

EDITORIAL¹

The latter part of the twentieth century has seen a renaissance of interest in Trinitarian theology. Tom Torrance speaks of the doctrine of the Trinity as 'the distinctively Christian conception of God with which every Christian doctrine and every aspect of the Christian way of life are concerned... the nerve and centre of them all'.² Trinitarian theology is not an obscure piece of abstract speculation but is closely related to the spiritual pilgrimage of God's people and the life of the church in society.

When the early church were formulating their understanding of the Trinity they were seeking to articulate the understanding of God that they had experienced in their personal and corporate encounter with the story of salvation.³ They knew the love of the Father, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the empowering presence of the Spirit. Elizabeth Johnston comments that, 'the New Testament is filled with narratives, confessional formulas, liturgical formulas, doxologies, short rules of faith, all in a threefold cadence'.⁴

David Cunningham argues that, 'our belief in the triune God shapes us in profound ways – affecting what we believe, what we say, how we think, and how we live'.⁵ But what exactly does it mean to be Trinitarian and live out a life of discipleship that is shaped by this doctrine?

WORSHIP

The early church encountered God as Trinity in their worship. Christian worship assumed a Trinitarian character from the earliest stages. James Torrance speaks of worship of the church as essentially a participation in

¹ A version of this editorial was presented to the Baptist World Alliance, Doctrine and Inter-church Commission in Prince Edward Island, Canada, in July 2001.

² Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being in Three Persons* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 31.

³ See Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God* (London, 2001), p. 5

⁴ Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Trinity: To Let the Symbol Sing Again', *Theology Today* 54 (1997), p. 303.

⁵ David C. Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (London, 1998), p. ix.

the worship of Jesus.⁶ Christ, according to Hebrews, is the 'minister of the new sanctuary', the leader of our worship. As Calvin expressed it, 'Christ leads our songs, and is the chief composer of our hymns.'⁷

This means that worship is not something that we do – a task to be taking up as a duty but is rather our response to what God has done for us and in us – a participation in the praise of Christ through the power of the Spirit – offering worship and honour and glory to the Father. Worship enables us to enter into the life of God, to rest in his love and to express our adoration. Worship, both corporate and private, will be characterised by the joy reflected in the eternal relationships experienced by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The God who rejoices over his people 'with gladness... with loud singing' (Zeph. 3:17) looks for such an expression of joy and gladness in the hearts of his people.

TRINITARIAN SPIRITUALITY

Philip Sheldrake makes the comment that 'the doctrine of the Trinity... is absolutely essential to the coherence and cogency of any Christian spirituality'.⁸ Our theology of God will inevitably affect our spirituality. Theologians who have tended to stress the 'economic' Trinity tend to understand their spirituality as one of 'doing' whereas those who stress the 'immanent' Trinity conceive of spirituality more in terms of 'being'.

Jurgen Moltmann's small book *Theology and Joy*⁹ seeks to reflect on the place of play in the Christian life, suggesting that in play and in games we may well be reflecting the activity of God as Creator. Moltmann criticises the 'modern achievement-centred society... [where] people have lost their capacity for leisure; they no longer know how to do nothing'.¹⁰ If David Bebbington is correct in seeing 'activism' as one of the defining characteristics of Evangelicalism¹¹ then we need to expose the danger of the exhausting treadmill of hyperactivity, which is so characteristic of the life of the church. Martin Luther anticipated the life

⁶ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle, 1996).

⁷ John Calvin, *Hebrews* (Edinburgh, 1963), p. 67.

⁸ Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (London, 1998), p. xi.

⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London, 1971).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 34.

¹¹ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London, 1989), pp. 10-12

to come as a time when people will 'have their fun, love and joy, and shall laugh with thee and thou with them, even according to the body'.¹²

ECCLESIOLOGY

The social model of the Trinity, espoused by theologians from a wide spread of theological traditions such as Moltmann, Torrance and Pinnock, clearly directs our thinking to a view of spirituality which is relational and grounded in our commitment to the life of the church. Evangelicals, strongly influenced by the Enlightenment, have tended to be individualistic and sometimes pietistic in their understanding of spirituality. We have normally portrayed the Christian life as a solitary spiritual quest for personal holiness and peace, whereas the New Testament would emphasise an expanded capacity for communal life, selfless love and identification with the needs of others.

Some years ago Peter Berger suggested that the concept of the 'autonomous individual' was the central characteristic of the modern Western world.¹³ The modern hero of western society is the entrepreneur, the self-made individual because 'self-realisation and self-gratification have become the master principles of modern culture'.¹⁴ The individual has become 'deified' in contemporary culture as we have forgotten that we were created in the image of a Trinitarian God who lives in a joyful relationship of love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Sadly, because we have lost the concept of the essence of the church being that of community, we have very little to offer to a culture of impersonality and loneliness.

One of the very great challenges which postmodernity is posing society is precisely in the area of radical individualism. The challenge to the church of Jesus Christ is to be a community that will demonstrate the story of the Triune God in the midst of a world crying out for spiritual reality.¹⁵ The character of God should shape the behaviour of all his children who long to indwell a community of mutuality, of co-operation, of forgiveness, of unity which experiences peace in the context of a

¹² Martin Luther, WA XXXVI. 600; XLV. 356

¹³ Peter L. Berger, 'Western Individuality: Liberation and Loneliness' *Partisan Review* 52 (1985), p. 324.

¹⁴ Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the Modern World: Or why it's tempting to live as if God doesn't exist* (Paternoster Press, 1998), p. 192. Gay also quotes Niebuhr as adding self-glorification (p. 196).

¹⁵ Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (London, 1996) p. 200.

genuine diversity of unique individuals who find their fulfilment in living in the unity of the Spirit.

Although we must avoid the danger of reducing our understanding of the Trinity to a question of relevance, it is evident that the social model of the Trinity speaks powerfully to the needs of the church in the twenty-first century.

Sometimes the stress that Reformed evangelicals have placed on the attribute of sovereignty gives the impression of hierarchy, even within the persons of the Trinity. This inevitably means that the model of relationships within the life of the church also begins to imply hierarchy. Yet, Trinitarian theology would remind us that relationships are about inter-dependence and not domination of other people.

GENDER

Often, the above model of authority has led to patriarchalism within the church; a feature that damns us in the eyes of many within our modern social setting, and in some situations makes our faith irredeemable.¹⁶ Post-Christendom, Post-Modernist secularism will no longer listen to a church which uses the language of the obedience of the Son to the Father to imply that women are no less equal in honour to men but they are subordinate and their function is to obey. There is something attractive about a stress upon a fellowship of equality among persons that is so unlike the inequalities in human society. This is the gospel of good news that breaks down barriers of class, gender, colour and ethnicity rather than builds them.

The Anabaptist vision of the church as a covenant community was one which stressed the priesthood of all believers where each was seen to be a 'priest' to his fellow sisters and brothers, ministering the grace of God; where all are called to interpret the Scriptures within the context of the community, each person contributing out of their own experience as they tried to apply the word to their everyday lives. It was a community where women as well as men¹⁷ were committed to lives of costly discipleship, at times 'contravening common societal restrictions on their gender' in both the church and society of their times.¹⁸ Goertz says that

¹⁶ See David F. Wright, 'What kind of Theology for the twenty-first century?', SBET 17 (1999), p. 104.

¹⁷ See C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Pandora Press, 1995), especially chapter 18 on 'Equality in the Community of Saints' (pp. 253ff.).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

'the notion of the priesthood of all believers' was 'enacted with particular zeal.... [T]he laity, both men and women, began to take over priestly ministries, preaching, celebrating communion and baptising...[:] women engaged in corner preaching and evangelism.'¹⁹

MISSION

Mission is primarily and ultimately the work of God for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate. Mission has its origin in the mystery of God's love, in the community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, overflowing in God's action in creating, saving and restoring the world: 'It is not the Church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the Church.'²⁰ All acts of service, through the life of the church and in the world, are always a participation in God's mission of love to the world in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. All who are sent in Christ's name to various parts of the world share in the one ministry of Jesus Christ, sent by the Father in the power of the Spirit to fulfil God's mission to the world.

The mission of the church is to participate in the seeking love of the triune God who reaches out to a fallen world, who pours himself out in sacrificial, self-giving love to welcome the wanderer, never restricting the goodness of God or the wideness of his mercy for all who need him so desperately – physically, emotionally and spiritually. This means that mission does not flow from reliance upon ourselves, our own resources, but upon the work of the triune God – not to be taken up as a burden but as gift of joy and love because we have been loved by God and long that others share that love for themselves.

As Christian theologians, we are called, not only to define and defend the doctrine of the Trinity in the twenty-first century but to 'participate in God', to experience his love and to express the reality of his life within our individual and corporate discipleship.

¹⁹ Hans-Jurgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists* (Routledge, 1997), pp. 114-17.

²⁰ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London, 1977), p. 64.