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DOCTRINE FOR TODAY

SERIES: THE ARMY'S ELEVEN ARTICLES OF FAITH

We believe that there are three persons in the Godhead – the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, undivided in essence and co-equal in power and glory.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The study of Christian doctrine would be considerably less complicated if the Bible contained a straightforward and unequivocal exposition of the Trinity. Instead we have the testimonies of eyewitnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the Early Church's attempts to find words to describe and interpret what it saw and experienced. How, for example, did the Christ who lived, died and rose in their midst relate to the Father and Creator of all things? And how did Jesus and his Father relate to the Holy Spirit? It took centuries for the Church to develop the language, and with it a coherent theology, to explain how God can be Father, Son and Holy Spirit and yet 'One God'.

More recent theologians usually approach the doctrine of the Trinity in two traditional ways. The first is God's successive self-revelation through Creation, salvation history, and in the persons of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The second relates to how Christians understand the

inner nature of God. In other words: What do we learn from God's self-revelation about the inner nature and life of God? And how does this impact upon Christian life, teaching and worship?

THE REVEALED TRINITY

In terms of the 'revealed Trinity' the New Testament demonstrates that the apostles and the Early Church had a strong sense that Jesus was more than a prophet and more than just a human agent commissioned to fulfil God's will and purposes. The first Christians evidently had no doubt that the man Jesus who had walked with them was also divine. John's Gospel (1:1-3) and the letters of Paul (Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-19) describe how Jesus was present and active in Creation, sharing the divine nature and central to the redemption of all things. Thus the great theological themes of Judaism, God's activity in Creation and salvation history, are ascribed also to Christ.

The same can be said of the Holy Spirit. The Bible describes him in terms that clearly take the reader back to the Creation story in which the eternal and pre-existent Spirit is present and active (Genesis chapters 1 and 2) as he is also in the subsequent life and history of Israel and in the life of the believer and the Church (Romans 8:1-17).

Later generations came to speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as

'distinct but not separate'. This is how God has made himself known through the revelatory process of Creation, salvation history, Christian experience and the Church. The unity of will and purpose that is at the heart of our understanding of God's self-revelation from the moment of Creation leaves no room for degrees of deity, division of powers, competing wills or any hierarchy of divinity. We speak of 'Three persons', but of only 'one substance or essence'.

THE RELATIONAL TRINITY

In some ways the picture that emerges from the 'revealed' approach to the Trinity is about differentiation and function. In general terms we recognise God the Father as the Creator and preserver of all things. The Son is the self-giving Saviour, and the Spirit is God present in the world today working in and through the Church, both in the lives of individual believers and in the life of the Christian community.

However, we cannot be satisfied simply with having sorted out 'who does what' in the Godhead. The interrelationship of Father, Son and Spirit has to be understood in terms of the inner life of God as well as the apparent function of each of the three persons.

The 'tri-unity' (trinity) of God has been expressed in different kinds of analogy over the centuries: water, ice,

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

MANY CHRISTIANS ADDRESS THEIR PRAYERS TO 'GOD OUR FATHER' AND OTHERS WOULD PRAY TO 'JESUS'. HOW DO YOU ADDRESS GOD IN YOUR PRAYERS?
HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE UNITY OF WILL AND PURPOSE IN THE LIFE OF OUR CHURCH/CORPS WITHOUT DENYING THE DIVERSITY THAT IS ALSO A GIFT FROM GOD?
WHAT DOES THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY SAY TO US ABOUT HOW PEOPLE SHOULD RELATE TO EACH OTHER?

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vapour; the three-leafed shamrock, and even in terms of the family unit – father, mother and child. This last analogy leaves us with the distinct problem of a hierarchical relationship rather than an essential unity. It also draws us away from the inner nature of God to attempts to reconcile the 'number issues' in the doctrine.

In the fourth and fifth centuries Saint Augustine developed a 'psychological' model of the Trinity according to which Father, Son and Spirit are universally reflected in the human psyche, as the self, the understanding and the will. While this and other analogies are helpful in terms of distinctness, they do not necessarily help us with the problem of the essential unity of the Godhead.

In the 20th century the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann proposed a more relational approach of the Trinity. He taught that there is a parallel relationship between the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Spirit and the indwelling presence of God in the Church.

Moltmann draws together two particular biblical insights to highlight this principle of mutual indwelling. One is the continued presence of God in the scattered community in the period of the Exile; the other is in the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John chapter 17:

'I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit'
(Isaiah 57:15)

AND

'Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me'
(John 17:21).

In *The Crucified God* Moltmann explained the distinct yet unifying roles of Father, Son and Spirit in the crucifixion of Christ:

'The son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son.'

The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. At the heart of the inner life of God therefore lies not only divine majesty, but a fellowship of suffering:

'The Son suffers abandonment and death, the Father suffers the death of the Son in the infinite grief of love, and the Spirit is the love that cries out with them and binds Father and Son.'

In all of this the Holy Spirit is the unconditional bond of self-surrendering *agape* (or divine love) that binds both the Father and Son, and enables forgiven and redeemed humanity to be drawn into this fellowship of love.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth speaks in perhaps more accessible terms when he uses three simple expressions – 'Giver, Given and Gift' – to describe the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit at Calvary.

However, for Moltmann it is the cry of grief that rends 'the silence of eternity': The Son's cry of abandonment on the cross, the Father's cry of anguish as he enters into his Son's sense of abandonment, and the Spirit who is himself the broken-hearted cry of love in the face of this horror. The inner life of God is not merely a serene unity of will, purpose and mission: it is essentially a fellowship of suffering and a community of love, a mutual indwelling into which the earthly community, the Church, is drawn through the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Christian teaching on Creation and redemption highlights the oneness of will and purpose that unites the Father, Son and Spirit. Yet, their unity is not purely functional, it is essentially relational. This helps us to understand better God's intention for the life of the Church. It too is a social organism; people relating to each other, indwelt by God, living in fellowship with him, worshipping, mirroring and participating in his life through worship, prayer and service.