

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY AS A BASIS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

This essay is concerned with the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity, as a basis for understanding spiritual growth.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the way of understanding God's revelation to us as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is the belief that the one true God is a community of three "persons", who are distinct, yet perfectly in union, to the extent that they are one. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the Trinity, and its relevance to Christian life. Many are now seeing the Trinity as the supreme Christian doctrine.¹ There has also been a shift in focus from the immanent Trinity to the economic Trinity, which has taken the doctrine from a speculative, and theoretical, inquiry to a more-biblical, and practical, investigation.²

¹ For example, Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* has placed the Trinity in his Prolegomena. Both Wolfhart Pannenberg and Stanley Grenz argue that God's triune nature should be at the centre of our theology. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994, pp. 84, 99.

² See, for example, Leonard Boff, *Trinity and Society*, Paul Burns, tran., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988; Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: the Trinity and Christian Life*, San Francisco CA: Harper & Row, 1991.

The New Testament uses a variety of terms to describe becoming a Christian, and growing as a Christian. Some of the main ones are as follows:

ENGLISH	GREEK	VERSES ³	MEANING
Justify	δικαιῶ <i>dikaioō</i>	Rom 2:13; 3:20; Gal 2:16	Sinners are declared righteous by the Saviour, as an act of the grace of God.
Redeem	ἐξαγοράζω <i>exagoradzō</i>	Gal 3:13; 4:5	To deliver from captivity to sin by the atoning death of Jesus Christ.
Regenerate (rebirth)	παλιγγενεσία <i>palingenesia</i>	Titus 3:5; John 3:5-6	New birth. Divine life is imparted to one dead in sin.
Sanctify	ἁγιάζω <i>hagiadzō</i>	Eph 5:25-26 1 Thess 4:7 1 Peter 1:2	Make holy, with the sense of separating from the sinful practices of the world, and consecration to God's service. ⁴
Transform	μεταμορφῶ <i>metamorphōō</i>	2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19	Change into another form; i.e., change into the image of Christ.
Renew	ἀνακαινῶ <i>anakainōō</i>	Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 4:16; Col 3:10	Discard the old nature, and adoption of the new.
Grow	αὐξάνω <i>auxanō</i>	Eph 4:14-16; 1 Peter 2:2	Natural growth and progress.
Glorification	δοξάζω <i>doxadzō</i>	Rom 5:2; 8:17-18, 30; 1 Thess 1:12; Heb 2:10	Ultimate perfection of believers, having the glory-image, revealed in Jesus Christ, restored.

³ Selected verses only.

⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989, p. 194.

Spiritual growth has often been considered in systematic theology under the heading of sanctification, for which there are a variety of theological views.⁵

Peterson argues that contrasting understandings of sanctification result from inadequately distinguishing the various biblical words used, such as, “sanctify”, “transform”, “renew”, “glorify”, and “become mature”.⁶ It is not the concern of this essay to delimit these terms, but, in looking at the Trinitarian aspect of a Christian’s growth, it is necessary to understand the different ways the Bible describes this. Although “sanctify”, and, to a lesser extent, others of these terms, are sometimes used in a definite and positional sense, it is the progressive meaning of these words, which is of interest here. This essay will mostly use the terms “spiritual growth” or “Christian formation” to encompass the progressive aspect of sanctification, renewal, transformation, and present glorification.

The Beginning of Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth, as the progressive aspect of our spiritual life, presupposes some starting position. Spiritual life must precede spiritual growth: becoming a Christian must precede Christian formation; justification must precede sanctification. One is foundational to the other.

The different aspects of becoming a Christian, and growing as a Christian, are interrelated. Karl Barth sees justification and sanctification as “two different aspects of the one event in salvation”.⁷ Reformed evangelicals, as a whole, see the two as linked. Existential

⁵ This is evidenced by the existence of two books, canvassing the alternative views: Donald L. Alexander, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1988; Melvin E. Dieter, et al, *Five Views on Sanctification*, Stanley N. Gundry, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1987.

⁶ David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, Leicester UK: Apollos, 1995, p. 136. Peterson argues that there is no such thing as progressive sanctification, according to the New Testament, but that the progressive side of Christian life is dealt with, using the words “renew”, “transform”, and “grow”. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-137.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: vol 4: The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Part 2*, G. W. Bromiley, tran., Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1958, p. 503.

holiness follows from the positional holiness, available through the redemptive work of Christ.⁸ Both result from the grace of God, activated by faith.

Conversion is like the foundation, upon which Christian formation is built. Hendrikus Berkhof suggests two models to describe the relationship between justification and sanctification. The first is the fruit of a tree, where a good tree cannot bear bad fruit (Matt 7:18). Hence sanctification is a natural consequence of justification. A second model is a jumping board, where justification launches the believer into the Christian life. Neither of these is satisfactory on its own. Spiritual growth is not just a natural process, but a battle, involving the grace of God, and the will of the individual. The jumping board takes human responsibility seriously, but does not have the sense of justification, as the continued foundation for our life.⁹

Created in the Image of God

God has created humankind in His own image (Gen 1:26-27).¹⁰ The main meaning of “image of God” is now widely understood in terms of relationship.¹¹ Stanley Grenz defines the divine image as the capacity, and need, for fellowship with God, and fellow humans. Our fellowship with God is our response to the special standing we have, as recipients, both of His love, and delegated responsibilities. The divine image, he says, “is fully present only in community”, when we “express the relational dynamic of the God, whose representation we are called to be”.¹²

⁸ Gordon R. Lewis, and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol 1, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994, pp. 184-185.

⁹ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, Sierd Woudstra, rev./tran., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979.

¹⁰ Although creation is appropriately the work of God the Father, the Son, and Spirit are also involved (John 1:3; Col 1:16; Gen 1:2).

¹¹ For example, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/1*, J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and H. Knight, trans., Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1958, pp. 184-185. A summary of views on the “image of God” is given in G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Waco TX: Word Books, 1987, pp. 29-32. The idea of the image of God is linked with the creation of human beings as male and female.

¹² Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, pp. 230-232.

The fall, and human sin, have damaged (but not destroyed) the image of God in us, such that we have lost fellowship with God, and can no longer live in harmony with one-another. A biblical concept of spiritual growth is restoring the image of God to its fullness.

In the New Testament, Christ is the image of God,¹³ and the goal becomes perfecting mankind, in the image of Christ.¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it this way:

But God does not neglect His lost creature. He plans to recreate His image in man, to recover His first delight in His handiwork . . . but there is only one way to achieve this purpose, and that is for God, out of sheer mercy, to assume the image and form of fallen man. As man can no longer be like the image of God, God must become like the image of man.¹⁵

Conversion and spiritual growth (justification and sanctification) both involve the restoring of God's creation plan for relationship, with God, and with one-another. This is reflected in the Great Commandment:

Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' " (Matt 22:37-39).

Conversion and the Trinity

In God's provision of salvation, we see the Trinity at work. By God's grace, He chose for Himself a people, and gave them His law. The law highlighted man's sin. The love and righteousness of God motivated the provision of salvation by grace. God, the Father, is portrayed as the One, who initiates our salvation. This involves sending the Son, and the Spirit. He is also the One, who calls each person to respond to His saving provision, and live out His will in the world.

¹³ 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3.

¹⁴ See, for example, Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London UK: SCM Press, 1995, pp. 269-270.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, obeyed the call and will of the Father, to the extent of dying for sinful humankind, to provide for their redemption. The Father delegated salvation and judgment to the Son. The Father honoured the Son's obedience, by raising Him from the dead, and giving Him all authority. The saving work of Christ has brought victory over sin, Satan, and death, by which the believer is free to progress in his salvation and Christian life.

It is also by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Word of God became flesh, that He fulfilled His ministry, and was raised to life.¹⁶ The Spirit also inspired the written word, by which the gospel is available to us. The Holy Spirit applies the work of salvation to the believer. He brings conviction of the need for salvation (John 16:8), and enables the believer to acknowledge Christ as Saviour and Lord (1 John 4:2; 1 Cor 12:3). The Holy Spirit seals us into Christ in baptism (Eph 1:13) and brings to completion the divine plan for salvation.

Without seeing the three persons of the Trinity fully involved in our salvation, we would have an inadequate starting point for spiritual growth. To see salvation without the Father is to lack the sense of love and righteousness undergirding God's act to redeem us and God's personal call on our lives. To see salvation, without Christ, is to lack the solid assurance of God's objective provision of a once-for-all sacrifice for our sins. To see salvation, without the Holy Spirit, is to lack the inner enabling, and empowering necessary, for us to have union with God.

The Essence of Spiritual Growth

The redemptive work of God removes the barrier of sin to fellowship with God. Spiritual growth is an ongoing fellowship, and participation with the Triune God. This is not to leave out the aspect of character development (which is dealt with in the next section), but to see participation in the Trinity as primary.

Participation is derived from the New Testament word *κοινωνία* (*koinōnia*), meaning "fellowship, sharing, and having everything in

¹⁶ Charles Sherlock, *God on the Inside: Trinitarian Spirituality*, Canberra ACT: Acorn Press, 1991, pp. 112-113.

common with those whom we love”. This is different from Plato’s idea of “partaking of, or participation” (μετέχω = *metechō*) in his theory of forms.

For Plato, a tree is a tree, because it participates in the form of a tree. Likewise, a Christian is a Christian, because he imitates Jesus’ ideals. But, in the New Testament, we are Christians because we participate in Christ’s life and ministry, as part of fellowship with the Trinity.¹⁷

Union with God

The Christian life is described in the New Testament as union, communion, and fellowship with God. Our communion with God is to be with each of the three persons of the Trinity.

God, the Father, has chosen and adopted us as His children, so that we call Him *Abba* (ἀββᾶ) (Gal 4:6-7). We are to us to pray to “Our Father in heaven” (Matt 6:9). We are to live according to the will of the Father.

The Apostle Paul frequently describes the Christian life as being “in Christ”.¹⁸

Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him (Col 2:6).

I no longer live, but Christ lives in me (Gal 2:20).

In John’s gospel, the believer is to abide in Christ, meaning to rely on the resources of Christ (John 15:4-7; cf. John 17:19). Union with Christ involves joining with Him in His death and resurrection (Rom 6:1-6). We are to be baptised “into Christ” (Gal 3:27), and share in the sufferings of Christ, as well as His glorification (Rom 8:17). Richard Lovelace asserts that “spiritual life flows out of union with Christ, not

¹⁷ James B. Torrance, “Contemplating the Mystery of Christ”, in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality*, J. I. Packer, and Loren Wilkinson, eds, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1992, p. 150.

¹⁸ For example: Rom 8:1; 12:5; 16:7-10; 1 Cor 1:2, 30; 6:17; 15:22; Eph 1:1-3. The phrase “in Christ” is found eight times in Galatians, 34 times in Ephesians, and 18 times in Colossians. R. David Rightmire, “Union with Christ”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Walter Elwell, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996, p. 789.

merely imitation of Christ".¹⁹ Jesus Christ has a continued role as our advocate, in pleading our cause to the Father, and praying for us.²⁰

The Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son to dwell in the believer (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:22). He becomes our personal advocate and counsellor (παράκλητος = *paraclete*). We are told to "be filled by the Spirit" (Eph 5:18), not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30), and generally to live in the Spirit (e.g., Gal 5:25; Rom 14:17). It is the fellowship of the Trinity that flows from the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14). Some scholars consider the Holy Spirit as the bond of love uniting the Trinity.²¹ The indwelling Holy Spirit allows us to share in the inner life of the Trinity.

At the same time, the Trinity is not working separately, but in unity. To be "in Christ" is to have the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9; 1 Pet 1:11), and also to be in the Father, because God was in Christ (2 Cor 5:19). It is by the Spirit that we can "cry *Abba* (ἄββᾶ), Father" (Gal 4:6, Rom 8:15). It is by the Spirit that we are baptised into Christ (Tit 3:5).

The Social View of the Trinity

Whereas the church of the West, since Augustine, has generally held to a unipersonal view of the Trinity, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in the social analogy of the Trinity.²² Starting from the perspective of three persons, the unity is seen in terms of *perichoresis*, meaning interpenetration, or, as Catherine LaCugna defines it, "being-in-

¹⁹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1979, p. 74.

²⁰ See Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25; 1 John 2:1.

²¹ Following Augustine, Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, p. 91. This view tends to undermine the personal attribute of the Holy Spirit.

²² Significant contributions have been made by: Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, Welwyn UK: Nisbet, 1943; Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, V. Green, tran., London UK: Burns & Oates, 1977; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, M. Kohl, tran., London UK: SCM Press, 1981; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol 1, G. W. Bromiley, tran., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991; Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, Paul Burns, tran., Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988; LaCugna, *God for Us*.

one-another, permeation without confusion”.²³ The three persons of the Trinity share in the life of each other.

Whereas the traditional Eastern view, originating from the Cappadocian Fathers, considered God the Father as the source of Triune life, a “modern view” is proposed, whereby the perichoretic relationship provides the source of the Trinitarian life.²⁴ The idea of *perichoresis* and communion, seen in the Trinity, provides a model for life in the church, and wider society. Clearly, it is also a pattern for our relationship with God. Catherine LaCugna suggests that the Trinitarian life becomes our life.²⁵ This has been criticised as losing the distinction between God and His creatures, and tending toward pantheism.²⁶ Yet, it seems possible to understand communion with God as a participation in the life of the Trinity, while, at the same time, retaining the transcendence and mystery of God.

The perfect love and harmony that exists among the members of the Trinity is available for us to participate in. Jesus prays to His Father that believers might be “in us” (John 17:21), and “that the love You have for Me may be in them, and that I Myself may be in them” (John 17:26). We have been grafted in (Rom 11:17-24) to receive the riches of God, but, also, in some insignificant way, contribute to the life of the Trinity, by our worship.

Participation in the Life and Realm of the Trinity

Susanne Johnson sees participation as the key word in understanding Christian spiritual formation.²⁷ Ray Anderson says:

The inner power of sanctification is relatedness, experienced immediately by Jesus as the *koinōnia* (κοινωνία) that He shares with the Father and the Spirit. The exclusive holiness that

²³ Ibid., p. 271.

²⁴ Boff, *Trinity and Society*, pp. 234-235.

²⁵ LaCugna, *God for Us*, p. 228.

²⁶ Thomas G. Weinandy. *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity*, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1995, pp. 131-132. Also Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1991, preface to 2nd edn.

²⁷ Susanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom*, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1989, p. 24.

properly belongs to God alone has opened out into the world, through the incarnation, resurrection, and Pentecost, so that all humanity can share in this *koinōnia* (κοινωνία) of holiness.²⁸

In the Old Testament, we participate in God's reality through covenantal relationship. In the New Testament, God is revealed to us in His trinity, and we are invited to participate in the life of the Trinity. "He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4).

Not only are we to participate in the life of the Trinity, but also in the activity and realm of God. We are to be coworkers with God (1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 6:1), and share in the ministry of redemption (2 Cor 5: 18). We are not to participate as slaves, but as sons and daughters (Gal 4:4-7).

The role of the Holy Spirit is twofold: to draw us into the life of the Trinity, and to empower us for ministry in the world (Acts 1:8). Both personal growth and service are part of our Christian formation.

Many Christians focus on one person of the Trinity, as a basis for spiritual growth, mostly either union with Christ, or walking according to the Spirit. This is to lack the sense of participation in the full Trinitarian dynamic. We are grafted, not just into a person, but into the love relationship of the Trinity. Without a focus on God the Father, we lack a sense of transcendence and holiness in our fellowship with God. Without a focus on Jesus Christ, we lack a sense of God's identification with our experiences. Without a focus on the Holy Spirit, we lack a sense of the immanence and love of the Trinity.

Our spiritual growth is, then, a matter of our participation in the life and realm of God. It is mystical, in the sense that it is by God's grace and revelation, and not a result of human effort, through spiritual disciplines.²⁹ Yet, it must be lived out in practice, with an ethical dynamic. Human effort is involved, in the sense of a willing submission

²⁸ Ray S. Anderson, *Ministry on the Fireline: A Practical Theology for an Empowered Church*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1993, p. 76.

²⁹ David Rightmire, "Union with Christ", p. 892.

to what God is doing: yet, like conversion, it is a matter of grace and faith.

Union with God does not mean a loss of individuality, but an enhancing of individual qualities. In the Trinity, diversity is not lost, despite their unity.

Evidences of Spiritual Growth

Participation in the Trinity must have a concrete outworking in the believer's life. With relationship, there come responsibilities. Charles Sherlock puts it this way:

The wonderful privilege of entering "inside" God's life brings with it an awesome responsibility. Those, who have received God's grace, are called to live it out: response means responsibility.³⁰

Our participation in the Trinity is God's gracious provision. We do not earn this place of fellowship with God. Having been grafted in, we are both transformed, and motivated, to exercise our free will responsibly. Spiritual growth involves both human responsibility, and the grace and empowering of God. The Bible's use of various metaphors for spiritual growth shows this balance, as well as the Trinitarian dynamic.

Fruitfulness

Fruitfulness is a biblical image, which illustrates how union with God has an outworking in one's actions and character (Matt 7:16-20; Luke 6:43-44). In John 15:1-16, Christ is pictured as the trunk of the vine, with believers represented by branches. As believers continue to relate closely to Christ, they are able to bear fruit. Apart from Christ, they "can do nothing" (John 15:5). Intimacy with Christ is maintained through obedience (John 15:10).³¹

The same passage in John 15 pictures the Father as the gardener, and, hence, owner of the orchard. The Father prunes not only the shoots that

³⁰ Sherlock, *God on the Inside*, p. 164.

³¹ Lawrence O. Richards, *A Practical Theology of Spirituality*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1987, p. 22.

do not bear fruit, but also some which do bear fruit to make the branch even more fruitful (John 15:1-2). In the Old Testament, God is described as the potter, who has the sovereign ability to rework the clay, where there is a flaw in the pot (Jer 18:4).

Good character qualities are also pictured as the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). It is the Holy Spirit that empowers us to live, consistent with our relationship with God.

Sanctification

Biblical references to being sanctified have both a definite and progressive meaning.³² For John Calvin, sanctification consists of mortification and vivification. Mortification is a point in time, when God breaks the dominion of sin, and weakens fleshly desires. Vivification enables the Christian to put on the “new man”.³³ Anthony Hoekema defines sanctification as:

The gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which he delivers us from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature, according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to him.³⁴

Sanctification involves the three persons of the Trinity. Jesus prays to His Father, “Sanctify them by the truth, Your word is truth” (John 17:17). We are to live in the context of God’s call on our life (Eph 4:1). God, the Father, also disciplines us, so that we might “share in His holiness” (Heb 12:10).

Yet, it is Jesus, who makes the church holy, “cleansing her by the washing with water through the word” (Eph 5:25-27). It is Jesus, who “purifies for Himself a people” (Tit 2:14; cf. 1 Cor 1:2). Jesus sanctified Himself, so that we might be sanctified (John 17:19), and, hence, has

³² David Peterson, *Possessed by God*, p. 1, has argued convincingly that the biblical use of *sanctified* emphasises a definite event, and that other words are used in relation to the progressive aspects of spiritual growth. This concurs with a Lutheran view of sanctification. However, generally, scholarship sees both the definite and progressive senses combined.

³³ Lewis, and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, pp. 185-186.

³⁴ Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 192.

become the perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2). Jesus became our priest, on “the basis of the power of an indestructible life” (Heb 7:16). Christ has become our holiness (1 Cor 1:30).

We are also sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:16). We have been saved “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, and through belief in the truth” (2 Thess 2:13; cf. 1 Pet 1:2), and “through the washing, and rebirth, and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5). The Counsellor (παράκλητος=*paraclete*) will teach us all things (John 14:26; cf. 16:13).

Christlikeness

Christ provides the model for our character development. “For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Rom 8:29). This happens, both by being transformed into the likeness of Christ,³⁵ and by following the example of Christ.³⁶ Paradoxically, we are to engage our human effort to that which is the gracious and sovereign provision of God. Being conformed to the likeness of Christ is not achieved fully until we are raised to be with Christ (1 John 3:2-3).³⁷ Being transformed has past, present, and future dimensions, which happen in tandem with the present struggle to follow the example of Jesus.

Being restored into the likeness of Christ is the same as having restored in us the image of God that the Father created in us.³⁸ While we are to imitate Christ, Jesus Himself was imitating the Father.

The Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because, whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all He does (John 5:19-20).

³⁵ 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21.

³⁶ Phil 2:15; Eph 5:1; 1 Pet 2:21.

³⁷ Various views of perfection, such as the Wesleyan doctrine, do not hold to complete sinlessness.

³⁸ Michael C. Griffiths, *The Example of Jesus*, London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985, pp. 182-183.

Imitation is Closely Associated with Obedience³⁹

When Jesus was crucified, the 12 disciples were left without a master to follow. Yet, Jesus assures them that it is better that He goes away, so that He can send the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). Through the Holy Spirit, the believer can continue to experience the presence of Jesus, and be instructed in His teaching and ways (John 15:26; Rom 8:9). It is the Holy Spirit's coming on believers at Pentecost that launches them into a new phase of discipleship. The power to be transformed into the likeness of Christ "comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). The Holy Spirit also convicts and awakens us to areas of our life needing growth. "The Spirit searches all things" (1 Cor 2:10).

Other Evidences

These evidences of spiritual growth relate primarily to character development. Other biblical images of spiritual growth include discipleship, renewal, maturity, and running a race.

Two other evidences of spiritual growth are: an orientation toward mission, and dependent prayer.⁴⁰ The scope of this essay does not allow these to be explored. Both have a Trinitarian perspective.

It is important to see the Trinity involved in our character development. Without God, the Father, we lack the sense of the sovereign God at work in all the events of life to mould and discipline us. Without Jesus Christ, we lack the perfect man to imitate and follow. Without the Holy Spirit, we lack the empowerment to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Neill Hamilton has proposed that there are two phases of spiritual formation. The first is discipleship, where the believer follows Jesus, largely in their own strength, based on a parenting relationship with God. This can be a legalistic type of religion. The second, more advanced, stage is "transition in Spirit", with the image of new birth. The receiving

³⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁰ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, pp. 145-160. He calls these "secondary elements in renewal", and also includes the community of believers, theological integration, and disenculturation.

of the Holy Spirit allows for a new intimacy with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and empowering the believer for holiness and ministry.⁴¹

Although Neill Hamilton helpfully points out the deficiencies of Christian formation without an adequate understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit, there are, equally, problems without adequately including God, the Father, and God, the Son. The progressive revelation of God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit, in scripture, and in the experience of the first believers, does not mean that this is normative in the experience of all Christians. There is a danger, particularly in Pentecostal churches, for people to know the Holy Spirit, without following Christ, by daily taking up one's cross.

The Goal of Spiritual Growth

The glory of God is both the goal and motive of spiritual growth. We have been chosen for His praise and glory (Eph 1:4-6; Phil 1:9-11).⁴²

The life of the Trinity is one of mutual glorification. The Spirit brings glory to the Son (John 16:14), the Son brings glory to the Father (John 17:4), and the Father, the Son (John 17:5). Participation in the Trinity, is to share in the giving and receiving of glory.

Giving glory to God involves worship. James Torrance defines worship as not something we do, but "the gift of participating, through the Spirit, in the (incarnate) Son's communication with the Father".⁴³

Christians are described as those "who, with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory", and spiritual growth is described as "being transformed into His likeness, with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). Through sin, we lost the glory of God (Rom 3:23), but, in the future, we will share in God's glory,⁴⁴ through Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate revelation of the glory of God.^{45 46} Through the Holy Spirit, we are beginning to share in the

⁴¹ Neill Q. Hamilton, *Maturing in the Christian Life: A Pastor's Guide*, Philadelphia PA: The Geneva Press, 1984.

⁴² Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 232.

⁴³ Torrance, "Contemplating the Mystery of Christ", p. 142.

⁴⁴ Rom 5:2; 8:18; Heb 2:10; 1 Pet 5:1, 10.

⁴⁵ For example, John 1:14; 2 Cor 4:4-6.

glorification of Christ, which is fully achieved, when we are raised with Him.

Glorification brings participation in the kingdom of God (1 Thess 2:12), even to the point of reigning with Christ.⁴⁷ Mission is a way we bring glory to God, and a way we participate in the ministry of the triune God, as He establishes His kingdom.

The Context of Spiritual Growth

The context of spiritual growth is community. Stanley Grenz has written a theology text with the integrative motif of community. He sees God's programme directed at bringing about community, in fellowship with God, and one another.⁴⁸ Susanne Johnson states that community "is not only the context of spiritual formation; it is the very shape of Christian spiritual existence".⁴⁹

The three members of the Trinity are involved in the constituting and enabling of the church. The church is described in the New Testament as the people of God (2 Cor 6:16), the body of Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 12), the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25-27), the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).

Furthermore, relationships in the church are to be modelled on the Trinity. The love and fellowship that the Father has with the Son is to exist in the community of believers (John 17:26; cf. 13:34-35).

The individualism of Western culture has affected our understanding of the church, to the extent that people belong, so as to fulfil their needs. Susanne Johnson describes the current situation, as it pertains to Christian formation:

⁴⁶ Peterson, *Possessed by God*, pp. 118-119.

⁴⁷ David Huttar, "Glorification", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter Elwell, ed., Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1996, p. 287.

⁴⁸ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, p. 30.

⁴⁹ Susanne Johnson, "Education in the Image of God", in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, Jack L. Seymour, and Donald E. Miller, eds, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1990, p. 136.

Dangled before us, is an extremely voluntaristic view of the church, as though it is simply an arrangement for the individual spiritual quest. Spiritual disciplines are packaged, and sold as technologies for self-discovery, and self-actualisation.⁵⁰

Rather, spiritual growth is to be achieved as the outworking of community. Spiritual gifts are given “so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith, and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). The result of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was not just conversion of individuals, but creation of fellowship (Acts 2:44-47).⁵¹

Biblical references to spiritual growth are given for corporate application. Paul generally uses plural pronouns with regard to the Christian’s experience of the Holy Spirit.⁵²

Resources for Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth is both a gift and a task; it is obtained by grace, and by effort. Participation in the life of the Trinity is not something we can attain, or maintain, humanly. Yet, it is not possible, either, unless there is a commitment of heart, and use of the resources that God gives us. Some of the resources include:

1. **Word of God.** The scriptures are inspired by God, and give direction to the Christian life (2 Tim 3:14-17). The Word of God has a Trinitarian dimension, in that the Word became flesh in Christ (John 1:14), and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, who guides the believer into all truth (John 16:13).

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 128.

⁵¹ Max S. Liddle, *Trinity and Communion*, unpub, BCNZ, 1997, p. 9. Habermas and Issler present a model of Christian maturity, based on Acts 2:42-47, concerning communion, community, character, and commission: Ronald Habermas, and Klaus Issler, *Teaching for Reconciliation: Foundations and Practice of Christian Educational Ministry*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1992.

⁵² James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: a Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: William B Eerdmans, 1975, p. 260. For example, “being the temple of the Holy Spirit” refers to the community, not the individual.

2. **Sacraments.** These can be described as the enacted Word. Baptism symbolises incorporation into Christ, by identifying with His death and resurrection. The Lord's Supper is a symbol of the ongoing fellowship with Christ, and other believers, through the Holy Spirit.⁵³
3. **Prayer.** The essence of prayer, is "not my will, but Yours, be done". We are encouraged to pray for "wisdom from above" (James 1:5; 3:13-17).
4. **Church.** Although the church is the context, it is also a resource, in the sense of pastoral care, moral guidance, discipline, encouragement, support, provision of good role models, and the traditions and writings, accumulated over the ages. The intimacy of small groups in the church can provide the support and encouragement, often lacking in the larger congregation.
5. **Conscience.** The human conscience is a God-given witness, and compulsion to do what is right. Our consciences have been damaged by sin, and need re-educating, but, nonetheless, are a resource for spiritual and moral formation.
6. **Circumstances.** The circumstances, or providences, of life are where the sovereign God brings pleasant and unpleasant experiences, to teach and correct us. Being in union with God, opens up the possibility of them being used for our growth.⁵⁴

These resources are utilised by the believer, through various spiritual disciplines. These resources, and, even more so, the disciplines, by which they are applied, are secondary to the life of fellowship with the holy Trinity.

⁵³ Liddle, "The Trinity and the Communion of the Church", p. 18.

⁵⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Reformed View", in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, Donald L. Alexander, ed., Downers Grove IL: IVP, 1988, p. 71.

Conclusion and Applications

The doctrine of the Trinity helps us to have a balanced understanding of spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is primarily a matter of participation in the life of the Trinity, and, only secondarily, a matter of bearing fruit, living holy lives, and becoming like Christ (to use a few of the biblical metaphors). Spiritual growth is primarily a matter of God's grace, and, secondarily, a matter of commitment and effort. Spiritual growth is primarily God's work, in and through community, and, secondarily, God's work in individuals. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have distinct, yet mutually interdependent, roles in our growth.

God, the Father, by creating us in His image, has given us the capacity of spiritual growth. His love, holiness, and call on our lives, motivates us to live according to His will. He has provided us with His Word, with consciences, and with access to Him through prayer. Furthermore, He is sovereignly controlling our paths.

God, the Son, became one of us, was tempted, suffered, and died as our sin offering. Salvation has freed us to live and grow. Jesus Christ is the perfect man, and the true image of God for us to follow. He continues to minister to us, as our advocate, praying for us, and leading the church.

God, the Holy Spirit, draws us into the Trinity, and into the church, to receive salvation and fellowship. The Holy Spirit empowers us for the Christian life, and gifts us to help others.

Spiritual growth is generally held to be the goal of Christian education, and one of the purposes of the church. Many would also see Christian colleges and Bible schools having this as a goal.⁵⁵ How can this Trinitarian understanding of spiritual growth help the church, and college, in its ministry? Here are some suggestions, in outline form:

⁵⁵ For example, see: Bruce J. Nicholls, "The Role of Spiritual Development in Theological Education", in *Evangelical Theological Education Today: Agenda for Renewal*, Paul Bowers, ed., Nairobi Kenya: Evangel Publishing, 1982, pp. 13-25; Dieumeme Noelliste, "Toward a Theology of Theological Education", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 19 (July 1995); Gordon T. Smith, "Spiritual Formation in the Academy: A Unifying Model", in *Theological Education* 33-1 (1996), pp. 83-91.

1. **Teaching on the Trinity and our union with God.** Teaching and preaching in the church often tends to moralism. Ethical teaching is necessary, but must be given in the context of our life in God, and the resources available to the believer.
2. **Worship and liturgy should focus fairly on all three persons of the Trinity.** The songs, prayers, and liturgy in worship services influence the way believers perceive their relationship with God. Many churches emphasise one person of the Trinity, to the detriment of others.⁵⁶
3. **Create a community context.** The church must provide close fellowship, as a basis for mutual ministry, and personal growth. Cell groups are necessary in all but the smallest of churches, in the college, there are benefits in a live-in situation, but spiritual growth can also be encouraged through small groups and mentoring relationships.
4. **Encourage spiritual disciplines, as a means, not an end.** Spiritual disciplines include Bible study, meditation, prayer, fasting, scripture memory, and praise. These are ways of taking hold of God-given resources, and can be a catalyst for spiritual formation. Yet, a preoccupation with these, can take our focus off the real essence of spiritual growth, which is union with God. Legalism should have no place in spiritual growth, because God esteems our individuality. Spiritual growth cannot be reduced to a single secret, or program of disciplines.
5. **Use a praxis-learning approach using people's experience of life.**⁵⁷ Often a false dualism is established between theory and practice. We need to provide opportunity for people to experiment with life (even if just through role-playing), and experience the Holy Spirit's

⁵⁶ See Peter Adam, *Living the Trinity*, Bramcote UK: Grove Books, 1982.

⁵⁷ See Anderson, *Ministry on the Fireline*.

enabling and empowering. This is not to do away with instruction, but to make truth concrete in people's lives, through experience. Where a person is required to act in a situation, to which they are unaccustomed, this can often be a catalyst for spiritual growth.⁵⁸

6. **Engage the world not asceticism.** The Trinity has reached out to us, and our life in God is to likewise reach out. Spiritual growth is not to be divorced from mission.

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⁵⁸ David Lonsdale, "Fostering Spiritual Growth", in *Can Spirituality be Taught?*, Jill Robson, and David Lonsdale, eds, London UK: Association of Centres of Adult Education and British Council of Churches, nd, p. 85.

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