

THE TRINITY

The truth is: If you *have to* believe something, you cannot really believe it. If belief is a forced or fear-based demand, then true belief is no longer possible. If we come to convictions honestly and because of what we have lived through, then that is meaningful. If somebody hands us a formula or a construct we are supposed to agree to because they “said so,” that is never a genuine belief. Coercion does not lead to true conviction. God designed us for freedom. No matter how many complaints we have about it, free will is built into us.

I have been watching for a chance to talk with you a little about “The Trinity.” It doesn’t matter to *your* faith what I think about The Trinity, but it does matter what *you* think about The Trinity. On the other hand, it is difficult to raise the question in any meaningful way unless I include some things about what The Trinity means to me.

Christmas does raise the question, for anyone willing to ponder it. Who was and is Jesus – really? I tell you Jesus is God’s Messiah. Most of you have picked up long since that I believe we have gone way overboard with the Deity thing when we think or talk about Jesus’ true identity. Jesus is not God. Jesus *prays* to God, and He is unbelievably intent on discerning and obeying *the will* of God. But if we say that Jesus is God, I don’t think that is scriptural. I think it obscures and confuses the story we find in the New Testament.

In actual fact, I think Jesus’ true identity is beyond all of our language and puerile theological concepts. Jesus is both *like* us and *beyond* us. That is, He shares our earthly existence in ways very familiar to what we know life is like here. But He cares, shares, decides, and lives for values and goals that surprise and astound me. He knows fear, but never seems to let fear rule Him. He values the people He meets way beyond what I am capable of on my best days. Yet He never seems to let them control or coerce Him, nor does He try to coerce or control *them*.

When the pressure and threats mount, and they do so with greater fierceness all through His ministry, Jesus continues on His Path and does not turn aside from His mission or purpose. He does seem so very human, but way beyond my way of being human. And even though I greatly admire and respect some of the humans I know, He lives way beyond them too. He lives way beyond all of us.

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This has caused considerable mayhem, of course. The only easy explanation is that Jesus is Divine. It is far easier to jump Jesus into a category we cannot hope to attain, than to bother trying to follow Him into the WAY of Life He is trying to invite us into. While claiming that Jesus is God does match later creeds, it flies in the face of the earlier Scriptures, one of which is very familiar at Christmastime: “To all who did accept him, who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God, born not of human stock, by the physical desire of a human father, but of God.” (John 1:12-13) That passage is not talking about Jesus; it is talking about us. “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail ...” (John 6:63) It is the baptism and His prayer life that set Jesus apart – not the Virgin Birth. What is the *real* miracle? The real miracle is seeing what happens if we humans get really close to God and actually trust God’s love, forgiveness, and mercy.

So are all of us able to live the kind of life Jesus lived? Well, that’s the conundrum, isn’t it? Among other things, it asks: How many of us are really trying? Do any of us know anyone who is *not* really trying? I know lots of people who are doing the best they can, but what has that got to do with following Jesus?

It is being born of the Spirit that leads us into new dimensions. And all of us are invited. Nevertheless, for much of Christendom throughout history, it has not been enough for Jesus to be God’s Messiah; it has not been enough for Him to be awakened at His baptism to a relationship with God closer and clearer than any other human has ever had. By the fourth century A.D., we wanted to be absolutely certain that Jesus had enough power to save us. So great was our fear, we decided that Jesus had to BE GOD – not just God’s agent – in order to save us. And so, ironically, Jesus could no longer lead us into the Life that He Himself had discovered. We could not have a life as close to God as Jesus had; we could not find the guidance or strength or power of the Holy Spirit and let it shape and form our lives like Jesus did. We wanted to be saved by the blood in a magical way so that we would not have to have anything to do with it ourselves. Children of all ages want to believe in miracles so they don’t have to do their chores anymore. Especially not their spiritual chores. So we turned Jesus into God, and now we don’t have to “follow Him” anymore. We can just venerate Him from afar.

Maybe it helps some of you, but it does not help me to simply say that Jesus is divine. Our concepts and notions of divinity are often as thoughtless and insipid as our concepts of humanity. Nor is there much agreement among us about what “divinity” means. Is Jesus The Divine going to cast everyone He doesn’t like into a lake of fire, where they can be tortured throughout eternity? Is God just an overgrown human because we are made in God’s image? Is God the “numinous other,” beyond all images and definitions? And if so, do we have any reason to suppose that God cares about us, loves us, or even notices us? Why should God give a damn about any of us infinitesimal humans? There are over seven billion of us. Does God hear all our prayers? Can we actually fathom an intelligence or a caring that can encompass all of us? And what if there are other planets with populations beyond ours?

It doesn’t matter what I believe. What matters is what is true. But as it happens, I have come to believe that God has such capacities – such caring and love and awareness – and enough for all of us. But apart from Jesus, I would be as blasé about it as most of the other Christians I know. They swallow it all whole without giving it much thought, so it does not reach very deep within them. They can move earnestly toward tithing for twenty years and never get past one or two percent. Not to worry; God can afford it. But they are cheating themselves out of the greatest partnership on earth.

It annoys some people that I question biblical interpretations and creeds from the fourth century and that I question Christian traditions that have been too sacred to examine for five centuries. But it annoys me to be told that an Apostle’s Creed – worked out in the fourth century – understands all spiritual truth on both the human and the divine levels of all reality. Especially so when it seems clear to me that Jesus was aware of spiritual dimensions way beyond what any of His followers were able to fathom or follow Him into when He lived on earth. Most of His followers, for instance, held convictions based on limited real estate. The flat earth, as they knew it, was the only stage on which any real drama could take place. So when people died, they had to wait in the grave until one phase of earth history was concluded, since there was no place else to put them. Then God had to clean things up – remodel the old stage into a new Heaven and a new earth – so that the next phase of the drama could go on. Then there was room again for people to come out of their graves and, if appropriate, take part in Act II: a better life here.

Yet Jesus is comfortable knowing that the heroes of the past are alive with God in some dimension nobody knows or can imagine. Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, and they recognize Him and each other. They do not seem a bit sleepy, and they know Jesus and what He has been going through. Where have they been for the last thirteen hundred years or so? Jesus is blowing the ceiling off of most convictions. As Jesus once commented to the Sadducees: “*You understand neither the scriptures nor the power of God.*” Jesus lives and thinks and chooses and believes way beyond the mental constructs of His time.

In 1973, a horse named Secretariat ran a race at Belmont Park against a small field of five of the other fastest racehorses of his time. Secretariat crossed the finish line thirty-one lengths ahead of the next-fastest horse. That was not possible. Nobody could or would have believed it was possible. But it happened anyway. Jesus is not possible either. He lived the spiritual life thirty-one lengths ahead of anyone else who has ever lived. So we do not believe it – until we pay enough attention to *see* it. Some say Secretariat must have been born of a virgin (that is, had magical bloodlines). But there are other, better explanations.

Do any of you actually suppose that we all mean the same thing when we talk about God? So if we conclude that Jesus *is* God, do we mean or learn anything from that beyond sheer gibberish? “God” is a title – not a name. A title may give us some information about a *position* someone holds, but it gives us no information about what kind of *person* they are – or in God’s case, what kind of *being* they are.

Jesus is the “Son of God.” I happen to like this phrase. That is, I like what it means to me. But what it means to me is mostly poetry – not math or physics, and certainly not biology. Aside from being ludicrous if I try to take it literally, what does Jesus being the Son of God say about God’s wife? Or if God has no wife, what does it say about God’s morals?

So back to The Trinity. Believe it or not, I love The Trinity. But I do not love The Trinity if you or anyone else tries to turn it into a creed. A creed turns something into an unquestionable tenet of truth. It then becomes a test of faith – that is, if you believe it, you are “in”; if you disbelieve it, you are “out.” If somebody asks me, “Do you believe in The Trinity?” – what they are also asking is, “Are you a Christian and one of us, or are you going to Hell?” And they are not

inviting me into a conversation where we might talk about our faith together, share experiences, or learn from each other. It just saves a lot of time to find out in a minute or two whether I'm even worth talking to in the first place. That cuts both ways, of course. If they think Christianity is about three spiritual laws or any other cookie-cutter formulas, I don't want to waste my time talking to them either.

If we do not turn it into a creed, The Trinity is a heightened awareness and a joyful recognition. It is also a very useful means of clearer communication between Christians. Are we talking about what we observe from the way Creation is put together? Are we talking about what we have learned watching Jesus? Are we talking about what we think we have discovered in our own prayer lives? It often saves time and miscommunication if we can let each other know which area of experience we are talking about.

Most of Christendom in our time treats The Trinity as a creed. And about eighty percent of Christendom will tell you that if you don't "believe in The Trinity" (whatever that means), you are no true Christian. And in fact, you are pretty much certain to be heading straight to Hell. Well, the traditional Hell is not part of any creed I believe in, any more than The Trinity is, so that falls on deaf ears in my case. If I do not believe the gibberish of the one, why would I fear the gibberish of the other?

Ah, but that is not the only story. The Trinity – from the outset and, in my case, still – reminds us and points us to three ways that God declares to us something about what God is like, what God cares about, what God is trying to do with us and for us. In short, The Trinity refers to three basic ways we can begin to know something about what the content of the title "God" contains. That interests me. In fact, nothing I know or can imagine is more interesting or more important to me.

By the way, I do not imagine that "The Trinity" says it all either. The true God, no doubt, has more than three sides or facets or aspects. But three is already more than I can fathom or keep up with. Besides, if we start talking about God as the quintessential essence of infinite personhood – the seven billion beings who are yet "one" – well, for people with finite brains like mine, that is not at all helpful.

The Trinity started out being very helpful. That is, in the three hundred years before the Christian church started to turn it into a creed, The Trinity was merely trying to be helpful in our communications.

1.) Some Christians thought they could deduce and learn certain things by paying more and more attention to THE CREATOR – that is, to how God made things. It is the primary foundation of all science. Some things work in creation and some things do not. It is no simplex formula, but it is still very revealing. Some approaches and methods seem to work for a limited period of time and then begin to deteriorate. That confuses many of us. But there is dependable rhyme and reason under the surface – if we go looking for it. More and more we destroy the planet if we do *not* go looking for it and pay attention to it. In any case, the Creator is one of the pillars of The Trinity. We learn certain things about the Creator by watching how the Creator does things. There are major themes and principles in Creation that may give us hints about what the Creator is like, and how we can learn what we are supposed to learn from our experience here.

2.) Another major contention or belief of Christians is that we learn a lot about God by paying attention to JESUS. That does not mean that Jesus is God. If Jesus is God’s Messiah, then God is revealing more about the mind and heart and purposes of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus than we can learn in any other way or by looking in any other direction. It is not easy or automatic for any of us to truly believe this. But if we come to believe this, then we do eventually want to “follow Jesus.” Jesus’ actions, beliefs, and opinions become more important to us than our own. Which is why we talk about “New Life” and “being born anew” and turning will and life over to someone who knows more about true LIFE than we do.

Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. What happens to us if we actually and truly start trusting Jesus? It becomes a matter so huge that we start getting into Disciple Bands to talk and to study and to share our experiences, strength, and hope (to coin a phrase). And the mysteries of what Jesus teaches and does become a lifelong study for many of us.

3.) THE HOLY SPIRIT, in my mind, is not as separate from Jesus as it seems to be for most other Christians that I read or talk to. Because of Paul’s experience on the Damascus Road, I think of the Holy Spirit as synonymous with the Risen Jesus. I’m not talking about

precision definitions, of course. But Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come to guide His followers after His death. So when Paul asks the Being who has stopped him on the Damascus Road, “*Who are you?*” and the reply is, “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting*” – well, that makes everything fit, for someone as simple-minded as I am.

So I think the Holy Spirit is Jesus in His higher identity. But this is also the Jesus who has risen from the dead, and who meets and guides and comforts and inspires us whenever we can listen or apprehend His presence – and especially in our prayer lives.

So I love The Trinity, but not as creed. I love The Trinity as the way God is actively trying to reach us and help us on the WAY.

Sometimes people ask me, “But who should I pray to?” This seems a strange question to me, I suppose because it often comes with a note of trepidation, like it is important to get the answer right; dire things might happen if we address our prayers to the wrong place or the wrong person. How long does it take us to shake all the old images of fear and worry out of our belief systems? This is the God of LOVE, who cares about us more patiently and genuinely than we have ever cared about ourselves. And all the facets of this God – all the ways we learn or know anything about this God – are deeply consistent with who this God is and what this God is really like.

Everybody here knows that by now, right? If you read the Book of Revelation and come up with an evil, angry, punishing God, then either Revelation is wrong or you read it wrong. You do know that, don’t you? If you listen to a preacher and go away feeling guiltier or more frightened or more alone than ever, then either that preacher is full of ... then either that preacher is in error or you heard him or her incorrectly.

There are lots of bad, wrong messages and messengers “out there.” Some of them are hangovers from past impressions that malign and misunderstand God – meaning, they do not match *at all* what Jesus reveals to us about the *true* God. That is the mission and purpose of Jesus’ life among us: to reconcile us to the true God who made us, who loves us, and who has a purpose and a plan for each one of us.

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The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – and therefore the God and Father of us too – is never about punishment. This God is always about correction and encouragement, and about any and every way that God can come up with to help us on our WAY, to bring us to fullness of Life, to help us to awaken to the true spiritual realms, and to bring us eventually into the future realms of unbelievable grandeur and joy and love.

So who should you pray to? Hey, pray to whoever comes into your mind first – and then know for sure and with utter confidence that whoever you are praying to will tell the others.