

Trinitarian Spirituality: Relationships, Not Roles

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Trinitarian thought rests on two affirmations: (1) God/Ultimate Reality is One, and (2) Jesus of Nazareth is divine. Orthodox Christianity holds to both truths at the same time. Throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians hammered out the implications of this dual affirmation in some detail. No doubt other participants in the Trinity Blogging Summit will fill in the many details.

For my part, I would like to address a thin slice of the practical implications of Trinitarian belief. Namely, how does Trinitarianism inform Christian spirituality?

The Baptism of Jesus

Let me quote a single passage of Scripture from which to develop my train of thought:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mk 1:9-11)

What is going on in this passage, theologically speaking? What do (1) a voice from heaven and (2) the Spirit of God have to do with (3) Jesus at his baptism? A non-Trinitarian, especially of the modalist

variety, will say that the voice, the dove, etc., are things “staged” for human consumption. They are divine condescensions to humanity’s inability to conceive of God as God really is. They certainly don’t imply that God can be experienced in/as three distinct, eternally existing relational nodes, and that these nodes interact with one another. A Trinitarian, however, will say that in this episode we see a glimpse of the inner life of the Trinity.

There are other episodes where a Trinitarian reading suggests we are peering into something of the very nature of God. I think in particular of the instances where we see Jesus praying to his Father or promising to ask the Father to send the Spirit. In these passages, Trinitarians perceive that somehow we are on holy ground.

Is God Knowable?

How can humans relate to God? Will God (*can* God) make himself known to finite human beings? Consider this question in view of Jesus’ baptism. In that scene, with Jesus in the water, the Spirit descending, and the heavenly voice announcing divine pleasure in the Son, do we see *God as he really is*, or do we see God “wearing masks” or “playing roles”? Are we seeing relationships that are central to the divine essence, or are we seeing temporary things meant for our edification?

If God is ultimately unknowable, the baptismal scene is merely a divine object lesson and are left with the God of Arius, “the Alone with the Alone.” Trinitarian theology repudiates this understanding of God and asserts that absoluteness is not the most essential characteristic of God; love is. We see this love most clearly in the self-giving vulnerability of Jesus as he dies for our sins the cross. If, contrary to Arius, God can indeed be known—in fact yearns to be known by us—we discover a God who shares himself with his creatures and, in the words of 2 Peter 1:4, we “become participants of the divine nature.”

Knowing and loving God is at the heart of Trinitarian spirituality. “God is love,” the Bible says (1 Jn 4:8). But if God is love, then whom did God love before anyone or anything else existed? If there was no one for God to love, how can love be an essential aspect of God rather than something God assumed once he had created the universe and had fitting objects of his love? This poses a theological dilemma if God is not Trinity. In that case, “[f]rozen within the singularity of his transcendency, [God] can never experience community” (Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* [Zondervan, 1997] 18).

Trinitarian thought safeguards the eternity of God’s love by positing the eternal self-giving love of the Father and the Son. From eternity, God has existed in a community of oneness in which relationship is key. Indeed, it is all there is.

Yet what if Father, Son, and Spirit only *appear* to exist in such a community of oneness? What if, as with Arius, the Son did not truly share the divine essence of the Father. Then there would be no oneness. What if, as with Sabellius, the Father, Son, and Spirit were merely three “roles” God plays in his dealings with human beings? Then there would be no community. If the relational aspects of God we find in the New Testament are something God merely assumed in time, then, in the words of Greg Boyd, the apparent personal interaction between Father, Son, and Spirit “simply cannot be genuine” (*Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity* [Baker, 1992] 181).

Spirituality Is about Relationships, not Roles

Our spirituality is shaped by what we think about God’s self-revelation in Christ. By “spirituality” I simply mean all that comes with living out one’s commitment to God. Academically, we can describe various spiritualities by asking two key questions. First, how does this spirituality distinguish between what is authentic and what is inauthentic? In other words, what are the values to which one should aspire and what are the things that get in the way? Second, what is the practical wisdom this spirituality

teaches as a means toward living more authentically. In short, what is one supposed to *do*? It often seems the case that Trinitarians and anti-Trinitarians answer these questions in fundamentally different ways.

A Case Study: the UPCI

In 1992, Greg Boyd wrote the book cited above, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity*, as a defense of Trinitarianism over against views of the United Pentecostal Church International and similar groups. (In his youth, Boyd belonged to this organization and espoused its monarchial-modalist theology.) His observations about the religious environment in Oneness Pentecostalism provide an interesting window into spirituality in an anti-Trinitarian community as opposed to what Boyd found when he later embraced orthodox Christianity. One element that surfaces many times in this little volume is the importance of “role-playing.” As Boyd describes them, Oneness Pentecostals seem to major on roles at the expense of relationships. What seems to matter theologically is not the people themselves, but their behavior.

This makes perfect sense if, in fact, God relates to humankind not by sharing Self but by wearing masks. What is seen as “authentic” in terms of divine-human relationships is not deep, intimate sharing—it is impossible to know God that directly!—but enacting the expected behavior patterns.

This approach virtually guarantees (if it does not define!) a legalistic outlook toward the spiritual life. It also undermines the doctrine of salvation by grace. As Boyd notes, groups that have denied the Trinity, whether Arians or modalists, have also usually held other esoteric or unhealthy beliefs, especially in regard to salvation. He writes,

The theological reason for this is that the doctrine of the Trinity, far from being a “merely speculative” piece of church theologizing, is intrinsically connected with everything else

that is distinctly Christian?. [W]ithout this doctrine the reality of God's eternal love and self-sufficiency, as well as the authenticity of God's self-revelation, God's sacrificial love on the cross, and thus of God's grace, is undermined. It is not a coincidence, then, that antitrinitarian groups as otherwise diverse as (for example) the Jehovah's Witnesses, the United Pentecostal Church, and the Worldwide Church of God all arrive at a sub-Christian view of God and an aberrant, legalistic view of salvation. (132)

It should be noted that the Worldwide Church of God has done an amazing turnaround on this and many other issues in the years since Boyd wrote. He continues,

We do well to note the extremity of the chasm existing between these two distinct sources of security [viz., grace and legalism] and the difference between the two views of God they entail. The God of orthodox Christianity is a God who loves undeserving, vile sinners with an unconditional love, a God who voluntarily suffers on the cross the hellish nightmare that the sin of these sinners produces, in order that they might share in the heavenly dream he has for them. This is a God who sent his own eternal Son and gave his own eternal Spirit to envelop these sinners with his own eternal love and cause them to share in the eternal joy of this eternal triune fellowship.

But, in Oneness theology, this beautiful relational God of the New Testament has been traded in for a nit-picky God of solitude who is compulsively obsessed with prescribed baptismal formulas and modes and who will eternally damn any of his "children" who don't get it right! (132-33)

Historically, Boyd argues, anti-Trinitarianism and legalism have almost always gone hand-in-hand. Since the various anti-Trinitarian groups generally uphold a vision of God that has more in common with Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover" than with the dynamic,

relational God of the Jewish Bible?much less the self-giving, self-emptying, eternally loving God encountered in Jesus Christ?it is not hard to understand why this would be. “*When one’s God is hidden,*” Boyd observes, “*one must grab onto gods more tangible*” (134).

True Oneness

In contrast to a view of spirituality that places performance ahead of relationships, Trinitarian theology offers the possibility of deep, intimate sharing between God and humans, and therefore by extension between humans and each other.

The first chapter of Gilbert Bilezikian’s *Community 101* is aptly titled “Only Community Is Forever.” In it he describes how in the Bible God is “presented as a Tri-unity of divine entities existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the eternal community of oneness from whom all other communities derive life and meaning” (17). God, Bilezikian continues, has given this gift of “oneness” to humanity:

So, God actually created a being who was to reflect his own image. But, having done so, he astoundingly declared his creation to be “not good” because it was solitary: God was displeased with the fact that the man was alone (Gen. 2:18). There was one solitary individual, but he had no oneness because there was no one else with whom he could be together in oneness (2:20). Since God is Trinity, he is plurality in oneness. Therefore, the creation of his image required the creation of a plurality of persons. *God’s supreme achievement was not the creation of a solitary man, but the creation of human community.* (19, emphasis added)

This is the beginning of Trinitarian spirituality: what is most authentic is to relate to another in community, because that is at the heart of what God himself is like.

If that is the ultimate value we applaud and aspire to, what next? What “wisdom” does Trinitarian belief have for us when it comes to living out our commitment to God? At its most basic level, belief in the Trinity means understanding that, since God doesn’t play roles with us, we are not to play roles with God. Faithfulness to God is about far more than doing the expected things, following the rules, or going through the motions. Instead, it is about being vulnerable before a God of love:

[A] trinitarian who lives his or her theology will know and experience the unconditional love of God, for such a person will know and experience that God loves him or her in Christ with the same love God eternally has for his Son. In turn such a person will, through the Spirit, love God with the very same love the Son has for his Father. Because God is essentially social and loving, our loving relationship with him is not a sort of bridge to God we construct with our “good” behavior?. Rather, our relationship with him is something God himself accomplishes by opening up his loving sociality now to include us. Our acceptance before God is wholly based on God’s performance?which manifests who God eternally is. It is not even related to *our* performance. Hence, in a word, as we are loved by God, and as we love God, *we participate in God’s eternal triune love*. And nothing could be further from a solitary God who loves “on condition that?.” (Boyd, 196)

Conclusion

If we worship the god of Arius or Sabellius, we place absoluteness, power, or ineffability at the center of our concept of God and, knowing that God will not or cannot share deep intimacy with humankind, we arrive at a spirituality that emphasizes what we can manage: correct external behavior. If, however, we worship God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we place love, mutuality, and even vulnerability at the core

of God's eternal being. We then have the opportunity to become participants in this divine nature (2 Pet 1:4) and walk a spiritual path where who we are on the inside counts for more than our ability to uphold external legalistic standards.

Unfortunately, this mode of spirituality doesn't come naturally even for the most committed Trinitarian, and therefore we never get away from our need for grace. But if we believe in the Trinity, shouldn't we act like the God we worship knows who we really are on the inside and loves us anyway? Shouldn't we live vulnerably before a God who has already given himself wholly to us? And shouldn't we strive to "go and do likewise" in the church and in the world?