitted us, but ought to believe before we understand; and since we must watch carefully, that our faith be not feigned; since we must have the fruition of the same Trinity, that we may live blessedly; but if we have believed anything false of it, our hope would be worthless, and our charity not pure: how then can we love, by believing, that Trinity which we do not know?*¹

Without the Trinity, love is just love. It can be any kind of love, not the specific love expressed and defined by the Trinity. Faith is just faith. It can be in anything, not the specific faith in the work and being of the Trinity. Community is just community. Relationship is just relationship in the most general or most specific sense that you wish to make it. The revelation of God as Trinity is the Christian distinctive that prevents true Christianity from being dumped into the pluralistic pile of religions. If you want Christianity to be counted as one of many ways to God, you must strip it of the Trinity or so distort the revelation that it looks like nothing or everything else. And the Trinity can only be understood in relationship to the other great Christian distinctive – the atonement. Without the cross, we cannot know the Trinity. Without the Trinity, there is no cross. The cross is the full revelation of who God is. The Trinity is who God is. The cross is our starting point. The Trinity is our destination.

To a certain extent the Trinity must be re-expressed from generation to generation, but there is a limit to this. The revelation of the Trinity is in Scripture, and our understanding and expression of the Trinity must never stray from these holy moorings nor should we ignore the early church's struggles to develop our understanding – that in finding new language that helps us express to a new generation who the Trinity is and what it means to be Trinitarian, we never forget that these early disputes clearly defined who we are not. We are not tritheists, we are not unitarians, we are not modalists, we are not monists. We are Trinitarian.

We cannot simply go back to Scripture; that would either be redundant or fruitless. We must take into account the Trinitarian language, even when couched in Greek philosophical terms, letting the terminology facilitate understanding, not obscure it. Even the original Trinitarian expressions were not understood by the masses. Even the learned leaders disagreed as to meaning and usage of key words. That is why the Trinity is often reduced to a slogan – three in one, one in three. Easily remembered, easily asserted, but of little value beyond that. A slogan may be catchy, it might sell the product, but it does little else. That problem was exacerbated as even the slogan, locked in time and in a culture, could not really be understood except by those who had studied not only theology, but language, history, geography, psychology, and sociology. Can God really only be understood in obtuse philosophical terms? Can He really be reduced to a slogan?

¹Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 8.5.8. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) and Second Series, ed. Schaff and Henry Wace, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952-57), electronic versions Oak Harbor: Logos Research System, 1997.

This is the problem with Trinitarian theology. It either requires too much study, only to come to the conclusion that more study is required, or it is reduced to a slogan or formula that we accept as orthodox, but has little value beyond the doxological. Is this what God intended when He revealed to us who He is? That we would take this revelation and ignore it in our daily lives? Have we placed our focus in the wrong place – instead of trying to figure out what the Trinity is, should we not instead determine the implications the revelation of the Trinity should have for our lives? This is the challenge presented by the Trinity and one that Christians must embrace to give their faith full power and full meaning and in so doing reveal the God Who is Trinity in their lives as the community of faith. Then the world will know.

The Doctrine of the Trinity and evangelicals

Despite a resurgence in interest in Trinitarian theology during the 20th century, conservative evangelicals continue to have a tepid, at best, attitude toward the doctrine with the main exception being efforts to engage in the complementarian-egalitarian debate. Trinitarian theology continues to be largely an enigmatic test of orthodoxy, a mantelpiece doctrine, that has doxological and occasionally polemical purposes, but little other relevancy.

Should this be the case among those who believe in the supreme authority of inerrant Scripture and verbal plenary inspiration, if the Bible reveals God as Trinity? At minimum, should there not be ongoing study of some relationship between the *Imago Dei* and the God who is Trinity? When Jesus prays in John 17 that those who will believe in him because of the witness of his apostles will be one as he and the Father are one, does this not bring to the fore a thorough examination of the oneness of the Father and Son so that we can see how that relates to the unity Jesus desires for us?²

Some of the major factors that influence the neglect of Trinitarian theology include:

Agnosticism – The Trinity cannot be known. Many Christians see the Trinity as an unsolvable puzzle that can only be worshipped, but unlike the rest of Christian theology, has no corresponding orthopraxy.

Pragmatism – The Trinity has no practical value. Many pastors and churches are focused on the pragmatic. Trinitarian theology does not seem to contribute directly to evangelism, missions, increases in baptisms, or numerical growth in churches. With all that needs to be done, there is no time to study a doctrine that does not pay immediate, measurable dividends. This is sadly in agreement with Immanuel Kant's statement:

The doctrine of the Trinity provides nothing, absolutely nothing, of practical value, even if one claims to understand it; still less when one is convinced that it far surpasses our understanding.³

² Colin Gunton believed that Trinitarian theology is an ontological issue, informing humanity regarding who we are and how we should live. *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, (New York: T&T Clark, 1997), xi.

³ Leonardo Boff is quoting from Kant's *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns, [Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1997], 19).

Individualism. Individualism (or “sindividualism,” as one student coined inadvertently) is the plague of the modern church. It infiltrates the church at every level. From the over-emphasis on one’s place in Heaven, regardless if anyone else is there, to homogenous churches to the increasingly individualized and specialized worship services, the church reflects the individualizing spirit of the fallen world. Some Christians are particularly vulnerable to this because of the interpretation of the autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of the believers as individualizing rather than uniting doctrines. In addition, the misinterpretation of a personal relationship with Christ as an individual relationship with Christ contributes to this problem especially in a denomination that so strongly (and rightfully) emphasizes evangelism.

For evangelicals to engage fully in Trinitarian theology, these three factors must be overcome. Here are some preliminary thoughts on changes that need to take place.

1. A change in the approach to Trinitarian theology. Instead of viewing the Trinity as a puzzle to be solved, the Trinity is the God who should be embraced. Accept the revelation instead of trying to prove it or explain it. How many people can explain how television or the Internet or even ketchup work? Yet they still are able to benefit from these. By beginning with the revelation, Christians can focus on the implications of the revelation. This also means rescuing Trinitarian theology from academia. Why would God have revealed Himself in such a way that only a select few could benefit? It seems there is a need to return the Trinity to the pews.
2. A change in pragmatism toward a Trinitarian end. God does expect results but it is not a quantitative standard that He seeks, which seems to go against the biblical witness. God has a qualitative standard, regardless of numbers. If humanity was created in the image of God and believers are in some sense the restored image of God, it would seem that the revelation of God as Trinity could inform the church regarding this qualitative standard.
3. A change from individualism to Trinitarianism as the spirit of the church. If God is “God in Three Persons”, Trinitarian theology is the hope for rooting out the individualism that infects the church. A strict monotheism could support an individualistic view, but Trinitarianism stands against it. This is the most difficult task to accomplish, because if one accepts the premise that God desires that His church become more Trinitarian, it will cause believers to re-think everything that they do or plan to do. Trinitarianism will confront each believer at every area of life that is in any way tainted with individualism.

There is no quick fix to these problems. Each has deep roots in many churches. Many Christians are still not completely free from an anti-intellectual spirit that has been prevalent in some churches. Education is a key component, but it takes time to teach leaders not only to understand the doctrine, but also to be able to communicate Trinitarian theology effectively. However, action can be taken immediately in churches to begin to think and act in a more Trinitarian way, even if it is not called that. In fact, many churches at some level or another are engaged in Trinitarian activity but do not identify it as such.

As understanding of Trinitarian theology grows, churches can begin to ask questions regarding how being Trinitarian affects evangelism, missions, ministries, worship, church polity, preaching, leadership, fellowship, and discipleship.

But most importantly, perhaps, the church can begin to ask the question: What is a Trinitarian vision for the church and for the world? One of the major problems with the church is the lack of understanding of God's vision for the church and the world. As a result, when those outside the church articulate a vision, the church often has no response or one that is inadequate. There are reasons for this. The Bible testifies that God's kingdom will not be fully established without the return of Christ. Some people take this as a reason to forget about the sinking ship of the world and simply save as many passengers as possible. But is our main task really to collect individual souls for some far in the future, otherworldly purpose? Is this what Jesus had in mind when he called his followers salt and light? Is this God's purpose for creation? Although we know that we will not fully succeed without the return of Christ, it seems that part of the task would be to present to the world an alternative to the way that people should relate to one another and that alternative is to live in a Trinitarian way.

This vision could be summed in the word "love," except that so many people understand this word from a human rather than divine perspective. We then have two words that can be misleading – Trinity, which most people admittedly do not understand, and love, which most people erroneously think they understand. Both of these problems can be overcome by bringing these words together as Trinitarian love.

What would a vision of Trinitarian love look like? Unity without uniformity, diversity without division, equality with distinctions in giftedness and roles, excellence without rivalry, freedom without chaos, and order without tyranny. There is love for the group and the individual, the many and the one, the ones near and the ones far. There is agreement on beliefs, because there is a common experience and a common spirit. Through faith in the one and only Jesus Christ, we are reconciled with the one and only Father and transformed through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to be able to live and love as one body and in so doing to bring glory to God first and foremost through our relationship to Him and our relationship to one another. So that the world may know.