

Theology Matters

What's So Important About The Trinity?

by Dennis Okholm

A friend once remarked that of all the Sundays on the liturgical calendar Trinity Sunday was the most difficult for sermon preparation. What do you preach to a congregation whose eyes will glaze over as soon as you announce your topic? Not that parishioners couldn't use some edifying discourse on the subject of the "trilogy," as one layman recently put it when he asked me for some clarification of what Christians believe. Even if clarity is not wanting, the doctrine may seem as unnecessary to disciples in the pew as it did to Friedrich Schleiermacher (the "Father of Protestant Liberalism") 180 years ago when he appended a few pages on the topic at the end of his systematic theology. Those who concede its necessity might still ignore it as irrelevant to a culture that seeks doses of spiritual insight for quick fixes and "felt needs."

Yet the confession of a triune God is one of the most unique and essential features of the Christian faith. This became crystal clear to me last summer when I assigned my Sudanese students at Nile Theological College (Khartoum) the task of interviewing Muslim friends about their perceptions of Christianity. That God has a Son and that Christians address God as "Father" was a recurring theme in student reports of what was perceived to be wrong with the Christian faith. It illustrated the point that much of our apologetic task consists of clarifying what we believe.

In a time of increasing religious pluralism the task is even more pressing. Just as Moses asked for more specificity about the God (*El*) who was addressing him (Ex 3:13-15), so the unambiguous name of the God Christians worship and baptize new disciples into is Father-Son-Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). As Stanley Hauerwas put it in a politically correct civic prayer, though folks would prefer we pray to the "God of Ultimate Vagueness," the history of Israel and Jesus Christ keep forcing us to be more particular.¹

Experiencing God As Three Persons

In fact, in the context of religious pluralism in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament, it was precisely the Jewish Christian experience of Christ's lordship that launched the early disciples' trajectory toward a doctrine of the Trinity. These were committed monotheists (who regularly professed commitment to Israel's "one God" in the *shema*—Deut 6:4) who worshipped and preached Jesus Christ as "Lord" (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:6-11)² and ascribed to

Table of Contents	
What So Important About The Trinity	1
The Gift: A Love Story	5
The Gift: The Enemy Of The Church	8
The Gift: The Mission Of The Church	11
Prayer In The Triune Life.....	13

him what was ascribed to God (Jn 1:1-18, 5:18, 10:30; Col 1:15-20), even to the point that they considered his claims to *be* the Temple where God and humans meet vindicated (Mk 2:1-12, 14:61-62; Mt 12:6, 42; Jn 2:19).³

Were they worshipping *two* gods? No—pagan polytheism was an unacceptable explanation for what they were experiencing. (And there can only be one “Lord”—by definition.) Still, the early Christian believers could not revert to some kind of unitarianism—the belief that God was only one person. The biblical witness reported that Jesus prayed to the Father (Jn 17) and claimed to come from and return to the Father (Jn 16:9, 17:25) after he completed his mission of making the Father known (Jn 1:18). Unless Jesus was schizophrenic, it seemed that at least two individuals were involved here. In other words, something about the identity and activity of Jesus Christ required an appropriate explanation.

In addition, a third party seemed to be caught up in this—the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus called the *paraclete* (one who “comes alongside,” see Jn 14:25, 16:7). In his “farewell address” to the disciples, Jesus not only told Philip that any who had seen him had seen the Father—that Jesus was in the Father and the Father was in Jesus (Jn 14:9-11), but he also wanted them to understand how they would experience his presence in their lives after his ascension: at Jesus’ request the Father (and Jesus) would send “another” who would remind the disciples of all that Jesus taught them, guide them into truth, be their advocate, convict folks about sin, and glorify Jesus (Jn 14:16-17, 25-26; 15:26; 16:7-15).

The church was beginning to experience God according to the manner in which God revealed himself: they were seeing God self-revealed in Jesus Christ, who identified himself as the Son in relation to the Father whom he, in turn, came to make known and glorify (Jn 17:1-5). And they were experiencing the Spirit who made it possible for them to enter into a relationship of adopted children of God, so that they found themselves calling the God of Jesus Christ “*Abba*, Father” (Gal 4:6). Though they could not articulate it in theological language, the early church was becoming aware that God reveals himself as three persons.

From Worship To Doctrine

But they soon found they *had* to articulate what God was up to in more sophisticated ways. True, they could extend greetings in the name of the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 1:7). They could assert there is one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ, from whom all things come and for whom we live (1 Cor 8:6). They could baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). And they could pronounce a benediction by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the

love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14). Yet, as Jaroslav Pelikan put it so well, “one could speak this way while kneeling to pray, but it was harder to do so when standing to teach or sitting to write.”⁴ And they *had* to engage in the teaching and the writing, because they had to define the Christian faith over against inadequate and pagan notions of God.

For instance, *modalism* (taught by, among others, a man named Sabellius around the year 215) held that the one God has revealed himself in different *modes* or manifestations—like a Greek actor who would come out playing one part with a mask, only to return later playing another part with a different mask. In this view, Jesus was just one of the many manifestations of God. The incarnate Son-Redeemer was just a role that God was playing after he played the role of Father-Creator on the universe’s stage.

While this idea of God preserved a very high view of the divinity of Jesus Christ, it not only contradicted those passages in which the incarnate Son, Jesus, seemed to be talking to another person, the Father (as in Jn 17), but it led to strange notions. For instance, if the Son was just the Father in another role, it could be argued that the Father was being crucified just as much as the Son. If God is three persons *always* and *at the same time*, then it makes sense to say that the Father abandoned the Son on the cross (Mk 15:34), and that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism as the Father announced his identity as the Son (Lk 3:22). (This is why the analogy of the three forms of water is not a good representation of the Trinity, since the same water cannot be all three forms *at the same time*.)

But the real problem with modalism has always been that it leaves us uncertain about how definitive God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ was. That is, if modalism is correct, then we will always wonder if some other god is lurking behind the mask Jesus wore—one who pops out in a fourth (or fifth or sixth) role that God hasn’t played yet. I have found that it’s helpful to remind people that the fullness of deity dwelt in Christ, for to look at the Jesus of the Gospels is to know how God responds to our diseases, our infirmities, our pride, our joys, and so forth. We need no further unveiling of God’s being and character than what God has disclosed in Jesus Christ as he is witnessed to by Scripture.

Another tendency that the church had to avoid was *adoptionism*. This was the mirror opposite of modalism. It emphasized the distinction between the Son and the Father, but it did so by compromising Jesus’ deity: Jesus was the Son of God by adoption, not by nature. That is, God foresaw just how obedient Jesus would be and promoted him to the status of “Son of God” as a kind of reward. The adoption took place either at the resurrection (Rom 1:3-4; Acts 2:32-36), the baptism (Mk 1:10-11; Acts 10:37-38), or the birth (Lk 1:34-35).

Not only does this view result in “divinity by promotion,” but it has no room for an incarnation. There is no Christmas in this view of Jesus. Jesus is not the incarnate Son of God (the Word become flesh); Jesus is simply an inspired man who, through his obedience, became the trailblazer for our salvation. This is precisely what Jehovah’s Witnesses teach. And the problem with what they and some other modern “biographers” of Jesus teach is that salvation comes by trying harder to be like Jesus so that we too will get promoted for being obedient to God and good to fellow inhabitants of the planet. In the end, this leads to a self-centered legalism, and legalism, like all heresies, is cruel—it will harm your spiritual, emotional, and physical health.⁵

On To The Nicene Creed

One species of adoptionism was *Arianism*, named after a fourth-century churchman Arius. (Come up with a good heresy and you might have an enduring legacy!) In fact, it was Arianism that eventually led the church to fashion the Nicene Creed, but not until after Arius was opposed by a North African Christian named Athanasius.

Arius had argued that if you take the Bible “literally” (such as references to Jesus being the “firstborn” in Col 1:15 and to Wisdom being created at the beginning of God’s work in Prov 8:22) and if you want to safeguard the transcendence and unchangeableness of God, then you wouldn’t want to say that God can be divided into persons or that God can be incarnate in human flesh. But you *could* say that the first of God’s creation—a supreme angel of sorts—had become flesh and become the intermediary between God and humans.

While Athanasius couldn’t point to a passage of Scripture that would refute Arius once and for all, he argued that Arius’ “Son” could not be Savior. Not only was this first creature neither fully human nor fully divine, but the logic of our salvation is such that only the God who created us in his image in the first place has the power and authority to recreate us in his image in the second place. That is, the God who is the Redeemer has to be the same God who created all things. In that way, though no Bible verse actually came out and said so, the history of what God is up to from Genesis to Revelation calls for a God who himself becomes human to redeem what we humans have severely damaged. (Athanasius put it this way: “God became human so that humans might be made god.”)⁶ Arius’ Christ could neither redeem humans nor reveal God (because he wasn’t). And to worship Arius’ Christ was to worship a creature!

As an aside, we should notice that Athanasius’ insistence on not separating the Creator and Redeemer also helps us to realize that a robust doctrine of the

Trinity keeps us from separating the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New Testament,⁷ the wrath of God from the love of God, and the indwelling of Jesus Christ from the baptism of the Holy Spirit in one’s life.

Part of Arius’ problem was that he thought “only begotten” in John 3:16 meant that the Son was created only by God. That is, Arius confused the verb “beget” with the verb “create.” But they are two very different things: A dad begets a daughter, but a dad creates (or makes) a dollhouse for his daughter. (Well, actually, I tried to create one!) Like begets like; like creates unlike. That is why the Nicene Creed is careful to say that the Son of God was “begotten from the Father, only-begotten, *that is*, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, *begotten not made*, of one substance with the Father.”

That phrase “of one substance” is *homoousios* in Greek—a word Athanasius preferred, even though it doesn’t appear in the Bible. (For that matter, the word “trinity” isn’t in the Bible either. It was a word used by Tertullian, an early third-century theologian to mean “three-in-oneness.”) But he thought it best summarized what the Bible was saying about the Son’s being in relation to the Father’s being. In fact, Mormons, who reject the Nicene Creed, claim that they believe in a Trinity, but when pressed to say that God the Father is the *same* God as God the Son, they deny that understanding of the Trinity. In other words, the Mormon idea of the Son of God is not much different from Arianism.

This precise theological language, referring to “three persons in one substance,” was not meant to *define* God. It is language that operates like rules of grammar—telling us what is permissible for Christians to say about God (and what not to say) if they want to remain in the Christian camp. Even to say that the Father “begets” the Son is not an admission that we know what such begetting would mean to *God*; the word might sound familiar, but when applied to God it signifies something beyond our comprehension. (In fact, Origin, a third-century theologian, even sounds illogical when he describes the Son as “*eternally begotten*.”)

The theologians and the creeds were actually trying to preserve the mystery of the triune God with their words. William Placher puts it so well when he says:

What the early theologians said was much more something like this: We know from Scripture that the Son is not the Father, for the Son prays to the Father with an intensity that cannot be playacting. We know that the Spirit is Another who the Father will send, and not the same as the Son. We know that there is one God, and yet we pray to the Son

and the Spirit, and count on them to participate in our salvation in a way that would be blasphemous if they were other than God. We need some terms in order to say that God is both one and three, and so we devise such terms, but it is only beyond this life, in the vision of God, that we will understand *how* God is both one and three.⁸

We will come back to this idea of preserving the Trinity's mystery, but first we should recognize that the Holy Spirit did not get much mention in this battle between Arius and Athanasius. In fact, it was what led up to the version of the Nicene Creed that we have in our *Book of Confessions* today that helped bring the Holy Spirit into the discussion. It was, in part, the work of three Cappadocian (Asia Minor) theologians (one Basil and two Gregorys) that helped us understand better how the *three* exist in relation to each other. (The 325 Nicene Creed was revised at Constantinople in 381, with an expanded section on the Holy Spirit.)

Life In The Trinity

The Eastern church, of which the Cappadocians were a part, had given the Father top billing in their understanding of the three persons. The Father was the origin and manager (i.e., "monarch") of the other two, from whom the Son is always begotten and the Spirit is always proceeding. While this seemed to smack of a heretical tendency called subordinationism, the intention was not to suggest that the Son and the Holy Spirit are any less God than the Father. As we shall see, the Cappadocians would insist that, in one sense, the Father's existence depends on the existence of the Son and the Spirit. But it is important here to point out that the Son's voluntary submission to the Father (as in Phil 2:6-8) is not a diminution of the Son's divinity, but an *expression* of what it means to be God the Son. The "pagans" think of divine authority in worldly terms as "lording it over" others, but the incarnate Son in the upper room stooped down and wiped the disciples' feet *at the moment* he knew that "the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God" (Jn 13:3-5; Mk 10:42-45).

The Cappadocians are often credited with taking our focus from the "economic" Trinity to the "immanent" Trinity. The former has nothing to do with money. The word *economic* simply refers to the way in which someone *manages* the affairs of a household, business, state, or the like. And most theologians had rightly been occupied with the way in which we see the three persons of the Trinity manage (or being managed by the Father) in the affairs of the world's salvation. But what God is in his saving activity—pouring out God's self in creation, redemption, and recreation—is what God is in the divine being itself. That is, *as* three persons God is the self-giving God. Though each person of the Trinity exists in distinction from the other two, each also exists

only in relation to the other two. For example, the Father *is* the Father but can only be Father *if* there is the Son (and vice-versa). Take away one of those two, and the other no longer exists. This fits nicely with some postmodern notions of what it means to be a "person," for a person's identity depends on his or her relation to others. The identity and existence of each person of the Trinity *co-inheres* in the other two—they interpenetrate, depend upon, and participate in each other. In Greek this is called *perichoresis*, and it is developed from another Greek word *chorein*, which can mean "to make room for." In other words, each member of the Trinity makes room for and relates to the others in self-giving love. Cornelius Plantinga expressed this so well in a sermon entitled "Deep Wisdom":

From all eternity inside God, inside the mystery of God, inside God the Holy Trinity—the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit make room for each other, envelop each other, call attention to each other, glorify one another. It is the ceaseless exchange of vitality, the endless expense of spirit upon spirit in eternal triplicate life. The only competition in glory of this kind is to outdo one another in love.⁹

When Jesus prays that all of his disciples may be one "just as you are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:21), Jesus in effect prays that we in the church live in such a way that we reflect the very triune existence of God. To paraphrase what Austin Farrer once wrote about dogma and prayer, we should insist that no doctrine deserves its place unless it is livable, and no Christians deserve their doctrines who do not live them.¹⁰ No doubt Calvin would concur when he wrote that Christian doctrine is learned only when it moves from head to heart and "passes into the conduct, and so transforms us into itself, as not to prove itself unfruitful."¹¹ As confessors of a triune God we must live the unique doctrine we profess, pouring out our lives into one another in self-giving, hospitable love.

In the end, our job is not to *comprehend* the triune God. Not that we could, since the etymology of the word would imply that we could "seize" or "get" God. And Augustine's oft-cited warning is correct: if we understand God, it is not God that we understand. The best we can aim for is "learned ignorance"—the kind of understanding that Calvin described as appreciating what God *has* revealed in Scripture, but refusing to speculate about God's being beyond God's self-revelation in Christ, who comes to us "clothed in Scripture," which the Holy Spirit authenticates as the Word of God.¹² And with that "learned ignorance," by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, Christians in their churchly existence may mirror the God in whose image we are created, as we grow up together into Christ who is the very image of the Father (Eph 4:15, 22-24; Col 1:15).

It is *this* God we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—this God who encounters us condescending, pouring out, humbling, giving, making room (Phil 2:6-11)—this God whom we confess and praise as the “great One in Three,” whose “sovereign majesty may we in glory see, and to eternity love and adore.”

Questions

As you look over this essay, consider the following questions:

1. What led the early Christians to begin thinking of God as three?
2. Why is it important to insist that God is three-in-one?
3. What do we learn about how to live our lives as Christians based on our confession that God is triune?
4. What does it mean to *practice* the doctrine of the Trinity?

¹ See Stanley Hauerwas, *Prayers Plainly Spoken* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999, 2003), 47-48 (and his explanation of the context for the prayer on p. 17).

² The Greek word for “Lord” is *kyrios*, a transcription of the Hebrew *adonai*, which was a substitution for the unpronounced name of God—*YHWH*.

³ See N. T. Wright’s discussion of the ascription of divinity to Jesus in *Simply Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), chs. 7-8.

Also, see James Edwards, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), chaps. 5-6.

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*; vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 178.

⁵ See C FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy* (London: SPCK, 1994).

⁶ Athanasius makes his argument in his classic, *On the Incarnation of the Word*.

⁷ It has been part of Christian tradition, especially in the Eastern church, to understand Gen 18:1-2 as a theophany in the three persons: “The Lord appeared to Abraham.... He looked up and saw three men standing near him.”

⁸ William Placher, *The Triune God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 130.

⁹ See Timothy George, ed., *God the Holy Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 155. Also, see Placher, *Trinity*, 155.

¹⁰ Ref. Austin Farrer, *Lord I Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1989), 10.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.6.4.

¹² See Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.2, 1.7.4-5.

Rev. Dennis Okholm, Ph.D., is professor of theology at Azusa Pacific University, designated co-pastor of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, and adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary Extension in Irvine. His forthcoming book is Monk Habits for Everyday People: Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants (Brazos, Nov 2007). Okholm is on the Board of Reference for Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry.

The following three sermons on the Trinity were preached at First Presbyterian Church, Baton Rouge, LA, May-June, 2005.

The Gift: A Love Story

by Gerrit Scott Dawson

Text: John 16:25-17:8

We arrive in the pews on Sunday morning as a motley crew. One family is smiling, though the beads of sweat under the collar tell us that just ten minutes ago they were yelling in the car. Why is it so hard to get ready for church, no matter what time the service starts? There’s a woman wondering if her friend two pews up has gained weight or was that just an unfortunate wardrobe choice? There’s a man who’s already begun the usual fantasy that helps him survive church. Right now he’s on the ninth hole at Augusta getting ready to putt after Tiger Woods. There’s a man in a suit who looks prosperous, but he wonders if he’ll ever be able to buy a new suit now that his business has taken such a downturn. There’s a woman wondering if she can make it if she leaves her husband. There’s a little boy who loves church because it’s the only time that his parents are both next to him for more than five minutes.

There’s a little girl drawing pictures of horses as she wonders whether people will be nice to her in Sunday school. There are people here who’ve already been reading Scripture and people who’ve already had their first drink. There are people who lose all track of time, lost in worship, and people who have already calculated how long each part of the service will take and when we’ll get out if the preacher actually quits on time.

Yes, it’s just us. Double-minded, double-hearted, compromised and full of mixed motives—and that’s just the preacher. It’s just us, a rag tag collection of humanity who all happen to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Nothing has changed. It was ever thus. The Almighty Triune Creator of the universe has chosen to make himself known through a community made up of the likes of us. The gospel of salvation in Christ, the thundering news of triumph over sin and death, the very hope of the human race, is going to be passed along

through people like us, or not at all. You may well wonder, “So God, when you set it up this way, what were you thinking?”

We are the church, the *ecclesia*, the assembly in one particular location of those who are connected through the gospel across all time and space. In the midst of our flaws, our preoccupation with trivia, our failings and our foibles, we are nevertheless members of the mystical body of Christ. We who are so earthly bound have a seat in the heavenly realms with Christ. We who are so focused on the now have a task of eternal significance. There are no trained Biblical characters somewhere else doing all this holy work. It’s just us, and people like us that comprise the world-wide fellowship that is the body of Christ. As we spend the next three weeks contemplating the mystery and majesty of the church as described in Jesus’ prayer in John 17, we do so remembering the reality. From the first disciples until now, all Christ’s members are flawed people. Jesus was not naïve. The extraordinary things he says about us were made knowing full well who we are—after all, one of the inner twelve had just betrayed him.

So knowing that, let’s dig in. As we study John 17, we realize first of all that it’s not about us, and it’s all about us. We are caught up in a larger story, a greater love, a higher drama. Our participation is not about our great choices, or our worthy deeds, or individual quests. The real story is the love that is the Triune God. The action is what is going on when by sovereign decision, the eternal Father sends the eternal Son to enter the world where a lost and wayward humanity dwells. The love between the Father and the Son has gone on for all eternity. Our story is about what happened when that love between Father and Son started to get played out on the field that is the world.

Don’t let talk of the Triune God shut down your mind. Most of us are functioning unitarians—we don’t really think of the Trinity even though we affirm this in our creeds. But let us think this through. God is love. That is the most important thing we know about God; our very lives depend on that fact. Love involves relationship. God is a being in relationship. Within the one God are three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each is fully, truly God. Each is his own person. Yes, this bends the mind. It sends one man back to Augusta National and another off to the mental shopping mall. But stay with me and consider the story. Imagine them just for a moment as distinct persons. The Father loves the Son and has from all eternity. He delights to share his divine life with him. The Son loves the Father, and delights to please him, to give himself in obedience. But obedience is not the way we think of it between boss and employee, servant and master, coach and player. Obedience is between equals, who find delight in freely offering themselves to one another.

Now it is the nature of love to be turned out from oneself toward the other. Love is only love when there is someone to love. Imagine that as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit loved one another in perfect joy and delight and fulfillment, they decided that this love could be magnified if it overflowed in creation. Let us create an entire universe filled with creatures whom we have made, who have a real existence apart from us so we can love them. Let us make human beings as most like the image of God. They will be male and female, finding their completion in loving one another and bringing forth new life, just as we do. And they in turn will be able to enter the joy of our love by loving us and one another.

Then, at the right time, we will bring this love that is between us right down into their midst. The Father sent the Son through the Spirit to enter the world in human flesh and bones. The Son loved his Father as he had from all eternity, though now he did so from inside our humanity. From his position as the man Jesus, the Son loved his Father and obeyed him and rejoiced in his love. We humans got caught in the crossfire of love between the divine persons.

Then the Father determined to give his Son Jesus a gift. A love gift. He gave Jesus the disciples. The Father gave the Son the church as his own possession. In some places, Scripture speaks of the church, the community of disciples, as the bride of Christ. We are the Father’s gift of a bride to his Son. In other places, Scripture speaks of the church as members of Christ’s body. He is the head and we are the members, the parts of his body. The church is the gift of the Father to the Son, of his body still in the world, still enacting his will. In other places, the church is spoken of as the temple of God, a house of worship built upon Jesus Christ as the foundation. We are the gift of the Father to the Son, of a beautiful, living temple where the Son may be glorified. We are the gift of the Father to the Son.

But also, we are the gift of the Son to the Father. The Son came to us as Jesus Christ in order to find us when we were lost, to heal us when we were sick unto eternal death. He came to save us from our sin and misery. He came to live the obedience and love that we cannot live on our own. Then the Son gives all he has accomplished to us. He gives us his righteousness. He gives us his obedience. He gives us his Word. He gives us his eternal life. Claiming us, transforming us, Jesus offers the church back to the Father. “You have given them to me, and I have taught them your Word, I have given them our love and life. So I offer these disciples back to you Father, as my offering of love to you. I have cleaned them up, cleansed them, and offer them now as spotless and pure through me, a gift to adorn your glory.”

We are the double gift. We are the gift of the Father to the Son. We are the gift of the Son to the Father. And in the process of that gift giving, look what happens to us. We get found when we were lost. We are called out of the darkness and into the light. We get healed when we were broken and battered. We get forgiven and our hard hearts are replaced with new hearts, new hearts that can respond to the love of God and to one another.

The third person of the Triune God also enters the picture. He is the one who empowers the human Jesus in his obedience and love of his Father while on earth. The Spirit is the love by which Jesus could offer his life on the cross and the Spirit is the power of the resurrection. This Holy Spirit is the gift of the Father through the Son to the church. Jesus sends him to dwell in our hearts, to be the glue between us and Christ. The Spirit is the mortar in the temple of God that holds us, the stones, together on the foundation. The Spirit is the sinews in the body that keeps us, the members, attached to Christ our Head. The Spirit is the pledge of love, the ring on the finger of the church, who is the bride of Christ, that indicates we are promised and sealed for our union with our husband, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the great pentecostal gift to us. But also, we are the Spirit's gift to the Father and the Son, as he labors in us to make us more and more like Christ. He transforms us and empowers our ministry—as a love gift to the Father and the Son.

This is what we ordinary scrubeenie Christians are caught up in. As you're doodling on your bulletin or noticing the dress on the woman in the next pew, or counting the organ pipes, you are also caught up in a love story great beyond imagination. The Father is giving you to his Son. The Son is giving you to his Father. The Spirit is being given to you and the Spirit is giving you to the Father through the Son. That's what the church is: the bride, the temple, the body, the gift.

Well, if you're like me, perhaps there's a little independent streak in you that is beginning to ask: "So what choice do I have in any of this? I mean, what about me? This doesn't seem to be about me. I seem to be just a participant in someone else's love story. I didn't choose this; I got chosen."

As my friend Cary would say, "You got that right." It's not about you. It's not about me. It's about the love story of the Father and the Son and the Spirit that opened up to include us. It's about an eternal love that reached down to scoop us up into it. It's about the God who came to save us, and declared, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." We can fight against this reality all our lives, and all we like, and choose to live in misery. But it won't change the reality. If you are here as one who trusts in Christ, it is because God chose you. He willed your salvation. He called you and

included you. He has stooped to pick you and me off the pile and say, "You will be my gift to the Son. You will be my gift to the Father." The choice we have is not about whether this is a reality. The choice we have is whether we will view this as a violation of our human authority and sovereign individual choice and thus curse it forever. Or whether we will see that this is the greatest news, the greatest joy, the deepest assurance, the highest love we can ever know.

Jesus began his prayer, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him." Once again, the story is first of all about what is going on between the Father and the Son. The hour for glory has come. Jesus is on the edge of arrest, trial, beating and crucifixion. He is on the edge of glory. As he prays later, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do." For the glory of the Son of God begins with his humiliation. He is God come to receive in himself the God-forsaken brokenness and rage of our human condition. He is God come to obey to the point of laying down his life that we might live. He will glorify, bring honor and praise to his Father by his obedience. The Father will glorify the Son in exalting him through death to life everlasting.

Jesus affirms in his prayer, that the Father has given him authority over all flesh. Jesus the obedient one is the one with true power of choice, with power to enact his will, the one with whom all creatures have to do. Part of this authority is to give a gift. By now that shouldn't surprise us. The Son has the authority to give the gift of eternal life. On whom does he confer such a gift? To those whom the Father has given him.

Then Jesus in his prayer defines eternal life. He prays, "And this is eternal life, to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Knowing God means entering a relationship. It means entering the love of the Father and the Son that has opened out now to include us. He calls us: Will you come and follow me? Will you consent to my joining you to myself? Will you be my bride? This is eternal life, to enter into a living knowledge of the Father and the Son in the Spirit.

In his prayer, Jesus asks, "Father glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." Then further along as he prays for us, Jesus says, "they have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me." Jesus affirms that the story began before the world was made. The Son and the Father have been glorifying each other. The crucial choice the disciples made was to believe that this man before them was actually the Son sent from the Father. He actually existed before his conception. He came from the Father

and was returning to the Father. This belief, this ability to see the larger story of the love between the Father and the Son opening out into our world, is what brought them into that living, knowing of the true God. It brought them into eternal life.

Over the coming weeks, we'll be talking about all that flows from such living knowledge. But let's close today with this one great thought. Just before he began this prayer, Jesus told his disciples, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me you might have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart; I have overcome the world."

Being caught up in the larger story of the Father and the Son is the path to peace. The world may produce tribulation. No, the world *will* produce tribulation. The world will wear us out. Death will invade us. We will seem to be lost. But, when we are caught up in the larger story, we see beyond the moment. "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer: I have overcome the world." The story of the Son who came from his Father is the story of passing through death into the victory of eternal life. In his obedience unto death, the Son overcame the world.

So in him we have peace. For it doesn't all depend on us. It's not about us. We are the Gift. We are the Gift of the Father to the Son, brothers and sisters to him whom he can make his own, to whom he can give eternal life. We are his glory. And we are the Gift of the Son to the Father, those who are included in the Son's obedience, righteousness, life and glory. We get it all as he offers us to his Father, members of his own body, a sanctuary of praise of which he is the foundation, the Son's own bride. We are caught in the crossfire of this divine love story.

All that is what is going on amidst the bulletin shuffling, the nodding, the distractions, the trivia of our lives. We are the Gift. Who would've thought?

Rev. Dr. Gerrit Dawson, is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Baton Rouge, LA. His most recent books are Discovering Jesus: Awakening to God and the forthcoming: Introduction to Torrance's Theology. He is a board member of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry.

The Gift: The Enemy Of The Church

Text: John 17:8-19

I went to the latest installment of the *Star Wars* saga with very low expectations. My appetite for space ship shoot 'em ups has waned since 1977. As the movie opened, I was preparing for a little nap. But then I was totally surprised by the depth of the story. We watched how Anakin Skywalker, the most talented young Jedi Knight was turned to the dark side. The evil Sith lord played upon his love for his wife and his fears for the safety of their unborn child. Anakin was told that by opening himself to the dark Force, he could gain the power to protect his family from death. Having been through the agony of seeing his mother taken from him, Anakin seeks unbridled power for the sake of the one he loves. Too late does he see the cruelty of this deception. Having killed a mentor, there is no turning back. A horrifying scene followed when we realize that Anakin had killed a dozen Jedi children. Wrongly trying to control what cannot be controlled, his

deceived quest for life turned him into the dealer of death.

As the carnage grew around him the more Anakin accumulated power, I couldn't help but think of another movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. It also was full of violence, but the brutality was turned towards one man, one with all authority who refused to protect himself. In stark contrast to Anakin, he gave away his power; he took the blows; he died in humility and abasement. Refusing the temptation to wrongful power, Jesus became the Savior of the world, the giver of life.

Getting it right about the nature of reality has enormous consequences. Living according to the truth or living under deception may involve only subtle choices of which road to take, but the final destinations of such paths are worlds apart. Now we might think that making the right choice would be as obvious as it is in a movie. But in the real world, there are enormous forces

arrayed against us. There are spiritual powers bent on leading us into illusion, and so to enslavement. Danger is afoot for the people of God.

Jesus knew this as he prayed his magnificent high priestly prayer recorded in John 17. As we pick up with verse 11, Jesus prayed concerning his disciples, "And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you." Judas had gone out to tell the authorities where Jesus might be found. Jesus had resisted the temptation to avoid the suffering of the cross. He had, in a sense, already completed his mission spiritually. But before the final drama, he paused to pray for those he would leave behind. He had begun the journey of leaving this world and returning to his Father. But his disciples would have to remain in the very world which would kill Jesus. "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me.... While I was with them, I kept them in your name.... I have guarded them.... I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one."

Immediately we see why Jesus is concerned. His disciples are the gift from his Father. He has cherished the gift and offered them back to his Father. They have, as we saw last week, been caught up in the great love story between the Father and the Son in the Spirit that then got played out in the field of earth, the world where we live. But now Jesus was leaving them, and they would be without his physical, guarding presence. Jesus named two enemies of his disciples: the world which hates the disciples as much as it hates Jesus, and the evil one, the malevolent power behind the world that resists its God.

Yes, we are the gift. We are the love-gift between Father and Son, those elected to be taken up into a relationship with him. We are those sent to tell that story and invite others. But the world rejected the eternal Son sent to save it. The people loved darkness rather than light. They preferred the lie to the truth. So Jesus had to be stopped. It would be no different for his disciples. To know the truth, to walk in the light, to joyfully join the love that beats at the heart of the universe is to rouse the ire of the world and the evil one. The church has deadly enemies.

How can this be? God so loved the *world* that he gave his only begotten Son. The world is the object of God's seeking, searching love. But the world also is defined as the whole system of resistance to the rule of the Triune God. The world is the field of self-assertion and independence from anything higher than ourselves. It is our attempt to organize life in such a way that we control it. The world represents all the ways we desire to be our own gods, to place humanity at the center of existence and the top of the heap. The world is the

system of trying to be sufficient on our own. Spirituality, according to this world, is what I choose for myself, the way I manage the mystery beyond me. The thought that there is a God with a definite will and a known nature who makes an actual claim on me is considered a horrible infringement on my rights. The world that desires to remain the world simply cannot hear the words of Jesus as he claims to be the truth, the light, the life. For Jesus would displace our egos on the throne of life, and that is not acceptable to the world.

This is the world that is in conflict with the church. And the church must accept this conflict. In fact, we may not flee it or evade it if we are to be faithful. Being engaged with the world is our mission. We are locked in a struggle with the world, for the sake of the world. If we drop what offends the world, we become of no use to the people of the world whom God loves. If we flee the world, we become of no use to the people of the world whom God loves. The great missionary and theologian, Lesslie Newbigin, has written:

The world does not know God. This contrast between knowing and not knowing God has to be stated with absolute clarity. Not to state it, to be silent about it, would be collusion with the power of the lie which rules the world. In a world which is organized around the self and seeks its own glory the statement "I know God" will be seen as an outrageous piece of self-glorification. Agnosticism will be seen as a proper modesty. But this modesty does not provide any way of escape from the world which is centered in the self. Its genial tolerance ends abruptly in the face of a claim that God has actually revealed himself in the flesh and blood of the man Jesus. This claim will appear as a shocking assault upon the sovereignty of the autonomous reason and conscience. The inevitable conflict is focused and resolved in the crucifixion of Jesus.¹

We are witnesses that the light has come into the world of darkness. The love of God has been revealed in the sending of his Son Jesus to save us. This is the way God is. It is the most wonderful news ever reported. But it is offensive, because the truth of it knocks away every other attempt to explain the reason why we are here and the purpose of human life. The world prefers to remain agnostic, so that the self remains in control. But being stuck with ourselves gives us no possibility of escape from the prison of self and our futility. We need a Word from above to free us. We need an action from beyond to get us out of ourselves. We are desperate for the truth, but we self-enthroned humans do not go quietly before the Lordship of our Savior.

So the world mocks Christians. Its favorite words in this decade include *rigid*, *strident*, *arrogant*, *narrow*, *exclusive*. These harsh words stop us right in our tracks. Who wants to be like that? The world's invective can silence our voice and dim our light. But

if we understand what is going on, we can resist taking these charges too seriously. When we see that the world is desperate to preserve its autonomy, we can understand why the story of Jesus raises such ire. When we realize that only those touched by the Spirit can receive such news, we understand why we will seem like aliens. This is normal. It helps, though, to see what is causing such words to pour forth upon us. The reality, I think, is that for every charge of being rigid, the case is that we are *firm* because we adhere to a reality we did not invent. Strident is actually *clarion*; we blow horns of grace that cut through the fog of this culture. Arrogant is the misnomer for those who are actually *consecrated* to a truth that is beyond us, so consecrated to that reality that we have no choice but to proclaim its truth. Narrow is just the slur on being *focused* on the truth, and exclusive is the smear for anyone who has *clarity* about what God has revealed.

If we are doing our job of loving the world and bringing the message of God's love for us in Christ, we may expect that we will be smeared by a world in rebellion against its Lord. Resistance is normal. Resistance is overcome by loving actions, by patient speaking of the truth in kindness and gentleness.

Jesus did not pray that the Father would keep us out of this conflict. No, he sent us into this engagement of the world. What he prayed is that we would be kept in the name of God, kept in the name of his Holy Father, kept from the evil one. In today's context, we hear Jesus' prayer as the prayer that the church would not collapse its story in order to avoid conflict. We need a mighty work of God to keep us from collapsing our borders and boundaries in a culture where the very presence of borders and boundaries is the absolute taboo. For if we stop being the church of Christ in order to get along with the world in the short term, we ultimately end up being cruel. For we fail to offer anything that can save the world from its self-centered will to power and bent for destruction.

Let's listen to Newbigin again:

When the Church is kept in the holy name of God it has a final commitment which is outside the comprehension of the world. Without this radical otherworldliness the Church has no serious business with the world. Archimedes said: "Give me a point outside the world for a fulcrum and I will move the world with a lever." If the Church does not rest on a point outside the world, it has no leverage with the world. All its tugging and straining is but a minor disturbance within the life of the world, and therefore it is still under the power of the evil one. The Church is marked off from the world by the fact that it has received and must witness to the word of God which is the truth and which thereby calls in question all the so-called axioms, absolutes, and self-evident propositions which are the stock-in-

trade of the world's life. It has to bear witness to the weakness and folly of a crucified messiah as the power and wisdom by which the world exists, is sustained, and will be judged. To accept this means to accept the overturning of the accepted wisdom of the world. It is therefore not a human possibility; it is a gift of God, a miracle, a new birth from above. Between the Church and the world, therefore, lies the boundary line which is called "conversion," and if the Church ignores this, it falls into the power of the evil one.²

The danger facing the church in America today is not persecution, though that is increasingly likely to be our lot. The danger is that the church will simply wimp out. We will become part of the world, not engage the world from a place outside of its values and ambitions. If we ignore the boundary line that "conversion" is required to enter the relationship with the Triune God of grace, then we simply leave people where they are, lost and hopeless. Our softness is not kind. It is cruel. If we have no Word from beyond, then all our pleading and tugging does not move the world at all. Our message is from above. Our Lord has come to reclaim his lost and wayward people. We are whom he has sent into the world, that well may hate us, with the news of a God who loves us so much that he came to live and die for us. Such salvation, though, means leaving the cesspool in which we are drowning. Jesus loves us as we are, but he loves us so much he does not leave us *as* we are. He summons us to more. The church must maintain that edge, or we are worthless.

Now, keeping our edge does not mean being obnoxious. Maintaining the claims of Christ does not mean bludgeoning people. Clearly defining what historic Christianity is and always has been doesn't mean strutting around like bantam roosters. But most of us are nowhere near in danger of any of those errors.

Rather, we need to get back into shape about our story. We need to stop letting a hostile world define us. We are called, as Peter says, to be able to give an adequate defense for the reason for the hope within us. For instance, will we let the media swamp us with the lie that those who resist destroying embryos are self-centered bigots who don't want people to be healed of diseases? Have we done the work to be able to explain the science, how adult stem cells have been used successfully but to date embryonic stem cells have not? Do we know how to articulate the theology that destroying life to save life is the choice of Anakin Skywalker, not Jesus, and historically has proved a very dicey way to go? In the area of sexuality, have we done the work to read the science to know that family and environment are the dominant factors in homosexuality and that no gay gene has been found? Do we know the theology of compassion and transformation that can lead us in a path that is neither blanket acceptance or

cruel bashing of those who are sexually conflicted? In the discussion of the plurality of religions, do we know what the other world views have to say? Do we know enough about our world view to be able to articulate our story in discussion with other faiths in such a way that we don't have to get all hyper and sweaty?

Yes, the world is hostile to the church. But the real work of the evil one, the enemy of the church, is to work within, urging us to collapse our boundaries in order to avoid conflict. That is the way the evil one hopes to render the church powerless. The real enemy works to close our mouths about the way, the truth and

the life that is in Jesus. That, of course, avoids strife in the short term, but ultimately it leaves the world mired in sin and despair, destruction and hopelessness.

We are called to more. Jesus prayed that we would be kept in the name of the Holy Father. This means remaining in the truth, the truth of his Word, and engaging the world in love with that truth.

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982, p. 115.

² *Ibid.* p. 235.

The Gift: The Mission Of The Church

Text: John 17:18; John 15:12-17

This afternoon, as we celebrate the calling of a pastor with the specific tasks of mission and pastoral care, of evangelism and love, of reaching out and caring within, we turn once again to the story of Jesus. We consider:

1) The mission of the Son is the mission given to him by his Father. The mission of Jesus is to be sent by the Father into the world:

“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5: 31).

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Lk 19: 10).

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3: 17)

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10: 10).

2) The mission of the Son is the mission of the church. Jesus prayed, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (Jn 17: 18). Earlier on he said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide” (Jn 15:16).

3) The mission of the church is to obey the Son and to teach others to be his disciples:

“Go therefore into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28: 20).

“And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” (I Jn 3: 23).

“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets” (Mt 7: 12).

“Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Mt 26)

Believe and love. That is our charge. Call others to belief and love. Do to others as you would have them do to you. What you do to the least, or don't do, you have done to me.

4) Enacting our mission occurs within a context. Our work takes place within the story of the Son. Only within his story does our mission have meaning. In particular:

a) **The glory of Christ is the glory of the church**

(Jn 17: 22)—

- glory of suffering the rejection of the world (Jn 15: 20-21)

- glory of “taking up our cross and following him” (Mk 8: 34)
- glory of dying daily (I Cor 15: 31)
- glory that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2: 20)
- the glory of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1: 27).

b) The joy of Christ is the joy of the church.

But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves (Jn 17: 13).

What is that joy of Jesus?

He told his disciples on the eve of his death, “Truly, truly I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.... I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn 16: 20-22).

The joy of Jesus is that though he dies, yet shall he live. Though the darkness encloses him, it cannot conquer him. He will rise and never die again. Life wins. Forgiveness wins. Love wins.

The joy of Jesus is his resurrection. But more, the joy of Jesus is that he returns to his Father. He completed his course, he remained faithful through death. He was vindicated in resurrection. He returned to his Father with our redemption won. Joy has conquered despair.

This is the joy he gives to us. He has returned. We will see him again.

c) The history of Christ is the foundation of the church and her mission.

“Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (Jn 17: 5).

“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (Jn 17: 24).

d) The future of Christ is the hope of the church.

“Father I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (Jn 17: 24-25).

He wants us to be with him.

“I go to prepare a place for you.... I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am, you may be

also.... I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (Jn 14: 2-3, 18).

Our hope is as secure as Jesus’ place in heaven. Our joy is as real as where Jesus is, in our humanity, in our name and on our behalf.

“We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf” (Heb 6: 19).

He is our reconciliation, our peace, our life—and he is safely through, at his Father’s side.

Thus, The **identity** of the church is enfolded in the eternal history of love between the Father and the Son. We are the gift of Father to Son and Son to Father.

The **goal** of the church is to be where Christ is, with him in the glory of the Father, Son and Spirit.

The **work** of the church is caught up in the history of Jesus, sent from the Father to redeem and save the world, returning to his Father to prepare a place for his bride.

5) The time of the church is the time between Christ’s departure and his return. The ascension marks the age of the church. This is the time for the mission of the church to be enacted. This is the time and space and breathing room for the world to repent and believe the gospel.

“Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.... Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6: 1-2).

“Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, ‘Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion’” (Heb 3: 13-15).

“Your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.... how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (I Thess 1:8-10).

“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable...so they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (I Pet 2: 12).

6) Summary: Within the history of Jesus, we enact our mission.

Within his eternal life with the Father before the foundation of the world and his life in the glory of his Father unto eternity, we enact our mission.

Within his return to his Father and his return to us from heaven, we have our time of **mission**.

“And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” (I Jn 3: 23).

Love and discipleship, seeking and saving the lost, doing unto the least and doing unto one another. Going to the ends of the earth and loving within the family. Without and within, the church enacts the life of the Son for the sake of the world.

Prayer In The Triune Life

by Gerrit Scott Dawson

“Prayer In The Triune Life” originally appeared in Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, May/June 2002 and is reprinted with kind permission.

Do you ever wonder whether your prayers get outside of your skull? Perhaps the whole spiritual life is merely a genetic program circulating through our brains. Maybe there is a religious propensity found more in one kind of humans than others, which causes the release of some sort of “spiritual” chemicals which make us feel connected to something we call Transcendent. After all, how could God “hear” our unvoiced prayers? Lying on our beds in the dark, we send our thoughts out from ourselves with the same mysterious impulse that causes our fingers to wiggle when we determine to move them. It happens, but we don’t really understand how. Of course there is an underlying chemistry to the connection between the brain and the movement of the body. A few highly educated people can actually trace that chemical path, but even for those scientists, the ineffable qualities of emotion and choice which lead to action elude us. In a similar way, there is a mystery to the reality of prayer which we will never fathom in this life. Yet prayer, like neurology, has a certain grammar which may be learned. Patterns and pathways exist for us to explore which have their origin in the very being of God.

The journey unfolds with questions: How does God hear our prayers? Where do our prayers go? Why does prayer work? What difference does it make if prayer is in the name of Jesus or not?

As creatures who live embodied in a world where we have to go from one place to another, our thoughts of

prayer are inevitably spatial. We pray to God “up there.” God hears us and sends an answer back “down here.” In more Trinitarian language, the whole journey of our prayer takes place within the life of God. The Holy Spirit, who prays in us and through us, conveys our prayers to the eternal Son who is at the right hand of the Father. The Son takes up our prayers, makes them his own and offers them, now cleansed and sanctified, to the Father. The Father who delights to answer the prayers of the Son replies, and the Son, in turn, pours out the Spirit in greater measure to us. Thus we are answered according to the will of the Triune God.

We know that this is a symbolic way of speaking about a true reality that is beyond description. For surely the Father does not need to wait to hear our prayers via the Spirit and the Son to know what we have said! For the Triune God, the entire creation is present simultaneously and equally in the divine awareness. The God who hears a penguin feather fall to the ice in Antarctica maintains at the same time a perfect awareness of the tiny sound made when a cell inside your body is invaded by a virus, while yet distinguishing every other event occurring in the world. The inside of the lining of an artery is just as clear to the sight of God as the mountain peak that juts before our eyes. There is no effort for God in perceiving one thing more than another. Nor is there any time lag between our prayers and God’s hearing of them. God is not delayed by the speed of sound nor even the speed of light.

We employ—or more truly said, God in gracious condescension has employed for us—metaphors of time and space to consider what is really a matter of relationships. There is a gap between us and God, a difference between us that requires *reaching speech* to cross. Human beings and God are not one and the same. God has granted us an existence of our own, even though all our life is lived in, through, and from the three Persons of the Trinity. God accommodates our frailty and speaks in a way we can hear, acts in the world in ways we can perceive, stoops to meet us where and as we are. Whether we were as large as a galaxy or smaller than an electron, mere stature would be no barrier to the God who made us. God can get to us as we are. But we have trouble getting to God. We pray—we offer up our thoughts and words—but we may well wonder if or how we are getting through to God. What’s the problem? We know we can never comprehend all that God is; our capacities remain miniscule. Yet we also know in our bones that the limitations of our creatureliness are not really the issue. This gap between us and God is more than the mere disparity between finite creatures and the infinite Triune Creator.

The separation is one of relationship. Human sin has made the gap unbridgeable from our side of the divide. The Scriptures tell us how from the beginning our desire to be our own gods and have our own way has created a rift in our communion with the One who made us. How sad is the story of God’s call to Adam and Eve that fateful evening in the Garden. “Where are you?” This is the question that touches our deep spiritual loneliness. Where are we? Hiding from shame, pretending we cannot be found the way toddlers cover their eyes in hide and seek as if that makes them invisible. We run from God to the farthest shores and then throw back the question in defiance, “Where are you, God? Why do my prayers seem to fall on deaf ears?” The Lord knew perfectly well where Adam and Eve were. Our physical location does not separate us from God but rather our spiritual condition. Now even our ability to perceive God’s presence has been vastly diminished. All our thoughts of God are distorted by what Luther described as our being curved in on ourselves. The grammar of prayer must account for this condition of separation and the efforts God has made to cross the divide and restore our capacity for relationship.

The Mediator

God’s response to our suspended conversation was to bridge the gap by coming to us as a human being. Each person of the Triune God was, and is, involved. Sent by the Father, the eternal Son of God became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). As one of us, from our side of the divide, Jesus entered the intimate communion with his Father of which we were incapable. He did so

by being above all the man of the Spirit. Conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary (Lk 1:35), Jesus beheld the Spirit descend upon him as a dove as he rose from the waters of his baptism (Lk 3:22). The same Spirit led him into the wilderness for his temptations and sustained him through his trials (Lk 4:1), not only there, but also in Gethsemane. Jesus was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 4:14) in order to preach the good news and heal the sick. He even prayed by means of the Spirit. At one point, we read of him rejoicing in the Spirit as he gave thanks to his Father that through himself the Father might be made known to the humble rather than the wise (Lk 10:21). Through the eternal Spirit (Heb 9:14), Jesus made his ultimate offering as he gave his life on the cross. Then, raised in the Spirit by the power of God (I Pet 3:18, Rom 8:11), Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father. There, Jesus who conducted his entire life in the fullness of the Spirit received even more as the ascended Lord who “received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:33) that he might in turn pour out the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost.

This living out of a human life in our name in intimate fidelity to the Father through the Spirit transformed the possibilities for all humanity. Jesus in his obedience *by means of* the Holy Spirit made human beings once more a fit dwelling place *for* the Holy Spirit. As Irenaeus wrote long ago,

The Son of God...when He became incarnate, and was made man, He commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us, in a brief, comprehensive manner, with salvation; so that what we had lost in Adam—namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God—that we might recover in Christ Jesus (*Against Heresies*, III. 18. 1).

Jesus “commenced afresh” a humanity that can live in intimate communion with God. So not only did the Triune God cross the divide with reaching speech as Jesus revealed to us his Father, but *from our side* Jesus offered the reaching speech of human faithfulness and response to God. Jesus is the living bridge between humanity and God. Because Jesus himself is both fully human and fully divine, he is our mediator not only through his gracious acts but also in his very person.

This is why prayer is in the name of Jesus. We cannot cross the breach between us and God. But Jesus is God come to our side. He is united forever to our humanity so that we may speak to him and be heard. Moreover Jesus has united our humanity to his divinity so that in him our human prayers reach all the way to God the Father. The interruption in communion between God and humanity has been overcome as long as the human and divine are held together in the person of Jesus—and that union is forever!

Returning to the earlier imagery, hiding was the human response to God after communion was broken. Jesus brought humanity out from behind the bushes and gave a new answer of availability. He restored prayer as the faithful response to God. The book of Hebrews explains this through the use of a remarkable series of Old Testament passages ascribed to Jesus:

For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Here am I and the children whom God has given me." (Heb 2:11-13)

First, we see that the one who makes us fit for communion with God, and we people, the ones he makes fit, are bonded as family. Literally, Hebrews says we are "all out of one." We are cut from the same piece of cloth, the humanity we have in common with Jesus. And he is pleased to be related to us. Second, we hear that the incarnate Son of God reveals God to his brothers and sisters in the flesh. But then, thirdly, we hear that Jesus the man will praise his Father in the midst of the assembled, summoned people of God. Fourth, Jesus reverses the hiding and shame of our first parents.¹ In response to the deep and abiding question of God, "Where are you?" Jesus answers, "Here I am! Here I am and the children I have gathered because you gave them to me." These passages are not just in the past tense, as something done once long ago. They are present and future tense. They are occurring right now and will continue to do so! The very person of Jesus provides the living dynamic for prayer in his name. All prayer and indeed all worship is a participation in Jesus' own prayer and praise to the Father, in our name.

The Conveyer

How does this occur? How are we participants in what the Son of God is doing? Since he is removed physically from us through the ascension to the right hand of the Father, how is it that he can be said to be in the midst of our congregations? The answer to all three questions is deceptively simple: through the work of God the Holy Spirit. Though the resurrected Christ has departed the earth, in the Holy Spirit he is not removed from us. The Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, and brings his presence to us in worship and prayer, most especially in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. And the Spirit lifts us up, *spiritually*, in our prayers to the throne of God where Jesus serves as our mediator, priest, intercessor and worship leader. Through the Spirit, then, the ascended Jesus comes to be in our midst, and through the same Spirit we are brought in into the Father's welcoming presence.

Jesus compared the Spirit to the wind, whose effects we see though we never see the wind itself (Jn 3:8). Similarly, speaking of the Holy Spirit is like trying to describe the wind. We make more sense when we mention trees swaying and a chill on our cheeks than when we try to name the invisible force directly. For the Spirit is always directing attention to the other persons of the Triune God, especially the words and works of the Son. Jesus said:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (Jn 16:13-15)

In this we overhear the inner dynamics of the Triune God. The Father gives all to the Son; the Son gives his life in love for the Father and the world. The Spirit, who has empowered the Son all along, goes on to make the Son known, speaking only what the Son has said, and so leading us into all the truth of who Jesus is. Thus the Holy Spirit brings Jesus the mediator to us, and in so doing reveals to us who the Father truly is (Mt 11:27).

In turn, the Holy Spirit brings us to Jesus. Paul wrote, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). The presence of God within us is the Holy Spirit who initiates all our faith, all our prayers, our entire response to God. Paul wrote, "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Gal 4:6). So the Spirit confirms with inner assurance our union with Christ; within us the Spirit "bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God" (Rom 8:16). Woven deeply inside our souls, the Holy Spirit prays from within us even when we do not know what to pray. Sometimes the Spirit speaks for us to the Father with groanings too deep for words (Rom 8:27) and in the intimacy of the Triune life, the Father searches, finds and understands these utterances of the Spirit on our behalf. Yet we recall that such exchanges all run through the person of the Son. Prayer requires the living work of Christ the mediator. Our link with him is his own Spirit sent within us to unite Christ to us and us to Christ so that in him we might re-enter communion with the Father.

In his book, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Andrew Murray wrote:

All the fullness is in Jesus; the fullness of grace and truth, out of which we receive grace for grace. The Holy Spirit is the appointed conveyancer, whose special work it is to make Jesus and all there is in him for us ours in...blessed experience.²

The word *conveyancer* is splendidly evocative. The Spirit carries our prayers to Jesus, who is at the right hand of God, interceding with his very life for us. And in turn, the Spirit carries all that Christ is to us back to us. So we have two intercessors, praying for us and enabling our prayers: the Spirit within and Jesus the Son above at the right hand of the Father. The Spirit is the connector between Christ and us, bringing all that Jesus is and does into our present experience. The Spirit is the artery between Jesus the Head and his Body the church, communicating all the essential life, energy and information that we need.

The grammar of prayer, then, is the Triune life of God. Even as the divine Persons flow in and out of one another in perfect love, so identifying the role of each in our prayers always leads to the sense that the work of one Person is tumbling into another in an endless circle of love. It is with the crossing of the divide in the arrival of Jesus the Son that this circle of the Triune life

opens to us. Jesus is our mediator, even now. His very person, in whom God and humanity are united and reconciled, makes prayer possible. We are brought into this wonderful union by the gracious activity of the blessed Holy Spirit. The Spirit, we now see, is not only the bond of love between Father and Son but also the bond of union between us and Christ Jesus so that in the Spirit we are taken into the very life of God. Our prayer in the Spirit through the Son to the Father is nothing less than a dynamic participation in the Triune God of Love.³

¹This link between the hiding of Adam and the “Here I am” of Jesus is explored by Baxter Kruger in *God is For Us*, Jackson, MS: Perichoresis Press, 1995.

²Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revel, 1953, p. 43.

³Prayer in the Triune life is a theme dear to the heart of Scottish theologian James Torrance whose thought underlies this article. See his *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1996.

**We need your partnership to continue this vital ministry!
Please send a donation today to:**

***New Address!* Theology Matters
P.O. Box 3940
Fredericksburg, VA 22402**

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)’s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry
P.O. Box 3940
Fredericksburg, VA 22402-3940

Address Correction Service

NON-PROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AUTOMATED
MAILING
SYSTEM