

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY – AN ALTERNATIVE?

I'm reminded of the sweet old lady who approached her pastor after the service and gushed, "Reverend, every sermon you preach is better than your next one." This has nothing to do with today's topic, but I'd like to start on a light note before plunging into darker matters.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost. We have a clue as to why it's called "Trinity Sunday" if we look at today's New Testament Scripture (Matthew 28: 16-20):

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."^[a]

This passage contains what has come to be called the Great Commission, which has sent countless Christian missionaries to the far corners of the world. More important for our purposes, it directs the disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This is the earliest (or one of the earliest) appearances of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) in the Bible. From there it worked its way to the center of Christian practice and doctrine, and countless people have been baptized with this formula. Initially, baptisms were performed simply in the name of Jesus, but this became the standard formula long ago. (I remember being so baptized, although maybe with "Holy Ghost'.)

In June of 2014, I drew Trinity Sunday in volunteering to speak and plunged into Trinity doctrine and learning with gusto, which quickly dissipated as I studied until I threw it all away and spoke about something else. Studying the Trinity does that to you. But Trinity Sunday appears on the scripture menu regularly, so I've decided to face up and talk about the Trinity on this Trinity Sunday. I could have talked about the creation story in Genesis but decided to take a bullet for this Church and do the Trinity. Now I regret it, but what can you do?

In any event, there is a doctrine about the Trinity, about these three “persons. The basic doctrine is that there is one God that consists (in some way) of 3 persons, who are separate persons. This doctrine got what might be called its official start at the First ecumenical council in Nicea in 325, which gave birth to the so-called Nicene Creed. (By the way, the Nicene Creed can be found on page 880 in your hymnals.) The doctrine was firmed up through the middle ages. Thus the Seventeenth Ecumenical Council (Florence 1442): (Hold on to your seats)

The [Holy Roman] Church firmly believes, professes, and teaches [that there is] one true God omnipotent, unchangeable, and eternal. Father and Son and Holy Spirit, one in essence, three in persons; the Father unbegotten, the Son begotten of the Father, the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son. The Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit; the Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son: but the Father is only the Father, the Son is only the Son, the Holy Spirit is only the Holy Spirit. The Father alone begot the Son from his substance, the Son alone was begotten from the Father alone, the Holy Spirit alone proceeds from both Father and Son. Thus these three persons are one God and not three gods: for the three are one substance, one nature, one divinity, one immensity, one eternity, and are one in all ways, where this is not impeded by the opposition of relation.

Note, by the way, the presence of technical philosophical terms like “substance,” “essence” and the like. These started coming in as early as the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325, and are common in expositions of the doctrine. The doctrine seems to require such profundities, which suggests to me that the Church Fathers faced heavy going in getting things straight, though that’s as that may be. In any event, the orthodox at Nicea didn’t like such terms imported from outside the scriptures. I’ll come back to this later.

The doctrine of the Trinity poses a problem – basically, how to understand the logic of it. How can three separate persons be one God? Conversely, how can one God be three separate persons? We know from the scriptures about the three persons, and we’re good monotheists, so we believe there is but one God. The problem (at least for me) is how to put these ingredients together. How can we understand the phrase from today’s hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” “God in three persons, blessed trinity?” Is there an analogy of some sort that will help? I thought about Clark Kent and Superman, but actually

didn't get very far. Better is an analogy suggested by the theologian Dorothy Sayers, who would have us consider the play Hamlet. There is Hamlet in the mind of Shakespeare, Hamlet as written down, Hamlet as performed on stage. Three separate and different occurrences of the Play Hamlet, but each is the play Hamlet. Similarly, she argues, God takes three forms, but each is God. Now, Sayers is referring to a common phenomenon in which a single entity can be found in several separate, concrete but distinct forms. We can see it in far simpler cases. Consider the letter E. I can write it on paper, scratch it in the sand, embroider it, etc. It occurs in many different instances, but each is the letter E. This sort of relationship, between the one and the many, has been dubbed by philosophers the "type-token" relationship: there is one item, a "type", that is realized in one or many "tokens." Thus each "token" of the letter E is itself the letter E, by virtue of its being a token of E, the type. Similarly with the play Hamlet.

Speaking of Hamlet, a fortune cookie to brighten things up: The following was found in a church bulletin: "The eighth-graders will be presenting Shakespeare's Hamlet in the Church basement Friday at 7 PM. The Congregation is invited to attend this tragedy." That was an actual... Just thought I'd...

Anyway, I think the Hamlet analogy fails, simply because God himself (or itself) is not a "type," an abstract entity that can have several instances or "tokens", but a single concrete being that does not admit of tokens. Copies, perhaps, but not tokens. So the type-token analogy does not license us to say the Father is God, Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, because there is no "type," God, of which the Father, the Son and the Spirit are tokens.

Aside from the difficulty of simply understanding it, I have another problem with the received doctrine of the Trinity. And here it is. The received doctrine, the one-in-many doctrine, is not in the Old or New Testaments. It's a doctrine ABOUT the accounts in these books, primarily the New Testament, that was made up by people with doctrinal fish to fry. And my problem is that it makes the New

Testament account of Jesus difficult for me to understand. It is not that, in the New Testament, God the Father and Jesus are two separate beings, as they clearly are. Jesus constantly speaks of God – clearly another person -- as his Father. After all, the doctrine does tell me that the Father and the Son are separate persons. What’s troubling is that, in the New Testament Jesus and the Father interact. Jesus doesn’t only speak of his Father, he speaks TO him. He asks his Father to take the cup of impending crucifixion from him while also accepting that his – the Father’s – will be done, and, on the cross, asks God why God has forsaken him. So I am to suppose that Jesus as God speaks to the Father as God. This is difficult for me to make sense of. For another – much more important -- thing, the account of Jesus in the New Testament, including his crucifixion, only makes sense if Jesus was really human – he was born of a woman (in puzzling circumstances, admittedly), he ate and drank, he suffered on the cross and literally died there. If he were a divine being of some sort in human dress the narrative in the Bible would be, at best, a distortion of the real facts. For if he was even partially divine, did he really suffer? And if so, why? The appearance of suffering would have been the same whether or not he really suffered, and as God he didn’t have to. And so on. The Jesus I see in the New Testament was a human being.

That’s not to say the Jesus of the New Testament was not an extraordinary human being. If the narrative is to be believed, and we’re taking it as such for our purposes, he had the power to heal, even to raise from the dead, to calm stormy seas, to turn water to wine, to walk on water. But do Jesus’s extraordinary – we can even say superhuman – powers compel us to accept the three- in- one model and say that Jesus was not fully human? For my part, I can’t see that.

Let’s go back. At the first Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 325, where the Nicene Creed was adopted, an energetic minority was desperate to defeat the view of one Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, who preached that the Son was “not equal to” the Father, nor “of the same substance,” and that the

substances of the Father and of the Son are different and have no share In each other.” His main point appears to have been that the Son is a creature, hence not truly God.

So, to confound Arius, the framers of Nicene Creed adopted language explicitly stating that the Father and the Son were of the “same substance,” thereby injecting such language into the mainstream of Christian thought.

But not without a struggle! The majority disapproved – didn’t like the introduction of new, untraditional, unscriptural terms like “substance.” The language employed in the Creed of Nicea aroused opposition even among the orthodox and contributed to a temporary ascendancy of Arianism, or at least of “Semi-Arianism,” in the late 350s. A council at Seleucia in 359 explicitly condemned the “same-substance” formula and adopted “like the Father.” But in the end, the “same substance” language survived, and has to this day.

Well, this morning I want to enter a tentative plea for Arius, who was given short shrift at Nicea. Not with the aim of starting a movement, but to encourage thinking, by those who worry about these matters, about the true relationship between Jesus and God. Suppose we were to side with Arius, and see Jesus as a human being created by God – God who is, let me remind you, omnipotent in standard Judeo-Christian doctrine and can bring about whatever he wishes -- and endowed by God with the supernatural powers, moral insight, strength of character and the like that we see in the Jesus of the Gospels. The words “Father” and “Son” would have to be given a somewhat figurative reading, but those words as used in the standard doctrine of the Trinity can’t be taken literally to start with. The effect on the doctrine of the Trinity would of course be substantial, but, relying only on my picture of the Jesus of the Scriptures without detailed re-reading, I wonder whether the scriptural picture of Jesus would be distorted. But this must wait for another day.