

Doctrine of the
Trinity:
Is It Practical?

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Immanuel Kant is concerned with God only so far as belief in God has *practical* implications. He believed that the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity had no consequences for the human life or its religious view of the world. Thus, Kant believed that the Trinity was “a mere accident addition” to our belief in God.

In Catholic theology, prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Trinity was a very abstract concept. Since then, people have tried to use the Trinity to answer all questions. It is not meant to answer all questions. It is meant to lead us to a deeper relationship with God.

So, does the Trinity make a difference in our lives? Those who take an “Eliminative Approach say that Trinitarian language was a mistake, taking Jewish thought and misappropriately combining it with Greek thought.”¹

Then, is there a Trinity? After all Christianity professes to be a monotheistic religion. God is God. We believe in one God. Mark 12:29-32 professes our faith in *one* God. Are we dismissing this by believing in the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? For as Kasper writes “For by his very nature God is such that there can only be one of him.”² God is infinite. If there were two (or more) gods they would infringe on each other in their infiniteness. Therefore, God must be one God and thus monotheism is, as Kasper puts it, “not a philosophical question but the fruit of religious experience.”³

From here, Kasper turns to what he terms the “primordial question of the human race.” How do we find *unity* in our reality that is full of multiplicity and multiplicity?⁴ It is from here that Kasper turns to the Trinity for an answer. God is infinite and absolute so there can be no division within God. God is distinct from the world. Yet, we do not live in isolation but in

¹ For example, K.H. Ohlig takes this approach. (According to class checklist, 10/18/2006).

² Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*. Trans. By Matthew J. O’Connell. New York: Herder & Herder, The Crossroad Publishing Company. ©1984, printed 2005, 239.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 240.

relation to one another. If God is distinct from the world, does he live in isolation?⁵ We believe we are created in God's image (Gn 1:26-27). Thus, it would seem since we are relational beings God must also be a relational being. Who does he live in relation with? The Trinity.

How do we know of the Trinity? What leads us to attempt to understand the Trinity? We can speak of the footprints of the Trinity as the Church Fathers did. There is an image of God implanted in our mind and heart. This image includes the Trinity and draws us to it. It is this footprint that gives us the means to *begin* to grasp the mystery of the Trinity. We also search for our own identity, which can never be completely found in this world. But this world is not devoid of meaning. It is in the Trinity that we see God as active in this world. God is the answer to our search for meaning.

There are biblical passages that seem to indicate God is plural. Genesis 1:26 has God saying "Let *us* make man in our image." The *us* is clearly plural. In Genesis 18, the three angels appeal to Abraham. Isaiah 6 has the angels offering the "triple holy." Christian scholars have attempted to use these passages to point to the Trinity. However, that is reading a specific Christian theme into Old Testament texts. There are other such "Trinitarian" references in the Old Testament that can be *interpreted* as a reference to the Trinity. Jewish scholars argue against such interpretations.⁶

Perhaps one of the New Testament passages that is the most explicit in its reference to the Trinity is the Baptism of Jesus.⁷ Clearly Jesus is present, we understand the heavenly voice to be God the Father, and the Spirit descends upon Jesus. All three persons of the Trinity are present, yet there is no reference to them as Trinity. There is also Matthew 28:19 where the Risen Jesus tells the disciples to go out to all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the *Father, Son, and*

⁵ Ibid., 240-1.

⁶ Ibid., 242-3.

⁷ Mark 1:9-12, Matthew 3:13-17, Luke 3:21-22.

Holy Spirit. Clearly, again the three persons of the Trinity are placed together and have a common role in baptism. Yet, no Trinitarian doctrine is provided.⁸

We have already said above that God is distinct from us but that it would seem that He too is a relational being. Who, then, is God's partner? Kasper questions if humans are to be God's "necessary partner" but nothing outside of God can be necessary for God or that would limit God.⁹ God must exist in relation *within* himself. The Christian Faith uses the Trinity to explain the relation God has with himself. In this lies the practical nature of the Trinity. We naturally seek God and to understand the nature of God we need to understand the relation within God that is the Trinity.

In our search to understand the relation within God, one may use the *model* where God the Father is the metaphysical self, Jesus is the empirical self, and the Holy Spirit is the narrative self. This interprets God as Trinity according to a model that we can use to understand ourselves. Initially, this seems to be very practical. However, for me it gives me nothing to set as a goal for myself. Perhaps, in this model, one could say the goal is find unity (and self-knowledge) of myself but what does this mean; in Kant's terms, does it have practical implications?

Taking a different perspective, Kasper sees the Trinitarian structure applied to the Church in Ephesians 4:4-6 referring to one Lord, one Spirit, and one God and Father. Kasper refers to the writings of Cyprian where he says that we, as a people, are brought together in unity from the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Thus, the Trinity is practical as a model of unity for us. This is not to say the temporal church will ever have the perfect unity found in the Trinity. It is an analogy. We are individuals. God is one. Our temporal unity is not absolute but

⁸ Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 245.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 247.

nonetheless, the Trinitarian unity can serve as a model for us. Likewise, the model of the metaphysical, empirical, and narrative selves is a *model* and *not* an *explanation* of God.

Kasper believes that

The unity, peace and life of the world thus come about through the revelation of the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinitarian doxology is the soteriology of the world.¹¹

It is the Trinity that leads us to our salvation. We need all three persons of the Trinity to understand and believe in Jesus' saving death. For Kasper, a christological confession requires a Trinitarian confession.¹² We seek salvation so we need the Trinity in practical things.

So, how are we to understand the relation of God in the Trinity? As humans, we are not perfect. We are called to be relational beings. We do not achieve full self-actualization without relation to others but we can exist alone. However, in God, substance and relation are identical. In fact, it is in the relational that God exists.¹³ In John 10:30, Jesus says, "The Father and I are one." Jesus himself professes his unity with the Father. This is vital to an understanding of the mission of Jesus. Jesus does not come to do his own work or will. His will is totally united to the will of the Father because they are one. Perhaps, this is the point (how their wills can be one) where applying the model of metaphysical self, empirical self, and narrative is helpful to our religious understanding. Jesus' work fulfills the will of the Father. Likewise, in John 14:26, Jesus says the *Father* will send us the *Holy Spirit* in Jesus' name. One person of the Trinity always proceeds in relation to the others. In John 14:20, Jesus extends this unity, although be it limited in some way, to us when he says we are in Him and He is in us.

In our humanness, we are limited in our ability to understand the Trinitarian relationship. This has led to such heresies as modalism and subordinatianism. We are not God, nor are we

¹¹ Ibid., 248.

¹² Ibid., 249.

¹³ Ibid., 280.

omniscient. While it is difficult for us to fully comprehend the Trinitarian relationship we can rely on faith as we hear the words of Augustine

In the Trinity ‘there is no mixture or confusion. Each person is in himself, and yet three are each wholly in the others; each of them in the other two or the other two in each of them, and thus all are in all.’¹⁴

There are three persons yet as God they are completely one. Thus, God is the perfect example of *unity*. The Trinity is practical as a sign of the unity that we are called to work towards.

The relationship of the Trinity to the question of salvation was presented above. Kasper goes on to find the relationship in unity. We must have unity to have meaning and order. Our salvation will be ordered and we will know the meaning of all things. We will have unity in our future salvation. As Kasper writes

The question of unity is therefore the question of how multiplicity and variety can be so brought into unity that the unity does not swallow up the multiplication.¹⁵

God is unity but the three persons of the Trinity do not disappear in that unity. Our western culture today is very centered on the individual. When we speak of unity, the individual does not seek to exist but becomes one with those around it, similar but not identical to the Trinity.

God self-identifies himself to us in the Trinity. In the Trinity, God shows us that He does not live in isolation; he “is not a solitary God.”¹⁶ As we are created in God’s image, if He is a being that exists in relation, so too are humans are meant to live in relation to one another. Thus, the Trinity is practical in giving us the self-communication of God.

¹⁴ Ibid., 283.

¹⁵ Ibid., 291.

¹⁶ Ibid., 294.

Thus, Kasper sees the doctrine of the Trinity as “the only possible and consistent form of monotheism and the only tenable answer to modern atheism.”¹⁷ The Trinity is how we can make sense of God.

What is the source of the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Trinity? Love. Human beings come together in love, most especially in marriage. However, our human love is imperfect so it does not bring us to perfect unity. However, God *is* love. It is the love that binds the Trinity. The Trinity *is* perfect love for one another and thus perfect unity.¹⁸

Yet, we must realize the analogy of the relationship within the Trinity to the relationship of human beings to each other is an analogy and not the same thing. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons of one substance. As humans, we are a communion of beings, yet we are separate individuals.¹⁹ We each have our own substance. Thus, the relationship of perfect unity of the Trinity will always remain something of a mystery. For some, it is that mystery that is a stumbling block. These people want to be able to fully explain every part of an idea before they make it practical. Or at the very least they seek not just an analogy but a direct parallel such as the union of marriage as the “perfect image of the Trinity, since its deeper sense is true love between individuals – transforming individuality into unity.”²⁰ There is nothing on earth that is the *perfect* image of the Trinity. The Trinity *is perfect* love in *perfect* unity. In the marital union, the “two become one flesh” but it is not the same unity as the Trinity for as said above the Trinity as one substance. A marriage is two *individuals*.

¹⁷ Ibid., 295.

¹⁸ Ibid., 299.

¹⁹ Ibid., 308.

²⁰ Taken from a homily at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception of the Mary heard by Dr. Thomas Schartl 2006.

As Christians we accept in faith that the three are one. For, as Kasper writes, “in the Spirit the faithful receive the gift of the Father through the Son, so that they may share in this gift.”²¹

In the end, what does the Trinity do for us? We end with Kasper

Finally, the Trinitarian confession yields a *model* for Christian spirituality of hope and of the selfless service that hope inspires. For the Trinitarian persons are characterized by their selflessness. They are, each in his own way, pure surrender, self-emptying.²²

²¹ Ibid., 308.

²² My emphasis, Ibid., 310.