



The Trinity for Teaching: A Work of Art

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DECADES AGO I LISTENED TO A FRIEND TELL ABOUT HER YOUTHFUL SUNDAY school class. She observed enthusiastically, "They even understand the Trinity." Unfortunately, my immediate response was a seminarian's wisecrack, but I have remembered her comment for thirty years. She was right. Those young people understood because they knew the triune God. The Trinity is part of the faith experience of every Christian. Theological discussions about it can be intricate and difficult, but such reflections are subordinate to encounter with the triune God. Complex understandings are not a condition for a trusting relationship with God. Here as elsewhere, theology serves faith. The doctrine of the Trinity is a comfortable and capable expression of the complex impact of God on humanity. It is a work of art that carries truth and rewards study. The doctrine is doxology. It is believers' praise in response to the rich drama of God's ongoing work.

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Teaching the Trinity is like teaching art appreciation. The doctrine is a work of art that serves our understanding and praise of God. Teachers can profitably focus on the historical development of the doctrine, biblical texts, heresies, and symbolic language.

Walk into a great cathedral such as Notre Dame of Paris. If you experience awe, you have understood the building. It was created from and for wonder. There are details, developments, and connections to be learned that may deepen one's awe and justify it. Those might occupy a lifetime. Yet, in matters of faith, wonder is the foundation for further learning.

When one teaches the doctrine of the Trinity, one is not teaching an article of faith that must be understood for salvation. There are no such articles. Rather, one is teaching an ancient and modern appreciation of God. God is richly known as the Lord Jesus Christ, as the one who is the origin of Jesus and of all, and as the one who is our fulfilling future. Doctrine reflects on that knowing and celebrates the object of faith.

Like other kinds of Christian art, the doctrine of the Trinity explains but also rejoices. Long-ago experiences of the greatness of God produced awe that shaped theology. Trinitarian doctrine is wonder put into words. Christians today also experience the wonder and, thus, are open to the impact of this great art. We can teach this human work with the assumption that our fellow learners have already experienced the complex awesomeness of God. They understand and they praise. The teacher seeks to enhance their appreciative and effective use of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is a great work of comprehension and praise for the God we already know.

Trinitarian doctrine is a product of deep piety shaped by encounter with the richness of God. Doctrines do not, of course, contain or confine God. On the contrary, doctrines, and trinitarian doctrine in particular, are meant to keep open God's way to us. Trinitarian dogma holds open a creative tension necessary to adequate praise. Scripture and Christian life convince us there is only one God and also that we know God as three distinct realities. Faithful teachers and students acknowledge and praise the triune God. The doctrine about the triune God is a work of art that assists such comprehension and worship. Teaching the doctrine is an exploration of the wonder and its rightness.

I was thinking only of comprehension and not of praise when I responded to my friend's comment about her students who understood the Trinity. The doctrine is for both. It analyzes but it also reflects the wholeness of one's encounter with God. Analysis has a key role. Robert Jenson says trinitarian doctrine has "intellectual complexities" whose "proper location is the back of teachers' and preachers' minds, determining the way they guide and, when necessary, explain [humanity's] relation to this God."^{*} The teacher must also remember that the doctrine is praise. Praise is a response of the whole person to God's self-revelation. We can attend to both aspects by treating this theological masterpiece as a work of art.

^{*}Robert Jenson, "The Triune God," in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 110. Jenson's complete essay, pages 79-191 in that volume, is a readable, fresh presentation and analysis of this doctrine. It would provide excellent preparation for one planning to teach trinitarian dogma or to reflect on it.

Every believer understands God well enough to be caught up in praise. Whether inarticulate or elegant, praise is the foundation for learning. Christians are already lovers of God and know God as source of love. The teacher of trinitarian doctrine seeks to help them be art lovers, appreciatively using this particular work of art.

Doctrine is for adults and those becoming adults. My thoughts here primarily concern teaching adults about the Trinity, though I think the suggestions would apply also to teaching adolescents who are beginning to think abstractly. In the sections below I reflect on four common approaches to teaching the dogma—historical development, basic biblical texts, heresies, and symbolic language. Each approach can be helpfully guided by remembering that the doctrine of the Trinity is a faithful work of art.

I. BEGINNING WITH ART HISTORY

Some students, or all students some of the time, can learn to appreciate trinitarian doctrine through the story of its development. There are intriguing tensions and arguments behind this great art work. Christians today also sense the complexity of God and can come to trinitarian doctrine through the lure of hot debate.

A fervent commitment to monotheism was a controlling motivation for trinitarian dogma. Early Christians shared with Jews the conviction that the God they had encountered was the one true God. However, the witness of the Bible and their own experience convinced Christians that there was a richness in God that was not adequately portrayed without saying more. Scripture and experience demanded expressions that, on the surface, contradicted monotheism. Reflection on this tension had begun even before the New Testament took its present form and continued for the early centuries. In the New Testament, many who encountered Jesus are portrayed as knowing they had thereby encountered God. Yet Jesus is never described as replacing God. In the Gospel of John, for example, Jesus' divinity is strongly emphasized because Christians knew their experience of Jesus demanded no less. Yet John also shows an emphatic tendency to distinguish Jesus from the One whom Jesus addressed and described as Father. In the narrative, Jesus frequently points behind himself to the One who sent him and who is also Father to the disciples. Further, Jesus pointed ahead, promising the coming of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to lead his followers into the future. By reference to relationships of sending, hearing, and passing on, John's Gospel clearly distinguishes the Spirit from God the Father and from Jesus. Other parts of the Bible make similar assertions and distinctions.

Reflection, formulation, and debate continued in the period after the New Testament. Early Christians felt the necessity of articulating a portrayal of God that was faithful to all the facts they had, paradoxical though these seemed. Development of a dogma was pushed by the evangelical desire to present Christ credibly in a diverse world and by arguments with people who held other opinions. The result of this development is an artifact, a human work, the doctrine of the

Trinity. Leaders like Athanasius and Arius are part of this history, but so are the masses of believers. The stories can be lively.

The teacher's opportunity lies in the resonance between the experience behind the doctrine and the experiences of believers today. Modern Christians have an instinctive commitment to monotheism on the basis of tradition and logic. We know amazing stories of Jesus and likely speak of Jesus as God. Today's believer easily feels the ancient tension. For that very reason, the divinity of Jesus seems to be the first thing questioned when Christians begin to reflect on the logic of their faith. Both the tension and the questioning can lead people toward an appreciation of artistic theological response in the first Christian centuries. Believers also usually assume that God and Christ will continue to be powerfully at work, though not present in the usual sense of that word. Language of the Spirit allows them to speak of this and adds a new aspect to the tension we share with those ancient theological artists.

Teaching can begin with the assumption that one's fellow learners have some experience of the tension. There is one God. Three distinct realities are rightly called God. Our world resonates with the early church's concerns. Their artistic efforts may be expected to draw together our thoughts and our praise. The history of the doctrine can give students an entry point for appreciating trinitarian dogma. As a segue from history, we can invite students to see if the doctrine works as well for them as it did for Christians long ago.

II. USING THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE ART

Asked "How should one teach about the Trinity?" one could defensibly answer, "Don't! At least, don't start with the doctrine." Begin, instead, with people's experience of the triune God. Begin with the stories that occasioned the doctrine. In the image I have been using, this means looking at the artists' world and at the materials they had available. The teacher can assume the stories will create diverse wonder, as they have for centuries. The stories will reveal our need to gather pieces of truth together in an artistic creation that both unites and distinguishes.

The Bible is the trinitarian teacher's prime source book, of course. Start with the gospels, selecting portions that portray Jesus' teaching, healing, praying, suffering, dying, being raised. Point out the different reactions in the stories—belief, praise, or worship, but also disbelief, apathy, or anger. Some people acknowledged the presence of God and some did not. Ask how particular stories present Jesus as a window through which the reader experiences deeper, broader reality—forgiveness, hope, love, newness. Use stories from both testaments to show that these realities were continually revealed and that people were thereby drawn into a trusting relationship with God.

Move on to point out how the stories of Jesus refer separately to God. The explicit and implicit allusions are abundant—in the Bethlehem angels' song, Jesus' prayers and miracles, the words on the cross, the post-resurrection sayings, and many more. Dig into Old Testament material to help students explore the background and associations of the language about the God who sent Jesus. Point to

the pictures of God who is constant, compassionate, creative, and self-revealing. Tell of the exodus when God rescued and sustained the people. Tell of the remnant that was always preserved, despite disaster and disobedience.

Finally, tell the stories that point to God's future with humanity. Each of the gospels and Acts points to the coming of the Spirit. Each portrays the ongoing impact of Christ and revelation of God. In the Old Testament there is a consistent picture of God who will continue to be powerfully at work with people. We see this, for example, in the prophets who proclaim that God is not absent or finished. Let the narratives paint their portrait of God who will be our future.

Students can be invited to take all these stories about God and weave them together in a complete piece. What work of art would they produce to meet the challenges of holding on to the whole story? Art materials at their disposal include the stories that speak of the *sending* and *begetting* of the Son and the *sending* of the Spirit. Encourage students to find the meaning of this doctrinal language within the narratives. For example, Jesus is God's *only begotten son* in the sense that the gospels narrate the relationship. The term does not have a procreative sense imported from genealogical lists or from Mediterranean mythology. The story of the great commission (Matt 28:18-20) is another important part of the narrative approach to teaching about the Trinity. The trinitarian name of God is parallel to the three-phase drama told in the stories. It links the story with the rites of the church and with the life of each baptized person. Invite students to wonder how to present the unity of the drama.

Stories of salvation are not confined to scripture. In tradition, worship, and the post-biblical history of God's people, there are many other narrative sources for teaching trinitarian doctrine. For example, the church's celebrations of the Lord's Supper tell a trinitarian story. When the bread is offered with the words, "This is my body...this is my blood...for you," we are pushed away from simplistic understandings of Jesus as a first-century man of Palestine. When the communion story proclaims forgiveness, worshipers are turned toward the one whose prerogative this is. When the sacrament nurtures faith and points forward to a great consummation of God's work, the Spirit is experienced.

Every believer is an artist, shaping praise and understanding to match the encounter with an incarnate and infinite God. The teacher can help supply the materials and can anticipate results that will make students more interested in the classic dogma of the Trinity.

III. COMPARING GOOD ART AND BAD ART

An average art gallery contains ample material to facilitate teaching by comparison: "Notice how this works. Notice how this is less effective." A complete history of Christian doctrine would include many an "Oops!" and not a few figurative mutterings of "I don't think so." Since trinitarian doctrine included a tension that could not be resolved, it was especially susceptible to troublesome formulations. Early trinitarian heresies such as modalism, subordinationism, and their variations are still very much alive. "Let's consider whether that will work,"

is an opening gambit for moving students from weak to strong doctrine. The teacher can assume they have the faith (the art sense) to recognize the true when they see it.

Modalism in all its variations suggests that God is a timeless entity self-revealed in the various modes named Father, Son, and Spirit, or in the roles of creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. Analogously, one might say, "Stan Olson is pastor, church bureaucrat, and husband, but none of these is the real Stan. The true Stan is a disembodied entity known in these and other ways." Thus understood, I never really interact with people. This is an inadequate way to understand a person. The basic problem with theological modalism is its failure to take seriously the Bible's assumption that Father, Son, and Spirit are each actually God and that there are relationships among the three. The God of the Bible is not remote and abstract but is at work in time—past, present, and future.

A teacher might point out the common, modalistic tendency to speak as though God were somehow behind Jesus rather than present in and as Jesus. Language about the Spirit as the power of God is often understood in a depersonalized way that keeps God at a distance. Any portrayal of God as fundamentally separated from humanity and uninvolved in time invites modalism. A teacher can help students identify such ideas in contemporary religion, acknowledging that such understandings make some sense to almost any Christian. They are simple, but inadequate. Pointing out the implied distance of God in some portrayal, the teacher can help students see why it is insufficient. Trinitarian doctrine can be presented as a sufficient portrayal, acknowledging God's diverse and consistent presence.

Subordinationism is the mistake of portraying two persons of the Trinity as fully dependent on the third. God the Father is often given the dominant role. This heresy lurks in the wide-spread, seldom-questioned image of God sitting on a lofty throne while Jesus and the Spirit serve as agents on site. Ask students if this picture adequately portrays their own experience or the stories of the Bible.

The most persistent modern trinitarian heresy is likely christomonism, a focus on Jesus Christ that subordinates or even ignores the Spirit and the Father. This bad art may have a narrow focus on Jesus as the man for others, as the model revolutionary, or as the last great prophet. The same artistic failure appears when christology is so independent and self-contained that there is little need for the God who begins and begets and the Spirit who fulfills. Teaching might start with a movie's humanized Jesus or even with one's own recent, careless way of stating the sufficiency of Christ. Some contemporary Christian songs illustrate disconnected christology. Help students ask: "Is this good art?" "Will this work?" "Is this adequate praise of God?" "Does it fit the evidence?" Trinitarian doctrine is a standard of artistic excellence that can be used to evaluate lesser efforts at comprehending and praising.

Bad theological art causes problems which are not merely intellectual mistakes. Instead of comprehension and praise, doubt and anxiety can result when one has too small a portrayal of God. There is no saving strength in "the man for

others” when death is our foe. There is no hope or comfort if the true God is imagined as separate from time and earthly life. However, the great artwork dogma of the Trinity capably serves people in their daily vocations. We teach trinitarian doctrine for the consolation of frightened souls and discouraged doubters. Doctrine is not gospel but it can serve the gospel. (Of course, most who teach about the Trinity have no need to maintain an absolute distinction between teaching and preaching!) There is comfort in trinitarian doctrine because it holds the window wide enough open to reveal the God we need. Our God is big enough. Trinitarian doctrine might be approached by noting human reactions which rise, in effect, from inadequate conceptions of God. The teacher could begin with an anonymous story of anger at God’s absence or the need for forgiveness or fear of the future. Help students see how the trinitarian portrayal meets existential needs in ways weaker formulations cannot.

IV. WORKING WITH ANALOGIES AND SYMBOLS

Can the devices of our limited minds help us comprehend God? Of course! Does it help teach about the Trinity if one brings in a three-leaf clover, describes the three states of water, or draws a triangle on the board? Perhaps, perhaps not.

The doctrine of the Trinity is itself a model. Theology creates word-models, or, in the image I have been using, theology creates works of word art. The model or art work is not the reality portrayed. However, such artistic efforts aim to convey something of God’s reality. Trinitarian doctrine is a subject for teaching that provides effective language for praise and understanding. Yet, the doctrine is complex. Are there models for this model, to make it easier to explain?

The determinative issue for a teacher is complexity. Models can be intricate and convey much, though they are still limited. Symbols and analogies are far simpler. That is their attraction and their shortcoming. The splendor of trinitarian doctrine is its preservation of an inherent tension in God’s self-revelation. Symbols and analogies may fail at this. The teacher will not want to be like those art critics who seem to explain away the richness and depth of their subject.

I suggest two uses of scripture in this regard: First, as much as possible, use analogies and symbols taken from the Bible. For example, God is the origin, the sent one, and the hope of all. Use the stories. Second, test the adequacy of possible symbols and analogies against the biblical narratives that necessitated the doctrine of the Trinity. Will the language be adequate for praise and understanding of God as self-revealed?

We teachers need not be such great artists as those who created trinitarian doctrine, but our work will hang in the same gallery, the gallery of faith and worship. Meaningful, praising faith is the goal. Would the language we are considering help our students know and praise the God of their baptism and their salvation? For adults who know and rejoice in the triune God, the simple symbols may work as abbreviations, as reminders, as symbols. Analogies may help them grasp some aspects of the doctrine and move on in lives of praise. Yet, they are like cartoons beside a Rembrandt—perhaps useful but never a substitute.

V. AN END WORD

The great dogma of the Trinity is wonderfully effective art for conveying understanding and enabling praise. One who teaches the doctrine begins and continues as a fellow worshiper of the triune God.

It is not required that every Christian appreciate Bach's Mass in B Minor or the Sistine Chapel. Nor is it necessary that every believer find the dogma of the Trinity a fully satisfactory way to praise God and hold together vital convictions about God. However, most believers can appreciate and make good use of this work of art for understanding and praise. By whatever means, that appreciation is the goal for one who teaches about the Trinity. ⊕